

December, a lovely time to spend with your loved ones indoors drinking hot chocolate and exchanging gifts. Unless, of course, you're a firefighter barrelling down a road at an ungodly speed in a big red truck towards a five alarm fire... Which is exactly what I'm doing. Dressed in my turnout gear I sit stuffed in the back with my crew, headphones on so we can speak over the siren. "You good, Wolf?" I hear the voice of my friend and coworker, Flynn Murphy. His brown eyes and boyish grin looked at me from the jump seat in front of me.

I shake my head with a small grin, "Yeah I'm fine, just thinking I'd rather be home with family. And I told you, on call, it's Lieutenant Kaipo." I turn and resume my thoughts as I stare out the window at the snow covered streets of Washington D.C. In the distance, smoke billows up from the tallest skyscraper in the middle of downtown, a company called Lake Global Technology.

"Alright, crew, listen up." I say sternly into the headphones, "When we get there I want people on the hose to combat the blaze and keep it from jumping. Reed, Murphy you two go to the top floor and start clearing floors heading down. Beza, Costa do the same with me from the ground floor up." I say, ending on the face of my best friend and resident Italian redhead, Annica Benza. She stares at me with her green eyes and nods as the rest of the crew murmurs in agreement.

Max Reed pulls Engine 17 to a stop and we all jump out, opening hatches on the exterior of the rig to grab our equipment. He and Flynn grab their halogens and make their way into the building once they don their helmets and oxygen masks. Yenelle Costa comes up to me and hands me a halogen with a small nod. I take it and give the Brazilian a nod in return as I put on my oxygen mask, "Thank you Nelle."

She slides on her oxygen mask before saying, "No Problem, LT." Annica, Nelle and I then make our way into the building. After checking the lobby, we head to the next floor using the northside stairs, finding rooms along the hallway. I sigh and shake my head "This is gonna take a while", I mutter before checking a closed door for heat before I open it. "Fire Department! Call out!" I yell into the room as I scan the room for anyone inside.

Nelle and Annica nod in agreement before they start checking the other rooms. After a while, we meet up with Max and Flynn on the tenth floor of the building. "Nobody on any of the higher floors, kinda like nobody is here." Max relays as his hazel eyes scan the area. "Well, that's strange but we still have to check every floor." I say as I pat his helmet as I walk by, "Let's go Steampunk."

"Right behind you, Wolf." He shouts back as he chuckles. I hear a faint cry and hold up my hand silencing the group, "You hear that?" I ask softly. The group looks around confused before Flynn asks "Hear what?" He then gasps as the sound reaches us again. "Someone is on this floor." I take off running down the hall with my crew behind me. I stop at an open lab doorway and can't see much beyond the smoke.

"Call out! Fire Department!" I yell as I step into the remains of the lab. Tables and computers around the room are on fire as I scan for the survivor. Annica and Flynn are the first two to catch up to me and use extinguishers to put out the spot fires. Moving deeper into the lab, we hear the cry again, but it seems to sound different this time. "Call out!" I yell again as we keep checking around the room and under tables and desks. My radio squawks to life as another crewmate, Scott Pine says, "Lieutenant, get yourself and your crew out now. We are worried about a flashover."

I pause and look over at my crew. "Shit." I murmur, "We need to move, NOW!" I yelled, pushing Annica and Flynn towards the door as they were closest to me. "The survivor, we are so close!" Nelle says as she gets closer to the noise. "STOP! Nelle, There is no survivor!" I say as she steps into a dark part of the room. "I had realized it when Scott called. Its a set up! Someone lured us here with arson and a recording on a speaker." I say as I move to Nelle to grab her. "Its a trap." Max says bluntly as he moves to the door.

"Exactly." I say, "Now let's go!" I yell again. At that exact moment, the door closes with a slam, trapping us all in. "Shit! Too late!" Flynn yells as he steps towards the door trying to open it. "Dont!" I start saying as an explosion rocks the room starting next to Nelle. I look over to see the flame engulf her before it slams over me knocking me off my feet.

I hear the grunts of my friends and only have time to register a dark shadow above me holding a syringe filled with a yellow liquid before everything goes black. The image is the first thing I remember as I wake up to the soft steady sound of a heart monitor.

'Hospital or psycho killers lab?' I think as I open my eyes, sitting up quickly. My head reels in pain as I scan the room. 'Hospital.' I conclude as I rip the IV out of my arm. Staggering to my feet, I hold onto the bed to steady myself. "Well, that's a sign of a concussion." I mutter as I look for my clothes.

Finding someone left a clean set nearby, I rip the hospital gown off, the cold washing over my body instantly. "Woah, LT! I knew you were hot but didn't realize you were smokin'!" I hear the voice of Scott from the doorway. "Look away or lose an eye, Tree." I say with a small playful growl as I start slowly walking to the folded clothes nearby. "Aye Aye", He replies as he turns around.

"Anyway, I thought you'd want to know that nobody died." I finish getting dressed and turn back to him, "What happened Scott?" He turns back to face me and shrugs, "As far as I know, an explosion went off in the room you were in. After that, y'all got knocked out. We went in and brought y'all out."

"Nobody died." I echo. "I saw Nelle get swallowed." I find a pair of sunglasses in my DCFD jacket and slide them on my burning eyes. "Turnouts saved her." Scott says, "Guess the explosion wasn't that bad." I let out an involuntary laugh, "Funny, I thought the arsonist was trying to kill first responders." I say through the pain filling my head. "Take me to the rest of the team."

He nods, "Well, I would but you have visitors who've been waiting for you to wake up." The doorway fills with people, parents and siblings as well as my whole team who's already woken up.

