

CAPTIVE

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ETHAN SHEEDY HAD 114 missions in his portfolio, and all had ended with the same result: Grifters dead, metas dead, him alive. Today's mission would be different. Never once had he planned his own surrender.

"You're not allowed to do anything reckless for my sake."

She'd made that command a year earlier, and Ethan understood following orders better than anything else. He hadn't intended to disobey. However, when he considered what he'd agreed to do half an hour ago, he was forced to admit that his promise to surrender alongside her had certainly been reckless. The realization bothered him, particularly when coupled with Leader's counsel regarding emotional attachment. Ethan was CO. His position forbade imprudent behavior, which suited him; imprudence was not in his nature. Yet, he had allowed himself to make an emotional call.

Now removed from that conversation, Ethan could recognize his poor judgment. He should have dissuaded her. Instead, he'd pledged his support. If she was determined to surrender to the Grifters, then he would surrender with her. Why had he said that? Partners were duty-bound to protect each other, but the MTA did not expect its cadets to follow their partners into foolishness. Had she been anyone else, he would've dismissed the idea outright. But he had seen that she wouldn't be deterred from her plan, so he had decided upon the only course of action that would ensure her safety. One could say he had acted as a partner should, but he wouldn't deceive himself by pretending his promise was motivated by logic. He'd been reckless. But if recklessness was what it took to protect her, then he could allow the exception.

His motorcycle shuddered as it slowed. Automatic steering clicked off, manual resumed. The scenery, formerly blurred by the speed, sharpened. A line of motorcycles made an L from the security box ahead to his vantage point as the last cadet to arrive. He hadn't occupied the last spot in years. Since fifteen, Ethan had travelled forward in his MTA career. Now, he was Commanding Officer, the highest a cadet could climb. For today's mission, however, directed by graduated agents rather than cadets, Ethan shared equal authority with his peers.

He drove toward the procession of cadets and idled. One glance at the bike directly before him informed him Ella had yet to arrive. She drove an older bike. Besides, her frame was narrower than this cadet's. He searched

over his shoulder. Behind him, gravel road expanded like a blue strip. Ten seconds passed. Ella's motorcycle didn't breach the hill. Ahead of him, one by one, each cadet received clearing to enter the Navy base. He examined every bike. None belonged to her.

He made his knuckles relax on the handlebars and controlled his pulse. She couldn't have followed through on her plan. Ella wouldn't know where to find the Grifters. Or would she? Surely she'd read every book in the library by now. He'd helped her do so, all the while ensuring he focused on the text and not her. The library books contained maps; Ella could have decided upon a destination and programmed her motorcycle with it.

No, he thought. Her confusion had been genuine. She hadn't meant to start her bike. It must have malfunctioned. Besides, she couldn't remember how to operate the nav system.

His fingers found the throttle. He edged forward and continued dividing his attention between front and back. It took three minutes for the line ahead to dissolve into the military base. During that time, Ella didn't arrive.

"ID?" asked Agent Kearney before the bulletproof box.

"One-four-one-one-four-seven. What's Kepler's location? Two-seven-three-four-one-six."

Kearney inspected his electronic grid screen. "Still in transit."

Ethan observed the perimeter again. A truck left a plume of dust above the road. In transit, even though she'd left before him?

"I think her motorcycle malfunctioned," he said. "It's the older model. I'll double back."

"You're not authorized to leave. This base is being quarantined. Check in with your CG." Kearney waved him forward.

Ethan disliked this order. He was Ella's partner; it was his duty to see that she safely arrived. More than duty.

He withheld his disagreement. CG Walker would give a more informed answer than Kearney. Ethan tapped his handlebar, said, "Yes, sir," and sped through the gate.

Agent Walker directed traffic toward a hangar where cadets disembarked. Ethan, instead of continuing toward his comrades, slowed. He lifted the helmet visor so Walker could see him. "Sir, a cadet is still in transit."

Walker spoke without matching his gaze. "Who?"

"Kepler."

"I'll take care of it. Go to your post."

"She's riding the old model. I'm concerned it malfunctioned. Requesting permission to double back."

"Denied. This is a closed base, Sheedy. No one else leaves or enters." Agent Walker, whose attention had not wavered from whatever occupied it, had recognized Ethan by voice alone.

