

"Stop here. I'll talk to the guards myself." The driver nodded, hearing Isabel's words, and gently pulled over to the side of the road. She caught a glance of a metal detector, and consequently left her phone in the car. Curious Citadel Defense Force soldiers looked over to the monochromatic black vehicle, with all windows, including the windshield, tinted to the point of it being impossible to distinguish the persons inside the vehicle.

Isabel pulled on the handle and opened the door with some effort due to its internal armouring. "Give them the IDs if they come up, maybe flash a badge. If I'm not back in 10 minutes, assume I've entered and go through." With these words, Isabel stepped out of the car and shut the door behind herself, not bothering to listen if the driver had any questions about her orders. She adjusted her weathered, lined beige peacoat that seemed too large for her slender form, and began to walk forwards to the checkpoint.

The LED sign that broke through the incoming darkness of the evening and stated "PEDESTRIAN ENTRANCE" was her sole guide towards the checkpoint, as the soldiers positioned around the checkpoint merely kept a watchful eye on the thin, eroded woman, and some of them on the armoured Lexus SUV on the side of the road.

The guard in front of the entrance stepped off to the side as Isabel passed through the metal detector on the path to the door without setting it off. The reinforced automatic door slid open, and Isabel stepped into the booth. It reeked of cigarettes and old paper. The door shut behind her, and Isabel looked to the person behind the bulletproof glass. A small black-furred feline, accompanied by a patrol cap stating "CITADEL WALL TASK FORCE" sitting on his head, his inspector outfit completed by a grey uniform. He only noticed the woman once she was in front of him, scrambling to hide away the papers and documents on the desk on his side of the booth.

Isabel did not speak as she retrieved her ID card from a pocket on the buttoned-up white lab coat beneath her peacoat, sliding it over to the inspector. The feline had opened his mouth to say something along the lines of *"sorry, I was busy with some papers"*, but found himself with no other option but to inspect the Citadel ID handed to him. He glanced at the discoloured and scratched plastic card, just as eroded as its owner. He ran it through an ID machine, only for it to beep and spit out an error message on the screen.

"Ma'am, it's, er, expired." He held up the card with two fingers, and used one on his other hand to point up at the date, which stated that the ID had expired all the way back in 2047. "Not only that, but you also have an outdated design without the newest security features."

"And what can I do?" Her voice was taut, yet her sunken eyes staring directly into the inspector's did not falter for a second.

"Mmph..." The inspector mumbled to himself for a second, as his polished claws, painted a rather fitting black, tapped the desk a couple of times. "Come in. My supervisor just so happens to be at base, maybe he has the auth to request an ID printing. Up the stairs, you'll see hallway with a few doors, the one at the end is his office." As he said this, he gestured the short path with his hands, pointing up and then to the side. He pressed a little button in his booth, and the steel door next to it slid open.

Isabel walked in, already seeing the stairs mentioned by the inspector. A singular LED light buzzed above as she entered. She went up, her boots clinking against the metallic stairs. Emerging on the second floor, she immediately saw the man she would be talking to sitting in his office with the door wide open; a protogen with green visor lights, dressed in the same uniform as the inspector in the

floor below, but he seemed a size too large for him. His somewhat high-pitched voice spoke with someone on a landline phone, talking on matters of checkpoints and security and the safety of the Citadel. Just as his subordinate, he wore the same patrol cap with the same text.

The canine woman stepped into the supervisor's bare-bones office.

"Yeah-yeah, just give me a sec, someone's got a complaint or something." He hung up the call on the phone, setting it down. He cleared his throat, before gesturing to a chair on the other side of the desk. "Apologies. Had to manage some operational stuff," he attempted to excuse himself. Isabel remained emotionless, staring at the protogen the same way she stared at the feline a few moments ago. She remained upright despite the offer to sit down.

"How can I help you today?" The "today" in his statement made it fairly clear that he had some sort of experience in customer service in his past, and that phrase was practically muscle memory for him.

"Expired ID. Your inspector told me you can help me with that." Isabel placed the plastic card on the desk, in front of the supervisor.