"Makuahine, Makuakane. He aha kuhana ma anei?" I ask my parents in my native Hawaiian. "O mkou kou ohana. Aole anei mkou e hele mai ke eha oe? Aole loa mkou i aei oe o lawe i kia hana." My mother answers as she steps forward to grab my hands softly.

I pull back as I hear whispers from Flynn and Annica. "What are they saying?" Flynn mutters. Annica leans in and whispers, "Kailani asked what they are doing here. Her mom replied that they are her family, asked if they shouldn't come when she's hurt and that they shouldn't have allowed her to be a firefighter."

I shake my head sighing, "Mom, I will always love and respect you, but Dad is a doctor and you're a detective, you see more danger daily. I'm fine. Thanks for coming but I need to get back

to work.” I say with a kiss on her and my fathers cheeks before walking past my brother and sister, ruffling their hair as I pass.

Pausing, I look at my crew “Y’all coming or do I need to look for new candidates?” I ask sharply. Scattered laughter pings the halls as they start to follow behind me. “Since when do you know Hawaiian, Annica?” Max asks as we pass through the double doors to the elevators.

Annica smiles at Max “Kailani is teaching me.” She answers as Flynn looks at me, “Did they really say they shouldn’t have allowed you to take the job?” I nod, “Yeah, they did.” I turned to Scott “Did you bring your truck or the Engine?” He sighs “Well, seeing as it’s been a few hours and they need the engine.” He mutters.

We pile into the truck once we exit the elevator. One silent trip back to Station 55 ends when Scott pulls into the lot. I bolt out of the truck and into the kitchen where everyone is eating leftover Poké that I cooked the day before. “Okay?! Which one of you numbskulls called my parents?!” I yell glaring at each of the firefighters there.

“That would be me, LT. Kaipo.” Says a deep voice from behind me. I turn to see Battalion Chief Allen walk out of his office. I groan and shake my head, “Well, I know for a fact my emergency contact is neither one of my parents.” He shrugs and heads into the kitchen to get some food, “Too late now. Go clean up and relax until the next call.”

I nod and head to my quarters, a little room off the side of the bunk area of the other firefighters. ‘Perks of being a Lieutenant’, I think as I lay down on my bed. The image of the shadow flashes in my mind as I close my eyes. I quickly open them and move to my desk where I pull out a pencil and blank sheet of paper.

After a quick sketch, I set my pencil down and look at the finished drawing. ‘That’s some nightmare fuel for a kid.’ I think to myself as I shake my head dismissively. The siren blares with the dispatcher saying “Structure Fire at 1721 L Street NE. Engine 17, Ambulance 7.” I jump to my feet as I change my shoes to my work boots as I run to the lockers to change into my turnout gear. As soon as I reach the lockers, my head spins and I stagger into my locker to steady myself, “Mm, my head.” I mutter as I pinch my temples. “You good, Wolf?” Flynn asks as he comes up beside me. “Yeah, that’s the job ain’t it? Gotta love it.” I say with a pained grin.

Soon we are all piling out of the engine at the scene of a burning apartment building. I scan the surroundings and freeze when I see something that makes my stomach drop. A white two door Toyota Supra with black doors and a black hood. On the hood is a wolf howling at the moon and cherry blossom decals on the doors. Annica sidles up next to me, “Isn’t that Alexis’ car?” I sigh and pull off a glove as I reach for my phone. “Yes, yes it is.” I pull my phone out of my jeans pocket under my turnouts and start dialing Alexis as I turn to my crew, “Max, Nelle, go around back and vent. Annica, Take Flynn and search for survivors. Scott, you get on the hose and keep the fire from jumping.” I walk behind the engine as I mutter to myself “Pick up, Pick up, Pick up.” When the call connects, Alexis answers with her signature, “Miller.”, while I hear cries in the background. I punch the rig as I lay my head against it “Tell me you’re not in the burning building.” There is a pause before she answers, “I would but I promised you that I wouldn’t lie to you anymore.” She replies as screams and creaking are heard in the background of the call. I sigh and punch the engine again “Stay safe, I’m on the scene. We will get you out.”

“I trust you.” She says before hanging up.

I put my phone away and slide my glove on before speaking into the radio “Annica, Flynn, Head up, we have civilians in the building. One of whom we know all too well.” I hear static on the radio before Flynn speaks “Cherry Blossom is inside, isn't she?” He asks with a heavy sigh.

“Yes. The adrenaline-seeking, threat-chasing private detective who happens to be my girlfriend is somewhere inside,” I grumble into the radio as I head inside.

I meet up with Flynn and Annica at the stairs leading to the second floor, just as Max and Nelle come up from the back of the building.

“Vents taken care of. So I hear Lexi is in the building,” Max says coyly.

That gets a laugh out of me,

“Don't call her that to her face, Steampunk. You know she'll kill you,” I say, looking at my friends and coworkers.

“Alright, we split up. I need to find my girl. Brazil and Pit Stop, go check the basement,” I say, pointing at Nelle and Flynn in turn as I use their nicknames. “Steampunk and Mermaid, take the middle floors. I'll take the top floor and work down.”

Annica grumbles as she walks away with Max.

“Mermaid, just 'cause my hair is red and I love the sea.”

I hear Max laugh a bit as he walks around her.

“Ah, well, you answer to it, small fry,” he says while I start up the steps, watching Nelle and Flynn head down to the basement.

I make it to the top floor of the apartment building and start banging on doors.

“Fire Department! Call out if you are inside!”

I yell, using my halogen to open any locked doors.

“Kailani.”

I hear Alexis yell faintly from down the hall. I sigh and shake my head, running toward the apartments down the hall.