"If it's closed," Ethan said, "how do you expect her to join the operation?"

Walker finally eyed him. Dark eyes squinted over a darker mustache. "I'll handle Kepler. Park your bike and report to your post. You're not CG today, Sheedy."

Correct. He *wasn't* CG. The fact was beginning to concern him.

In situations where Ethan had disagreed with a course of action, he expressed his opinions freely. Leader trusted his judgment and expected the academy's CO to voice opposition if duty required it. And so, there was no impertinence in Ethan when he said, "Respectfully, sir, I can't leave my partner behind, particularly when she could be stranded in dangerous territory. I can —"

"The only thing you will do, Sheedy, is report to your post. That's an order."

No one had dangled that caveat before Ethan Sheedy. Those were the words he said to unruly cadets, those whose wills would bend only under threat. He had never needed a reminder of his obligations.

He maintained a steady breath and held Walker's gaze. The agent would not change his mind, and he wasn't required to. Ethan was his inferior.

"Sir," Ethan said, and engaged his bike.

Leader had the power to overrule Walker. All Ethan had to do was find a phone.

The vast hangar would have echoed had motorcycles not filled it. Its rafters crisscrossed over its possessions. Motorcycles pointed to a single door through which the cadets diverged. Ethan drove toward a vacant spot, parked, and disembarked. Black hair fell across his forehead when he removed his helmet. He pushed it back, fighting the usual yearn for his former haircut. For years, he'd kept a shaved head. The military-grade

style wasn't required, but it was efficient. Now, he let it grow. Ella preferred his outgrown hair. She'd never confirmed this, but he knew.

Before exiting the hangar, he cast a final inspection behind him. Still no Ella.

A civilian Navy soldier cleared Ethan and allowed him to enter the hallway that finished at another door, manned by the MTA's Agent Langley, who recognized Ethan and stepped aside.

"May I use your phone?" Ethan asked.

The agent palmed one of his pockets and canvassed him. "Why?"

"To call Leader."

"That's not how today is going to work, cadet. *We're* in charge. Can't go running to Leader any time you like." Langley clamped down on Ethan's shoulder and tried steering him through the doorway.

With practiced deftness, Ethan twisted out of the man's grasp as courteously as he could manage. "One of our cadets has been delayed," he said. "Leader needs to be informed."

"Did you tell CG?"

"Yes, but —"

"Then you've done your job. Top marks all around." Agent Langley made sure to exercise a firmer grip this time. Ethan was shoved into the room.

Immediately, he tested the knob. Locked. Through the square window set in the door, Langley smirked. Ethan didn't understand why an agent would be so intentionally unhelpful.

He found his three squad members seated with taut posture atop one of the benches. Other cadets paced the holding room, inspected their bracers, and watched the wall monitors that displayed the flurry of activity amongst the civilians on the grounds. At Ethan's entrance, they stood at attention, then resumed their former occupations.

"What's wrong?" Reynolds rose off the bench. The red-haired cadet was already beginning to pale beneath his freckles.

"Kepler hasn't arrived," Ethan said.

Reynolds and his MTA partner, McFarland, shared a look.

"Explain," Ethan said.

"We thought her bike might malfunction," McFarland said. Her words came measured. Calm, like her typical mannerisms. "There's a reason we don't use those."

"I agree," Ethan said. Usually, he didn't need solidarity, but he took relief in knowing his suspicion had been founded. "I've been denied permission to double back. Agent Walker says he'll manage the situation."

Vires stood, dwarfing his peers. "Walker's prepping for an incursion," he said, haughty indifference reflected in the draw of his brows. "He doesn't have time to search for tardy cadets."

"I know," Ethan said. "The base is going to be quarantined, if it hasn't been already."

"How is Kepler supposed to enter if we're locked down?" McFarland asked.

"I had the same question, McFarland."

"They'll let her through," Reynolds said, always the optimistic buffer. "She'll be here soon."

Nodding, Ethan checked his watch, then remembered he was neither CG nor an officer in charge. If he had been, he would've been able to track Ella's location on the issued bracer.

Minutes passed. The cadets grew restless, though for different reasons than Ethan. Missions never required so much preliminary, but this was a base of ninety-five percent civilians. Negotiations had to be made.

Ethan stationed himself by the door, where he could see Agent Langley's profile. After enough knocks against the glass, the agent agreed to alert him once Ella arrived.