The protogen picked up the card, looking over it in a similar manner to his subordinate. He sucked in some air through his nanite teeth after a few seconds of inspection, setting it back down on the desk. "I'm afraid I can't actually do much for you. Due to the current state of unrest, you will have to contact the Citadel Entry Agency and request a temporary entry pass, and then once you're inside travel to their office to request a new ID. But even then, why do you want to enter? There's a whole civil war going on, and—"

"Shush it. It doesn't need to matter to you why I need to enter." Isabel spoke sternly, the protogen going silent as soon as he heard her. "Will I get to enter *tonight*, or not?"

"I'm afraid not. My condolences if you had any family you were willing to vis—"

Isabel reached over, grabbed the protogen's patrol cap, and tossed it to the side. She then grabbed a fistful of his hair and tugged on it, forcing him to let out a yelp of surprise and pain at the same time.

"What the fuck are you doing?!" He reached up to his hair, trying to free himself from Isabel's grip, but she did not yield in the slightest. He tried to claw at her hands, and while he succeeded in inflicting a few minor cuts, he was interrupted by a slap to his hands of such force that it resonated throughout the office and forced another yell of pain from the protogen, the pain making him stop his attempts at breaking free. Isabel went around the desk, still holding the supervisor by his hair. She pulled back his cushy office chair and forced him up onto his feet; at 5'7, he was just an inch shorter than her.

He frantically tried to reach down to the sidearm in his belt holster, only to receive another debilitating strike to his hand. "Don't reach for shit, understood?" Isabel's voice was loud and menacing, but she was not shouting just yet. She dragged him up to a small window that showed a small piece of the views outside of the Citadel's walls, but it was enough for what she had planned.

She slammed the protogen's face against the window, holding him by the hair with one hand and by the neck with the other. "You see that fucking building?!" She pressed him further into the glass, now pointing at the cooling towers of the Citadel's very own nuclear power plant in the distance, spewing clouds of steam, the lights on them flashing red and green in the dark of the approaching night. "*I* built it. It provides electricity to your entire pathetic fucking city." She let go of his neck, using her now free hand to tug at her lab coat to reveal the silver badge representation of Rutherford's atomic

model clipped onto the lab coat on the left side of her chest, little silver spheres stuck in orbits around a larger collection of spheres, nearly shoving the badge in the protogen's face.

The protogen tried to struggle once more, and was met with Isabel pulling his head back and slamming him into the window again with such force that the glass of both the window and the protogen's visor cracked slightly. He let out a yelp that seemed more like a complete scream of pain now.

"So? Can I go through now, Inspector?" She growled, waiting for a response.

"Gh—just, just go, I'll tell him to let you through—" He muttered, his voice slightly distorted due to the uncomfortable position of his head.

"Good. And don't reach for shit." She let go of him roughly, almost throwing him back. She went to pick up her ID card, and once she did, she left without saying a word more, quickly going down the stairs.

"The hell's going on up there? I heard you screaming for your life!" The feline's voice crackled through the radio on the protogen's shoulder.

"It's... the dog lady. She's fucking crazy, man. Just let her through. I'll deal with it later if we get scolded, but I'd rather get a scolding from command than have my eyes clawed out..." The protogen's voice was audibly shaken. He tried to correct the newly appeared crumples in his uniform, and ran a hand over the crack in the glass of his visor.

"Mkay... just don't blame me if we get sacked later." The inspector sighed into the radio, before once more meeting Isabel's gaze as she emerged from the little side entrance. "Stay safe." He mumbled, before pressing the button to open the exit door of the booth.

Isabel simply nodded to the inspector, and left the booth. The door shut behind her as she took a deep breath of dust-filled air, looking towards the seemingly unending layers of military outposts and forward operating bases that lay up ahead on the highway-like entrance road, the sidewalk of which she stood on.

She immediately recognized the faint glow of the neon sign of "M's Motel" off in the distance, and a faint smile made itself evident on her otherwise emotionless face.