Of course she has to be on the top floor as well.

I hear her voice again.

“Alexis, call out!”

I yell, waiting for her voice to lead me.

“We're over here!” she yells from an open doorway to my right.

I find Alexis and move toward her. Nelle and Flynn get there double-time to help me get them out. Max and Annica search the next apartments, calling out to see if anyone is inside.

I make my way to the door.

“I want to ask so many questions but I won't until we are all out of this,” I say over the flames as I enter the doorway and find Alex huddled in a corner with a scared girl next to her.

“To be fair, when I got here, the building wasn't on fire yet,” Alexis says with a playful grin.

“Later,” I say, closing the room behind me as I grab the girl in my arms. “Let's go. Anyone else here?” I ask the private detective.

“Shouldn't be. But I didn't get to check fully,” she says as she looks into my eyes.

At that moment, someone shows up in the hall.

“Well, fancy seeing you here.”

Flynn says playfully to Alexis, who sticks out her tongue.

“Do your job, Pretty boy,” she says,

“I wasn't able to clear the apartment before the fire. Maybe more people here.”

Flynn nods and moves toward the bedrooms with Nelle to check for others. Max and Annica show up a minute later, and I pass the girl to Max.

"Get her down to the EMTs. Alexis, go with him. Annica, come with me to check the other apartments," I say as I begin walking toward the doors.

A cracking sound in the ceiling and floor stops me dead. I turn to look at the others.

"Scott, the building is unstable. We have civilians up here. Can you get the ladder to the top-floor apartment?"

"I'll try it," he responds.

I sigh and look at Max.

"Go to the stairs while you can."

He heads down the hall as Annica yells.

The beam hits his arm and splits in half on contact, crashing to the floor around him.

"What the—?"

Everyone says it in unison as we look at Max.

"Nobody else!"

Flynn calls as he steps into the room.

"Shit! The floor is unstable!"

Alexis calls to him.

"Also, you just missed something," she adds.

"What did we miss?" Nelle asks, looking around.

"Beam fell on Max, and yet he's totally fine," Annica says, still shocked.

Max looks at us, then at himself.

"I don't even understand it," he comments.

"Well, we don't have time to play twenty questions. Max, keep going. Carefully. When Scott comes with the ladder, we'll get out," I say as I look toward the window.

"Uh, we have a problem. Truck can't angle correctly."

Scott's voice comes through the radio.

At the same time, creaking comes from the floor beneath Max.

"Shit!" I yell at both things. "Max, move now!"

I say, turning toward him.

"We'll find a way."

He nods and takes a step, which causes the floor to start falling from underneath him.

He looks at us with fear in his eyes before darkness engulfs him.

"Max!"

I yell, running to the hole to look down.

"What the fuck just happened?!"

I hear his voice through the radio while looking into the hole.

"Max? Where are you?" I ask into the radio on my shoulder.

"Outside. Somehow," he answers.

Nelle squeaks as she looks at the group.

"I think I had something to do with that," she says softly. "I wanted him safe outside."

I nod and look back into the apartment.

"Alright. Again, no time for questions. Flynn, get over here. We either go up or down. Find roof access or another staircase, since there's a giant hole in the floor."

I say, moving away from the hole.

Flynn quickly crosses over as he and Nelle reach the entranceway. Beams fall and block the door.

"Can we catch a break?!" Flynn yells.

He hits and groans, ramming a shoulder into the blockage.

"Flynn, think smarter. You have a halogen?"

I ask.

He nods but keeps ramming with his shoulder.

It is then that I notice his body changing before our eyes. His legs grow bigger and hairier as he grows taller and wider.

Almost instantly, he changes back to normal and looks at us with wild eyes.

"I have no idea what just happened," he says as he looks at his gloved hands.

"None of us know what's happening. But we'll talk about it later," I say, turning to head toward the stairs.

"Watch out!"

I hear Alexis shout over the crashing of beams overhead.

I barely have time to think as I throw my arms over my head, trying to catch the beams while my life flashes before my eyes.

Realizing I haven't been crushed to death, I open my eyes and look at my hands and the flaming beams held within them.

An orange glow, like that of a sunset or a basketball, surrounds me, slowly forming into the outline of a grizzly bear.

"I don't know how long I can hold this, so Nelle, if you could figure out how you got Max outside—and quickly—that would be amazing," I say, trying to keep the strain and fear out of my voice.

"I can't take much more of this craziness."

I hear Annica mutter. A quick look at her makes me believe that she has been affected too. Her green eyes now have a small glow in them, as do her hands.

"Annica, you okay?" I ask as she notices me looking and takes a few deep breaths. The glowing in her hands disappears.

"I'm fine," she says quickly, averting her eyes.

"Anyway, Nelle?" she adds.

Nelle nods.

"I'll try. Everyone huddle up," she says in her accented English.

The rest of them circle around me, and Nelle closes her eyes to focus.

Soon, darkness surrounds us, and in the blink of an eye, we are outside in the cool December air.

Gasps sound throughout the group as the glowing outline dims around me.

"Did you see that? A person appeared out of nowhere!"

I hear someone say as I lower my arms and storm after Alexis.

When I see her turn and slink away toward her car, I call after her.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" I ask, removing my oxygen mask.

"Back to my office to write up a report."

She responds simply, taking her keys out of a pocket in her trench coat.

I reach out and grab her wrist.

“Nuh-uh. Get your happy ass back there and get checked out by the EMTs. And while you’re at it, tell me why you are here.”

I say in a stern tone.

She sighs and rolls her eyes, with a smile fighting to form on her face.

“Yes, ma’am,” she says sarcastically, turning and looking into my eyes.