"This is absurd," Vires said as the lengthy wait increased. Impatience wrinkled the cadet's tan face; he swung his pulser compulsively. "This mission has been thoroughly prepped. Preliminary shouldn't take this long."

"This is a military base," McFarland said. She likely hoped to deflate Vires' growing frustration—a losing battle. "The MTA has to follow protocol."

"She's right," Ethan said, aware that he needed to show confidence in MTA procedure, even if he didn't understand it. Out of habit, he scanned his watch again to no avail.

"Worst case," Reynolds murmured, drawing closer, "she misses the mission, which might be a good thing. There'll probably be casualties."

Ethan realized his jaw was clenched and rebuked himself. "She could arrive in the heat of battle," he said. "She could—" He checked his words. Abruptly, he turned around. The movement failed to interrupt his

thinking.

He rapped on the glass again. Agent Langley swiveled, saw who'd knocked, then looked away. Ethan knocked louder. The agent ignored him.

"Did he leave?" Reynolds asked.

Ethan inhaled, then let the breath release with equal measure. Exteriorly, he would maintain his composure for his peers' sake. Interiorly, he struggled against a foreign, overwhelming sense of regret.

Something had gone wrong with Ella. He had dissuaded the conclusion as long as logically possible, but time had only created more evidence. Thirty minutes had passed and she'd yet to arrive. Even an outdated bike could reach top speed. Though she may not have activated her bike, she'd clearly programmed it with another destination than Goose Swamp—which meant Ella had followed through on her word; and Ethan, who had promised her his protection, had failed to follow through on *his*.

He should have stopped her once she declared her plans, removed her from the mission roster, prohibited her from manning a bike, reminded her that he would do everything in his power to find Kara, and assured her that he cared enough to risk his life if it meant her safety. Instead, Ethan had done nothing except make a promise he couldn't keep. Since December, he had done nothing. Leader had ordered him not to tell Ella the truth about her past, and he had obeyed, because his superiors had taught him that perfect obedience formed irreprehensible character. For half a year, Ethan had undergone the most trying test of his character, and he had thus far succeeded. However, he did not feel victorious so much as confined, held captive by the rules that had given him clarity all his life.

"... Sheedy?"

His name, loudly called, refocused him. Ethan turned back to the cadets and found them standing at attention. They awaited an answer. He hadn't heard the question. This lack of composure unnerved him.

"Repeat?" He sought out McFarland.

Her returning stare lacked the confidence Ethan was familiar with. However, she pivoted toward the crowd and announced, "We'll be allowed leave when we're given the orders. You know this. Now, back to your posts."

The cadets obeyed. Fortunately, none of them appeared disgruntled by the fact that McFarland had answered for him. Ethan, however, was.

“McFarland,” he said, motioning her toward a corner of the room. A truly private conversation would be impossible, but the cadets knew better than to eavesdrop. Ethan was humbled by the realization that a few cadets might, regardless of rules. Yet, he wasn’t tempted toward another course of action. The safety of his team mattered more than his pride.

The two cadets stationed themselves in a spot where the walls met. Surveillance footage played on the screen embedded in the wall. Ethan surveyed the room, ensuring that none of the cadets were sparing them wayward attention, then quietly said, “I’m stepping down. You’re first.”

Shock widened her eyes. McFarland quickly quelled it and said, “Then, as first, I step down and reinstate you.”

“McFarland –”

“You’re *not* compromised, sir. If you were, you wouldn’t have been able to make that call.”

Ethan’s response failed. Judging by McFarland’s fierce expression, he knew only a direct command would change her mind, and he had no desire to pull rank at the moment. Her stalwart loyalty had always impressed him; it gave him the confidence to nod and steel himself once more. McFarland would make a fine agent.

Surely sensing his resolution, McFarland offered him a rare smile. “If you –” she began, but forceful pounding disrupted their conversation.

“Do you expect us to relieve ourselves in the corner?” Vires called to Agent Langley through the glass, one fist still hammering at the door. “I doubt civilian relations will enjoy explaining why twenty cadets defaced government property.”

While McFarland emitted a disgusted sigh, Ethan started toward Vires, intending to reprimand the cadet before any such defacing occurred. Agent Langley opened the door, likely to give a similar rebuke. The door had hardly moved before Vires, pulser in hand, charged.

At Agent Langley’s yell, Ethan darted faster and caught the door before it shut. Keeping it propped against his boot, Ethan yanked Vires back and found Agent Langley unconscious on the floor. “What have you done, Vires?” he demanded.

“Check his bracer.” Vires wiped his brow and tossed the stolen bracer.

Ethan refused to catch it; doing so would legitimize Vires. “Keep the door open,” he ordered, then crouched beside Agent Langley’s slack frame. A healthy pulse drummed against Ethan’s fingertips. Good. But he

needed to rebuke Vires' behavior, now, before it worsened.

Ethan stood. Though Vires bested him in height, Ethan had never been intimidated by the cadet. "You've assaulted a superior —"

"Yes, and now you're free to call Leader, and we're free to leave this room," Vires drawled.

A sharp chime interrupted the tension. The blinking light of Agent Langley's phone bled through his vest pocket. Ethan saw the caller's identification flash on the agent's disregarded bracer. *ANDREWS*. That name Ethan never used, but he still knew it belonged to Leader.

Despite the situation, Ethan felt some relief. Finally, access to a phone. Flicking his fingers, he unzipped the agent's pocket, then had the phone float to his ready hand. "Sheedy," he said.

Leader halted his breath. "Where is Agent Langley?"

Ethan eyed Vires, who crossed his arms and cocked an eyebrow. If Vires had demonstrated even a fraction of remorse, Ethan would've considered delaying his indictment until he'd discussed the matter with the guilty cadet. "Sir," he told Leader, "there was a mutiny. Agent Langley is unconscious."

"A mutiny? Never mind. Find privacy, Ethan."

Leader's dismissive tone gave Ethan pause. If mutiny met with Leader unfazed, then the situation at this Navy base must have grown worse than the cadets speculated.

He lowered the phone and turned toward the room. The cadets, all of them gawking, had congregated near the doorway. "None of you leave this room," he said. To Vires, he added, "You are suspended from active duty until further notice. Revive Langley."

The tall cadet rolled his eyes.

"Yes, sir," McFarland said. She reached for Vires' wrist and dragged him inside while Reynolds pulled Langley through the doorway by his heels.

Ethan nodded. Then he let the door slam and aimed down the hall. Once he'd rounded enough of the hallway and stood in fluorescent isolation, he said, "Sir, Ella —"

"When did you last see her?"

His pacing faltered. Leader's tension, then, had nothing to do with Goose Swamp. Agent Walker had evidently passed along Ethan's message. "In the shed, before we left," he said. "Sir, her motorcycle started

without her programming it. I think the older model malfunctioned.”

“Why was she on the old model?”

“One said you wanted her on that bike, sir.”

“One?” Leader spoke sharply. “A Tacemus?”

“Yes.”

“This is very important, Ethan. Did Ella give One any type of command? An order?”

“No. He initiated the conversation and gave her a backpack. Said it contained supplies for this mission.”

“Did you see Banks in the shed?”

“Banks? No, sir.”

These questions made little sense. Banks, rogue as of last October, hadn’t been seen around the academy in nearly a year. And what business would Ella have giving the Tacemus orders?

Ethan, poised for answering another question, felt the sting of worry once Leader had nothing else to demand from him. Though he failed to comprehend Leader’s line of reasoning, one worrisome fact bled through.

“Is Ella in danger?” he asked.

Leader answered after a beat. “Yes.”

The sting needling Ethan grew more acute. He straightened his shoulders, an unconscious act borne by years of firm bearing. “Agent Walker’s denied me permission, but I want to double back.”

“What did Walker tell you?”

“He said he would take care of the situation.”

“Take care of the situation...” Leader murmured.

“He—”

“Be quiet for a moment, Ethan.”

His lips sealed. He tapped a steady rhythm against his leg, an effort that typically focused him – and, indeed, Ethan *was* focused, every aspect of him narrowed in on something he was being prohibited from accomplishing. He could save Ella, if Leader would let him. But who was Ethan’s opposition? He understood fighting Grifters, but Leader had referenced Banks. If Ella was in danger from Grifters, Ethan had no doubt in his ability to protect her. If, however, she was endangered by MTA operatives....

Ethan hadn’t the time to probe the consequence of such an accusation before Leader finally spoke.