“But before I do,” she adds before grabbing me by the waist with her free hand and pulling me into a kiss.

I let out a squeak and kiss back softly before pulling away. “Alex! I’m on shift!” I yell in a harsh whisper. She shrugs and starts walking to the ambulance. “So I’m your girlfriend, Kay, if I can’t kiss you after you save me then what is the point?” She says with a flirty smile. I bite my lip and nod as we walk back.

By the truck I see Flynn and Nelle putting away supplies with Scott, who seems to be trying to find out what happened. Max is with Annica by the EMTs, who are checking out the girl Alexis had saved. The two embrace tightly, oblivious to Alexis and me as we walk up.

“How is she?” I ask the EMT who is checking the wide-eyed girl.

“Riley? In shock, obviously, and appears to be a bit malnourished. We will take her to the hospital where a CPS agent will be called and she can get more treatment.” He answers before Alexis clears her throat. “CPS won’t be needed,” she says as she gets checked out by the EMT’s partner. “I was contacted by Riley’s parents to find her after the police hit a dead end. I followed the trail here and went inside. She was kidnapped three weeks ago by her elementary school’s janitor who I believe wanted to do way more than treat her as a daughter.”

She stops and looks at Riley with sad eyes. The girl curled herself into a ball on the gurney inside the ambulance and fell asleep. “Tell the doctors to run a rape kit just in case. I can’t be sure what he did to her. Anyway, when I came into his apartment I found her locked inside the spare bedroom. I was almost out the door with her when the psycho came home and saw us. He bolted to a corner where he had a gas can, which I somehow missed, and used a Bic lighter to start the fire before leaving.”

She finishes. I stare at the little girl and sigh. “Poor thing is more than shocked. She’s going to be traumatized for the rest of her life. Kidnapped and possibly raped. Worst things to happen to a girl.” I say, holding back rage and tears. “If the EMTs release you, I need your services at the firehouse.” I tell Alexis.

She looks at me curiously but nods and turns to the EMT examining her. The medic gives her a nod of approval, which at Alexis quickly pops her to her feet. “Meet you there,” she says as she heads to her car. I shake my head, look at Riley one more time, and head towards the engine.

****Chapter Two****

****Cherry Bomb****

Once everyone gets settled in my quarters—whether sitting on my bed or leaning against a wall—I pick up the sketch I made and look at them from my position perched on my desk. “So, I called the six of you in here because of what happened tonight. I think I know a little of what happened.” I start looking from face to face. “How could you possibly know?” Flynn says, taking a position leaning by the door. “Yeah, and what’s that paper?” Max asks, leaning against the

window sill. "Hey, where is this going?" Alexis asks me as she shifts to the edge of my bed. Annica and Wells just stare at me curiously and then exchange looks.

"The fire at Lake Tech," I continue. "We were lured into a trap." Alexis gasps and another flash crosses her face. "Why wasn't I notified?" she asks. I shrug and continue as the others nod. "Before I fell unconscious I saw someone holding a syringe with a glowing yellow liquid inside in the smoke." I flipped the page to show my sketch. "I think whoever it was, lured us there and used a small explosive to knock us out and inject us with whatever was in the syringe." I pause to look at their faces, taking my time. "And you think that whatever he injected caused those changes, those powers?" Nelle asks after a short silence. I nod. "I do. Except maybe in one of us who may have had powers from the start." I look at Annica. "What does that mean?" Max says, noticing my gaze.

"Well. All the rest of us ingested experimental change that seemed instinctive. Max, you've been shown to have some sort of invulnerability. Flynn has a shape-shifting ability. Nelle can move us through darkness. I have some sort of ability to channel animals. Who's the one person who didn't exhibit powers and was at the Lake Tech fire?" I ask. Every eye turns to Annica. "Alright." She hesitates and I notice the blue in her eyes again as she looks up. "Yes. I've had powers. I was born with them. I learned how to hide them from a young age." She yells as her eyes and hands begin to glow. "But if you are right and the others gave you powers, I think it may have changed me. I haven't had the best control tonight." She says fearfully as everyone around her takes a step back. A ball of energy forms in her hand, the same blue as her eyes. "Annica... calm down," I say softly as I take a step forward.

"How can I calm down when you think some maniac injected us with some crazy serum that gave you all powers?" she says loudly and stares up at me with glowing eyes, her hair standing on end. She is reaching for me. "Because why do you think Alexis is here? I brought her to investigate and find out who and why." I say, trying to remain calm while waving my arms around her shoulders. She nods and closes her eyes, breathing slowly as she calms herself down. The energy ball in her hand disappears and then she opens her eyes—they are her normal green. "Good, and calm," I ask her with a smile. She nods and smiles apologetically at everyone.

"Alright. Let's hope we aren't too famous now due to what happened at the fire. Alexis, you will do this right?" I ask. Alexis nods and takes my hand. "Of course. I'll start at Lake Tech as soon as I finish the report for the DCPD." She says, kissing my cheek and walking out. I nod to the others and stand up. "Go get some rest. Relax. Watch TV. Do something until the next fire." I say as I walk out toward the kitchen, having some polar iced tea.

Leaving the firehouse, Alexis headed to her Toyota Supra, which she had named Howling Flower. Unlocking the car, she slid off her trench coat and tossed it into the passenger seat before sliding in and putting her phone on. "Siri," she said to her phone's AI. "Call Jenn." She sat and turned on her car as the female AI voice said "Calling Jenn." Her phone connected to the car's speakers as she started driving to her office at Hound Detective Agency. "You better have

a good reason for calling me during the day when you know I'm night shift," said the groggy voice of Jennifer Walker, a CSI with DCPD.