“Listen to me carefully, Ethan, and do exactly as I say.”

AS HE PROCEEDED along the hallway that would deposit him back into the bike hangar, Ethan recognized the anger propelling his steps faster than a casual stride. This emotion did not plague him readily. Ethan had never found anger as governing as his peers did, but justice demanded this fire. Leader had just informed him that rogue metas were working to dismantle the MTA, and their selfish operation was now harming Ella. Ethan’s only consolation came from knowing she hadn’t surrendered to the Grifters. She’d be in far more danger were that the case.

Outside the hangar, where MTA agents conversed with the civilian soldiers, clouds had begun darkening the sky. Agents Walker and Chang stood near a Humvee, gesturing toward a soldier whose chest badges boasted of more authority than the other civilians. Their conversation tickled at his hearing, but Ethan was trained not to eavesdrop. Even though he might’ve had every right, he stuck to his programming.

Agents Chang and Walker did not cease their explanations when Ethan approached. Per Leader’s orders, Ethan disregarded the air that he was an interruption and strode to Agent Walker’s side.

“Sir, may I have a word?”

Agent Walker barely acknowledged him. “I’ve told you I would handle the situation.”

“This concerns Andrews.”

At the name dropped so purposefully, even Agent Chang turned her head. Something passed like a shadow across Agent Walker’s face. He set a hand on Ethan’s shoulder and steered him far from the Humvee. They were surely beyond the civilian’s hearing, but Ethan imagined Agent Walker intended to keep this out of any meta’s range, too. Agent Walker did not stop until they’d reached a pier jutting yards into the water, at whose end rested a ship nearly as wide as the academy, a steel gray that tapered at its prow.

“Be quick, Sheedy,” the agent said.

Ethan recalled Leader’s exact wording: *Tell Walker Operation Whitewash is losing*. Its effect was painful. Ethan did not want to believe that Leader’s first officer might belong to an operation supported by the likes of Banks. Ethan admired Agent Walker. Respected him. Already, the knowledge of this Operation Whitewash had shaken Ethan. Why would a meta want to

destroy his heritage, the organization that had raised him and protected civilians from Grifters for countless decades? Even if Ethan had considered the idea that such a notion could possess a meta, he never would have called Agent Walker a victim to insubordinate fancies. At least Leader was still uncertain. This was a test – Agent Walker had yet to fail.

As Ethan struggled to readjust his composure, a thud from behind demanded his attention. He and Walker checked in unison. The ship undulated side-to-side. Its deck lay the same as before, without indication of what had produced the sound. Yet, a scan of the surrounding water revealed this to be a solitary instance of movement.

“There’s no wind, sir,” Ethan said.

Agent Walker’s scrutiny narrowed. They waited in the still of air before the rocking boat. Its movements did not cease. Ethan refused to blink. His gaze travelled the length continually, until a figure of gray raised its body above the prow. In rapid succession, heads lifted into view from overboard.

The MTA had prepped for a frontal assault. These Grifters had come by water. Unexpected.

Clever, Ella would’ve said.

Ethan formed a fist and felt his bracer charge.

Agent Walker gripped his shoulder. “Run.”

They turned as one. The two leaped toward shore and touched down in seconds. Ethan heard the air behind him stir; he dodged left, avoiding a thrown spear.

“Slow them!” Walker sprinted toward the ignorant civilians.

Ethan measured his surroundings. The terrain of concrete offered nothing in the form of defense. From whatever vantage near the dock, Ethan was exposed. The closest option rested with a utility shack some yards from the water. He jumped for it, noting the sound of another projectile and craning mid-flight. This one nicked his arm before it dived.

Dropping flat on the metal shack’s roof, Ethan aimed his bracer. He preferred melee to ranged, but one meta against the strength of twenty would not fare well.

Time didn’t allow for precise aiming. Another reason he never favored ranged fighting – Ethan didn’t like doing anything without precision. He began with the closest Grifter and worked through the charge until his magazine emptied. Digging his fingers into the bracer’s cartridge hold,

Ethan watched the last Grifter descend from the ship onto the dock. His eyes hardened. He recognized the Grifter by its missing appendage. According to Leader, Chron was the one who'd taken Kara Watson. Chron was motivated by revenge from its previous altercation with Ella, which had resulted in the loss of its arm. This Grifter, the MTA needed alive. If Chron moved onshore, its chances of survival vanished.

The army – only one fatality by Ethan's shooting – surged deeper into base, leaving the water behind. Chron maintained the rear. Ethan couldn't let the creature come any closer.

He leaped twice. Once toward the ground, and again toward Chron. His body rocketed into the Grifter. Ethan pinned the creature's torso as they tipped off the dock. The water snapped against his skin. Chron's thrashing pulled him under. Ethan fought both Grifter and nature, disliking how water restricted his motions. An arm hooked Ethan's neck, yanking; he impacted Chron's undefended side until the Grifter's hold slackened. Ethan swung his fist into Chron's face and felt the creature relax.

After rising to the surface, Ethan slung Chron onto the dock, and then pulled himself over, shaking droplets from his vision. Already, Chron stirred. Ethan needed to secure it. He grabbed the Grifter's shirt and dragged it toward the boat. Disregarding the ladder, he threw Chron onboard, jumping after.

On deck, the cargo consisted of aircraft carriers. Ethan searched for rope, but he saw only vehicles and didn't have time to investigate the lower decks. He carried Chron toward the prow and spied an on-deck anchor, not yet dropped. Ethan focused on the chain and mentally lifted. Tension burned in his muscles. Ever conscious of Chron's stirring, Ethan leaned as soon as the chain was within grasp and hauled it closer. Grifters were stronger than metas, even one-armed, and Ethan was determined this one would not escape.

Pressing Chron against the ship's incline, Ethan wrapped the Grifter's torso with the chain. He considered dropping the anchor but worried the pressure might sever the Grifter in half. Once Chron was bound, with the anchor outside the creature's line of sight, Ethan smacked its head until it awoke.

Chron twitched to awareness and immediately inspected its bound form. After straining to no avail, it met Ethan's eyes. The creature's head tilted. "I know you," it said.

“Where is Kara Watson?”

The creature’s grotesquely misshapen lips jerked. “Do you intend to negotiate?”

“I don’t negotiate with Grifters.”

“Yes, Ethan Sheedy obeys his superiors. He does not break protocol.”

Ethan hesitated. He could not guess how the creature knew his name.

You are a lock that needs no key, Chron said, switching to telepathy. I see everything, because you do not hide it. A weak mind.

The creature meant to unhinge him. Ethan shook away his confusion.

“I’ll ask you once more: Where is Kara Watson?”

The svag’s safety should not worry you as much as Ella Kepler’s. Can you answer for her whereabouts, Ethan Sheedy?

He knew he should not let the Grifter’s ruses unsettle him. Perhaps, on another day, Ethan could’ve ignored it. But Ella was missing, and this Grifter knew. Which meant Leader was mistaken. She *hadn’t* been the bartering piece between the MTA and Operation Whitewash. Chron had found her, or she had found the Grifter – and Ethan had failed to prevent either from happening.

Ethan crouched at Chron's head level and pushed the Grifter against the prow’s incline. “What have you done with her?”

That should not be your question. Fear for what I will do. For I do not show mercy to elaks.

“These are pointless threats, Chron. Your creatures are outnumbered. Whatever you’ve done with Ella and Kara, the MTA will –” Ethan halted. He heard the rustle of fabric behind him and ducked but avoided his fate for only another breath.

The blow came. Ethan’s vision turned off.

WHEN ETHAN REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS and felt the shackles dragging him, he chose to observe, rather than offer a futile struggle. Grifters secured either arm as they carried him forward. His boot tips scraped stone in a continuous grind. They’d blindfolded him, so he relaxed his vision and expanded his hearing. He measured their footsteps against their pulses. Four total – one leading, one following, and two as the escorts. Their strides resounded and occasionally splattered. Stone, damp, cool, with a rumble that tremored in his core. Only something vast could produce such a vibration. He guessed they were in proximity to rapids.

He'd calculated a half mile when they stopped. A half mile, plus the additional distance he'd been unconscious. He couldn't have remained unconscious too long, which meant walking distance from Goose Swamp.

His escorts ripped off the blindfold. The cell walls rushed at him as the Grifters shoved him inward. The door hadn't yet shut before he spun around. Chron filled the doorframe. A haze of yellow light shrouded the Grifter's wide bulk, enough for Ethan to examine his cell. Stone floor, crudely finished walls. No light. Behind Ethan, the air moved freer. Perhaps cracks in the floor.