"Sorry, but I need that badge of yours and I need access to Lake Tech. I thought with the recent fire you could help me get access," Alexis said as she wove through the streets of the city. "Alexis. That's a big favor. Bigger than just chance food," Jennifer said, the request having woken her up more. "I know. But I really need this. It has to do with Kailani and her crew." Alexis told her all about what I had told her. "Someone at Lake Tech trying to give first responders' super powers against their will? Interesting. I'll see what I can do. But you owe me big time," Jennifer said as she hung up.

Smiling, Alexis pulled up her Spotify account and put on "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana as she drove. She soon parked outside the old apartment building her adoptive father Howard Hound had bought and renovated into the Hound Detective Agency. She grabbed her phone and coat as she turned off the car and stepped out into the cold. She walked to the door and used her key card to unlock it, then pushed into the building and walked to her office. She saw her coworkers huddled at desks as one smiled. "I still can't believe it," she thought as she stepped into her office, hanging her coat and tossing her keys onto her desk. She had just sat down when a knock came from her door. "Come in," she yelled through the door.

As the door opened she was hit with the smell of fresh baked goods and coffee. She looked up to see her father holding a bag and a drink tray from Carly's Café down the road. "Dad, what a surprise. To what do I owe this visit?" she asked as he set the bag and tray on her desk and took a seat, setting aside his suit and paper bags. "What? I gotta have a reason to visit my favorite girl?" He shrugged back, grinning. "Well no. But you brought cookies and coffee," she said as she pulled out the box of cookies from the bag and one of the coffees. "Alright, fine. I missed you and wanted to check in," he said, taking his coffee and a cookie as he sat in one of the visitor chairs. "You heard about the fire on your police scanner—which since you aren't on the force anymore is illegal, I might add—and found out I was involved. Don't think I can handle myself?" she asked as she popped the lid off the to-go cup and dunked a cookie into it before taking a bite. "Mmm. From Carly's," she added as her father sat there stunned. "I think you are perfectly capable of handling yourself or I never would have given you the company," he said after a while before taking a sip of what she assumed was his signature black coffee. "Doesn't mean I don't worry," he added. "Well as you can see, I'm fine. Thank you for the cookies and coffee but I need to write a report," she said as she finished the cookie in her hand. "Okay. Just next time same and update please," he said as he finished his cookie and grabbed three more as he stood up. She gasped in protest as he smiled with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "You think all these were for you? I love these cookies too. Would marry Carly if she wasn't already just for those cookies," he said as he grabbed his hat and walked out taking one last cookie.

She muttered softly before grabbing another and taking a bite as she opened the police phone case file up. After typing the report she closed it and then saw she had a text message from Jenn. It read: Got you in. Meet you there in an hour. You owe me something. Not sure what yet. She smiled and locked her computer. Pushing up from her desk she got to her feet and grabbed her keys and coat as she raced down the stairs. She pulled open the door and made her way to her car, slamming the door when she got in.

An hour later, putting on her sunglasses, she saw Jenn walk up to the entrance. Showing her around before making her push open the doors and step out. She shut and locked the car door before making her way to her. "How did you get me in so fast?" she asked when in front of her. Jenn smiled and shrugged. "I have connections plus a crime was committed so CSI takes over. I got you an ID," she whispered as she pulled out a CSI badge. "I need that back when we are done," she said before turning and walking inside, her curly brown hair and leather jacket flowing behind her. Alexis clipped the badge onto her coat and followed her inside.

"Welcome to Lake Global Technology. Sorry about the construction. We recently had a fire," a receptionist said as they entered. "We know. We are with the DCPD CSI division. We need access to the tenth floor," Jenn said, pulling out her badge and holding it up with her prosthetic right hand. "Oh of course," the receptionist said. "Head through security and the elevators are to your left." Jenn nodded and slipped her badge back in her pocket. "You know I will never get over the fact that you could use your own prosthetic that moves so smoothly. You didn't get tech off of it," Alexis said as they walked to the security area. "What I wanted to do plus the tech is too advanced," Jenn replied as she stepped before a metal detector and slipped off her jacket revealing a red shirt and the full prosthetic arm.

The prosthetic was gunmetal grey and looked like several plates of metal put together at every joint. The metal even stopped and bent and almost sparked next to the skin. She set her jacket and a couple of her pockets into a small container before pulling a gun from a shoulder holster on her right side and a Beretta from an ankle holster. Alexis gave her a puzzled look and she shrugged. "Can't be too careful. Not after last time," she said and looked at the security guy. "Do I have to remove the arm too?" she asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm. He shook his head.

Jennifer stepped through the detector as Alexis did the same first, undoing her own Glock 19 from the holster at the small of her back. "My dad's old service weapon," Alexis said as Jenn gave her a curious look. "Don't worry it's registered and I have a license," she added as she stepped through without trouble.

They gathered their things as they walked to the elevators and replaced their things and put their jackets back on. "I never got that full story on your arm," Alexis said, hoping to make conversation. "No you didn't. Well then here's the short version. I was working on a case gang-related only CSI still at the scene. Guy doubles back and grabs me. Threatens me for drugs to find out what I knew and tries to get me to agree to tampering with evidence. When I said no, he broke my arm. First was at the wrist then my forearm and so on until I was rescued," Jenn said deadpan.

Alexis stood still, shocked at what she had just heard. "Damn," she muttered as the elevator dinged. Once the door opened Jenn stepped out and headed down the hall. "You coming?" she asked over her shoulder. Alexis shook the image out of her head and rushed after her just as the door started to close. "What do you think we will find?" Jenn asked as they stepped into the room where Kailani and her crew had gotten trapped. "No idea," Alexis said as she pulled a pair of latex gloves from a pocket in her coat. Jennifer did the same and shook her head. "Well any idea what you are looking for?" Alexis looked at her with a serious look. "Any evidence that shows someone besides LT Kailani and her crew weren't the only ones in this room on the night of the fire."