Chron stepped closer, its single arm outstretched with fingers splayed. *No, Chron said, I will not free the svag. Better to have two cups of poison than one. Yes, you and the svag will die.* Its fingers, grey and thick, pulsed. They reached for Ethan as if they could siphon information from him. *Yes, I know where Ella Kepler is.* The Grifter recalled its arm and stepped back. *No, you will not see her alive again.*

Again, Chron seemed to answer Ethan's very thoughts. Could it read his mind?

Yes. I can. Ella Kepler neglected to enlighten you. She trusts you so little. The creature motioned to its guards. They receded, and the door slammed shut.

Ethan forwent investigating the cell for weak points; he knew the Grifters had fortified these walls. Instead, he crouched and thought. A Grifter who could read minds. How? Leader was unaware, and so was Ella; he would believe nothing the Grifter said. Although, Chron claimed to know where Ella was. If the Grifter could be believed, that implied she was elsewhere and not here.

Still hunched, he kneaded his temples. Ethan had allowed himself to lose focus on the boat, and now he could do nothing to keep Ella from harm. At least the Grifter had given him valuable information: Kara was alive. Ethan knew Grifters referred to civilians as "svags."

"It means 'weak,'" Reynolds had told Ethan and their classmates once. "It's Swedish, like most of their words. Probably used as a derogatory term, same as 'elak.' They call us 'evil' and civilians 'weak.'"

"And what do they call themselves?" Lydia had asked. "Noble? Pure? Righteous?"

Reynolds had shrugged. *"If they have a name for themselves, no one's ever told me."*

Ethan could think of only one name: *Scum*.

A noise, something like a wheeze, derailed his thoughts. The sound broke the quiet outside his cell, successive bursts from seemingly weak lungs. The owner's heartrate fluctuated.

Ethan darted blindly toward the door, letting hope buoy him. "Ella?" he called.

The other prisoner, separated by feet of stone, gasped, then silenced.

"Ella?" he said again.

"Are... are you talking to me?"

The differences in the voice – though it was feminine and young – deflated him. Not Ella. Though possibly Kara.

"Yes," he said, forcing disappointment from the word; he didn't want to offend Kara, if it was, indeed, her. "I thought you were... What's your name?"

"You first."

Ethan squinted. Something that would verify her identity, yet not reveal sensitive information, should her presence be a façade of the Grifters.

"What does the word 'erythrophobia' mean?" he said.

"What?"

"Just answer."

"It's... it's fear of the color red."

"Are you wearing it?" Ethan said.

"Who are you?"

"Answer my question, and I'll tell you."

"You're talking about my bracelet, aren't you? I lost it. How – how did you know about that?"

Ethan smiled with the knowledge that he'd accomplished his objective. "We have a mutual friend, Kara. My name is Sh –" He paused the automatic formality. Ella would want him to be warm. "Ethan," he said. "I work with the organization searching for you. You'll be safe."

Kara didn't answer for so long that Ethan worried she'd grown unwell. "Kara?" he called.

"Ethan," she said slowly. "Ethan Sheedy?"

He frowned. "Yes. How do you know that?"

"Is Ella with you?" Her voice grew louder, as if she'd shifted closer in his direction.

"No. How do you know my name?"

Kara's cough sounded slick. Ethan guessed it was a disguised sob and received confirmation when he heard stifled crying. This continued several moments. Ethan's curiosity didn't fade, but he did have room for regret that he had nothing with which to comfort her, other than his words, muffled behind a barrier.

A minute passed before Kara gathered herself. "It's...." She sniffled, then sighed. "It's hard to explain."

"The Grifter told you?"

"No. Ella did. She doesn't realize what she's doing."

Ethan longed for a window, a visual on Kara that might bring clarity to this conversation. "What is she doing, Kara?"

"Talking. To me. Every day for... for however long I've been here."

"I don't understand."

"The Grifters can do it too. Talk with their minds. Ella tells me things." She released a dry laugh. "I know I sound crazy. I thought so, at first, until the Grifter leader started asking questions. He knows what Ella can do."