Jennifer and Alexis started to walk. They combed through the room opening cabinets big enough to fit a person and looking low for any trace evidence not destroyed by the fire. On the floor in the back of the room near where one of the bombs went off Alexis found the charred remains of a Bluetooth speaker. "I think this matches with the report of being wired with wires on a speaker," she said to herself as she pulled out her phone and took a pic. "Jenn, do you have evidence bags?" she asked her friend who was across the room. "Yeah but come look at this real fast," Jenn said, standing at a corner of the room by the door.

Alexis bagged the speaker and walked over to her as she slid up next to her. Jenn pulled a bag and put it inside before writing down the chain of custody. "Unknown," Alexis said as she crouched down in the area to see what can be seen. Perfect view of the room. Guy probably sat here with the heat waves. Then as they got ready to leave shows the door open disguise of the flash that he heard Scott call about.

She theorized as she looked for any trace evidence while taking pictures. "Shelter Blanket," Jenn asked. "For the heat. Silver Kevlar looks like aluminum foil and keeps the heat away. Anyway he probably had the triggers for the bombs with him and blew them when they got close enough. Click the door for prints though if he was smart he would wear gloves. And I just point to the fact that this guy is very smart," Alexis said as she looked over at Jenn watching her move to fingerprint the door.

She continued looking near the remains and found a shoe print in the ash. "Hmm," she said as she took a picture and looked closer. "This may be something. Got a ruler?" she asked. Jenn nodded and grabbed the door before walking over and pulling out a ruler from her CSI kit. Alexis grabbed it and set it near the shoe print. "Size 12. Definitely male. I will check to see what type of shoe has this print when I get back to the office," she said as she took another picture. "I think this is all we are going to find." She closed and zipped off her gloves as she headed to the door. She heard her follow as she pressed the button for the elevator. The door opened and they stepped inside. "Need a ride back?"

Jenn shook her head. "No, I parked a few blocks away since I'm supposed to be home and not at a crime scene." She smirked at her. "Well I appreciate the favor," Alexis said and could hear the CSI badge as they walked out of the elevator into the lobby. "But remember you owe me big. I'll be on the prowl and the sooner we get you home." She said as they walked out of the building and Alexis headed to her car. She pulled out her keys and tossed them back in the car when she was a few feet away. She heard the beep and click of the locks before she bumped into a ball of flames. She spun a few times before her body hit a temperature only described as burning seconds before the flames and the force of the explosion knocked her back. She hit the ground hard and only had time to register Jenn yelling "Alexis" before her vision went black.

A few minutes later my phone rings. I expect it to be Alexis calling to schedule plans or even to talk about the case I sent her on. Unfortunately I find it's an unknown number. I answer with a curious "Hello?" I hear a distinct sigh but also the sound of someone who has been crying. "Is this Kailani... is it?" the unfamiliar female voice asks. "Yes this is her," I answered, still very confused. "I am Jennifer Walker, a CSI at DCPD and a friend of your girlfriend Alexis Miller. She

told me to call you as her emergency contact if anything happened. I was just with her and witnessed her car explode at Lake Tech.” I am half right before I drop the phone and my keys and take off running. I can barely shout my name before I find myself getting faster and notice I have grown a few inches. Not caring what’s happening at the moment I use the enhanced speed to get to Lake Tech.

When there I take in the scene. Alexis’ car Howling Flower sits as a burning husk as Station 60’s fire fighters try to put it out. I see an ambulance leaving with its lights on and for the first time I feel the sting of tears on my face and in my eyes. I see a woman in a red shirt and a leather jacket talking to some cops before she notices me. “Kailani...! What’s...” I hear Flynn yell after doors open and shut. “Sh...! That’s what happened?” Ignoring him and obviously my three other friends who came with him. I make my way to the car before I get stopped by two women. “Kailani, Jennifer Walker, I talked to you on the phone,” she says as she holds out a hand. I look at her face and can tell that she has been crying. “You don’t say. Is she?” I start to ask hopefully as someone says “Yes it is. It’s a long story.”

I nod and she stands back as she asks the receptionist for three security tapes. She replies with a copy. We’re told we have to wait for someone to bring them down. She says and we both look out the window. A few minutes later a voice breaks the silence. “You two the CSI?” says the female behind us. Jennifer and I turn to see a woman a few years older than me with a messy bun of electric blue hair held up with a green scrunchie looking up at us from a wheelchair. Jennifer holds up her badge. “Yes. Well at least I am. I’m Jenn Walker.” She says and shows her badge.

“This is LT Kailani of the DCFD.” She says introducing me. “ You’re young to be a lieutenant already aren’t you?” The woman says with her grey eyes seemingly boring into mine. “I’m a hard worker Miss. What did you say your name was?” I ask. She smirks. “I am Eliza Lake. One of the owners of this company. I don’t mind bringing the tapes to you in hopes I could ask a favor.” She says motioning to the box on her lap with a tan arm. We nod and Jennifer places a hand on her lap. “I don’t make any promises but what’s the favor?” She asks as Eliza hands over the box. “Find whoever is doing this. This is a fire on one of our development floors which almost burns a fourteen year old personal project of mine and injures five firefighters. Now a car explodes in the parking lot.” She says warmly. “It’s a little much.” Just then a man comes up behind Eliza, one that looks like the male version of her except for the black glasses and brown hair with green streaks in the front. “E, what’s going on? I was just programming a new level of Heroes Den when I heard an explosion.”

He says as he pulls a phone out of his worn blue jeans. “A car exploded outside. But what surprises me more is that you heard it through those things.” She says pointing to the headphones hanging on his neck. She turns to us with a small smile. “Sorry this is my twin brother, Hayden. He isn’t much for conversation with anyone he doesn’t know. Unless he’s behind a camera.” She says. “That’s right. I thought you looked familiar. You are a Twitch Streamer right? Crypto?”, Jenn asks. He smugly nods. “Yes I am. You are a fan?” He asks as his eyes drift to her right hand. “That’s a prosthetic yes?” She nods. “Yes it is. It’s a long story.” He nods and steps closer and takes the prosthetic in his hands. “This is very nicely made but not one from the medical side of our company. Where did you get it?” He asks. I look at Jennifer and she’s blushing. I smirk softly and yell back “I made it. The original one they stuck me with was too plain and just was bulky so I create my own.” She replies.

He nods. "We have some experimental technology here if you want to take a look for a new version sometime." He suggests as he backs up. "Thank you but I think I'm okay." She says. "But I will hold you to it." Just then a team of police radio squawks. "Mayday. Officer and EMTs down on route to Haven Rock Hospital. Attacked by some sort of out of control monster." Jenn looks at her radio and then at me. "Shit. Alexis." She says looking back into Lakes. I see a dark portal forming before Nelle's head appears out of it.

Jennifer looks at it with wide eyes. The receptionist gasps and runs, heels clacking on the tile floor. "Hey Boss. A monster is attacking Alexis' ambulance. I suggest we beat its ass. You in?" She asks as the Lakes jump and turn. "Fuck yeah. Nobody messes with my girl." I say as I walk to the portal while pulling my hair in a ponytail. "Wanna come Jennifer?" I ask when I reach the portal. "Sure." She says simply before shaking the shock off.

She crosses the distance and we step through the portal together. On the other side everyone is huddled behind Max's Dodge truck while watching the monster. It looks human sized but has tusks like a saber tooth tiger. Black hair covering its body and razor sharp claws on either hand. "Glad you could join us ladies." Flynn says with his signature grin. I grunt as I look at him. "So what's the plan?" I ask. Max says, "We hoped you had one." "Well you know doing this exposes our powers." I say to them with a serious face.

Chapter 3 Identity Crisis

In response, Flynn sticks his hand out into the middle of our circle, "I'm in." He looks at me with a smile. Annica is next putting her hand in, "So am I." Max does the same and after him is Nelle. "Well I guess they are in and so am I," Jennifer says, putting her left hand in. "Let's do this then. Max I want you to go help the injured with Nelle.

When they are safe, come fight. Annica with your energy blasts you are a heavy hitter so I want you with me on a frontal assault. Flynn, flank around back and shift into anything that hits heavy. I recommend gorilla or bear. Jennifer, I want you to be a distraction since you don't have any power." I go to stand after the orders, but Flynn grabs my hand and puts it on top of the stack. "Okay now we can go," He says with a chuckle. I send a look of annoyance at him as he turns and runs into an alley.

Max and Nelle use one of her portals to make it to the ambulance where the wounded and Alexis are. The creature turns to look at them with a snarl before Jenn draws her Sig and fires at it while stepping from behind the truck. Annica then looks at me and nods as her eyes turn blue and start to glow. "It's coming!" Jenn yells while I step out. I feel the wildness and ferocity fill me as the orange glow surrounds me again. "Well that feels right!" Annica says following me out from behind the truck. "What?" I ask, staring the creature down.

"Well, when you ran to Lake Tech the glow resembled a horse. Now it's a wolf. Your favorite animal." I nod and remember my totem pole. Bear, Horse, Wolf. Interesting. I wonder, I think as the creature keeps charging. I rush forward and rake my now razor sharp nails over the side of the creature while trying to avoid the claws and tusks trying to take a piece of me. Annica yells and throws an energy ball at it to let me get another strike into its back before moving away. The energy ball hits and the creature roars in anger while it picks itself up off the ground. "It doesn't even seem hurt!" I growl out noticing Flynn come to an opening in an alley to my right.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Max and Nelle disappear into a black portal of darkness with the wounded and I relax knowing they are safe. Flynn shifts into a gorilla per my suggestion and charges at the creature slamming closed fists down on its back as Annica throws another energy ball at its chest. I rush forward and drop to my knees taking a swipe at its legs. I yell out in pain as its claws rip across my back before I can get away. Pushing myself up I get clear and tell myself I will get looked at later.

Max rushes the creature while it gets pummeled by fists and energy balls. His skin changes from flesh to steel as he runs and grabs one of its tusks in both hands. He jerks his hands and breaks the tusk turning it in his hand to use as a weapon. "You okay?" I hear Annica ask and I nod, not trusting my voice to remain calm. Jennifer holsters her gun and holds her metal arm, raising it at the creature's palm out. A circle of light appears in the palm while I watch curiously. Before she can do anything, however, unmarked black SUVs and helicopters descend on us from every direction.

People with guns and high tech weaponry exit the cars and descend from the helicopters on ropes. They easily subdue the creature and usher it into a transport truck as a white male in his late thirties comes up to us followed by a black, battle-hardened looking woman in her early thirties. He nods at us as we group up again. "Thank you in your effort to stop this thing, but we have it from here," He says with a white toothed grin. "And who is 'we'?" I ask stand-offish, the orange glow fading. "An organization that nobody really knows exists. We are called O.R.D.E.R. That stands for Omega Research Development and Emergency Response." The man answers. "We have been watching this city for a few days and seeing you fighting, especially the ones with powers, we would appreciate it if you could come with us. We will even help the woman who was hurt in the explosion at Lake Global Technology."