Familiarity prodded a distant memory to the forefront of Ethan's focus. "*What if I told you that I have conversations with Kara in my head?*" Ella had said. "*Like, a lot?*"

Had those conversations reached Kara? That would beg the question of Ella's potential, but she couldn't even work telekinesis like the rest of the metas. A stunting brought about by her civilian upbringing, Leader believed. If Ella were *telepathic*, Ethan would know. Their training at SPO-10 would've revealed that.

As Ethan further considered the prospect of Ella possessing telepathic abilities, he recalled something else – that Kara was not alone in hearing Ella's voice. He'd experienced something similar on multiple occasions, but he'd attributed the sporadic chatter to himself. The manifestation of Ella's voice was infrequent, an unprompted arrival that usually mentioned something Ella would've said had they been together. Though Ethan wasn't the type to daydream, he'd told himself the voice was the product of longing.

It was a strange possibility he would've never allowed but for his current circumstance: captivity by a Grifter who claimed a similar potential. Chron had appeared to read Ethan's mind, and the creature had been searching for Ella relentlessly since last year. For revenge, Leader believed, and Ethan had accepted that, but neither Leader

nor Ethan had been able to give any meaning to Chron's words to Ella on the roof of St. Luke's Hospital.

"Tell me, how can you do it?"

"Ethan?" Kara said. "Are you still here?" Her pitch rose toward fear.

"Yes." He inhaled. This had three answers: Kara was hallucinating, the Grifters were tricking her, or Ella was speaking to Kara from miles away. The first possibility seemed unlikely, given that Kara knew his name. The second possibility had the most merit. A Grifter could've learned these details from Ella when it wiped her memory. Ethan could ascertain the extent of this voice's information by seeking intel a Grifter wouldn't know, because the experiences took place *after* the memory wipe.

"What else has this voice told you?" he asked.

"Where do I begin?" Her question was strained. "You're CO, in charge of everyone, like McFarland, Vires, and Reynolds. Burnette hates Ella. She doesn't know why. The leader of the academy doesn't have a name, but Ella calls him 'Sanders.' They train together in the afternoons. You eat the same breakfast every day. Oatmeal with an apple. Ella eats oranges. What else... you're all part of the MTA. The other cadets are telekinetic, but Ella isn't. This frustrates her. The MTA fights Grifters. Your last mission, at the hospital, was a disaster. You had to flee. Should – should I keep going?"

"No. I believe you."

Each sentence had given him further confirmation. A Grifter wouldn't have been meticulous enough to torture this information out of a cadet, and all of it originated post memory wipe. He couldn't reason any other explanation as to why Kara possessed this intel. Ella was, evidently, telepathic. Again, Ethan marveled that this ability had remained unchecked for so long. No matter. Now he knew.

A flame of hope energized him. This telepathy, unorthodox though it was, would give him insight as to Ella's well-being. She could give Kara her location.

Of course, Ethan could do nothing with that intel. Not from within this cell.

"Do you know where Ella is?" Kara asked, prodding what he couldn't answer for.

He closed his eyes. Steadily as it had come, the hope vanished. The bleak understanding of his own futility – he couldn't burden Kara with that. "What has she told you over the past twenty-four hours?" he said.

“Well... the last thing was, ‘Are you here, Kara?’ and then, ‘That’s not very helpful.’ Before that was her usual promise to find me. And....”

“And what?”

“She was talking about you. It woke me up, so it might’ve been morning. Or night. I can’t tell anymore.”

“What did she say?” Ethan asked.

“That she told you... how she feels. About you.”

Ethan’s mouth dried. That conversation had taken place early morning today. He’d told her he’d already known because he had – for a year. He hadn’t verbally reciprocated because he’d wanted to wait until her memories were restored, and then she would see that he didn’t have to verbalize it at all. He’d shown her, last year and now, with careful and intentional expressions. His decision had been resolute, but now he wished he’d demonstrated something more outright, disregarding decorum and the knowledge that, to her, their friendship was sustained by only five months of familiarity.

“You didn’t answer my question, Ethan,” Kara said, freeing him from his regret. “Where is she?”

He squeezed his fists. He’d meant to accompany her until the end. Now, he was imprisoned, unable to help Kara and himself, let alone Ella. He would have traded a beating to hear her voice in his head and the assurance that she was safe.

Ethan forced himself to answer Kara. “I don’t know.”