I freeze when I hear that. "How do you know about that?" I say venomously. He laughs, "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Chris Tyler. I am the director of O.R.D.E.R. and I know everything." He says, flashing a smile again. "Behind me is my head of security Quinn Worth. I do hope you will take me up on my offer to help. Here's my card. I will give you a few hours to make your choice." He adds, handing his card. When Flynn takes it he turns and gets into a waiting SUV before it drives away with him and Quinn. "I don't like that guy. Something seems off," Jennifer says. The rest of us nod. "Yeah, but if he can help us and Alexis?" I ask. "We would be fools not to take the help," Max finishes my thought. "First things first, let's get Kailani some help and get away from civilians with smartphones," Flynn says. Nelle smiles, "I've got this," she says before portaling the six of us to Haven Rock Hospital's ER waiting room.

The nurses watching over the room look up at us when we suddenly appear. "Oh, Max!" one of them asks when she recognizes Max and Nelle. Before we can answer a security guard comes in from outside. "Sir, we need to hold onto that," he says to Max pointing to the tusk. Max follows his finger looking confused. "Oh shit, I forgot I was holding this. I want it back when I leave," he says as he hands it over. With that out of the way, the nurses' attention focuses on me as they see blood on my shredded jacket. "Let's get you back right away," one of them says as they lead me into the ER.

Once in a room they tell me to take off my shirt and jacket. I do and sit on the bed with my legs up and my back facing the edge of the bed. The nurse comes up behind me and begins to clean the blood off of my back. "So what's the story with the tattoo?" she asks. Sitting in my black bra and jeans I am glad that the nurse didn't allow my friends back, Scott already got a

good look at me earlier." I sigh and look at the tribal tattoo on my left forearm. "The back is because wolves are my favorite animal as well as my spirit animal. My forearm is because of my Hawaiian ancestry. I wanted to wear my heritage with pride," I say as the nurse finishes up. "Hmm, that's strange. A lot of blood but such a small wound," she says confused. I turn and look at her. "What?" I ask as I climb out of the bed and head to the bathroom connected to the room. I rush up to the mirror and maneuver to see my back.

I have three claw marks on my back but they look just like a small animal cutting me. "Weird," I mutter before hearing the door to my room bang open. "Oh Lord, not my parents again," I say under my breath before stepping out of the bathroom to almost run face first into Sonia Parrish, my girlfriend's PI partner and host of the famous podcast Grave Desires. "I heard what happened! God, I'm just glad she's alive!" She says as she looks at me.

"Sorry for barging in, Jennifer told me you were in here. I needed to see you before seeing Alexis. She sent me something before it happened," she adds, pulling out her phone. I walk over and slide my shirt and jacket back on. "What did she send?" I ask as I motion her to follow me.

We walk out of the room and meet up with the others in the hall while she pulls up the text chain she has with Alexis. "I hate hospitals. Too much death," I hear her mutter. "Here it is!" She says louder as she falls into step beside me. I stop in the middle of the hall a few feet away from the room that Nelle says Alexis is in. I look at the screen and see photos and notes from what I assume is her investigation of the lab at Lake Tech. "What do you think she was looking for? She never told me about this case. What if it almost got her killed?" she asks.

I look dead in the eye and walk again, putting us in front of Alexis' room. "Come inside and I will explain what I know. And I can almost certainly say that this case definitely put her in here. I hate that because it was me who gave it to her," I say before sliding the glass door open and walking inside. On the bed in front of us lays the burned form of Alexis. She is unconscious still and has an oxygen mask on. I look at her vitals before taking one of her hands. "So what do you know about this?" Sonia asks after a few minutes, her voice soft as she stares at Alexis.

I explain everything to her, not even bothering to look away from Alexis' face. "Wow. So she was investigating this shadow man and then he attempted to blow her up. She must have been onto something," Sonia says as she looks over the texted notes again. "I'm sorry sir, you can't go in. She's not awake." We hear the muffled voice of a nurse. A low bass of a male groans softly, "Alright. Mind if I leave my card so you can tell me when she wakes up? It's important I interview the victim or the case may go cold," says the unidentified man.

"Well, the patient is stable at the moment, but the doctor doesn't know when she will wake up. Maybe it would be helpful for you to ask her friends, some are here right now," the nurse says. I look at Sonia and my friends who have drifted to the door trying to sneak a look. "Who's this guy?" I whisper to them when I come up behind them. "Don't know. His back is to us. All I see is a trench coat and shaggy black hair," Nelle says.

The man's voice reaches us. "Yes, that will help. Do you know where they are?" he asks. "They went into the room a few minutes ago. Five of them were in shirts from the fire department. One had a leather jacket and metal head. And one was in a long coat and fedora," the nurse answers. "Don't know if they left though, I just got back from break," she adds with a shrug. He nods and starts for the door.

"Nelle. Portal us out. Let's go to my apartment," I say as the others look at me. Nelle nods and darkness engulfs us just as he opens the door. In a blink we are in my den and the man will

just be looking at Alexis on the bed. "Who was that guy!" Flynn asks again after he flops onto my couch. "Don't have a clue, but he will definitely be looking for us after the nurse's description," Jennifer says, moving to a chair across the room. "Luckily for a few days we are off shift," Max says, flopping next to Flynn. "But he may convince Chief to give him our addresses," Annica says sitting on the arm of the couch by Max.

I sigh and make my way to my room peeling off my jacket and shirt. I come back to them in the same positions with Nelle on the other arm near Flynn. "What do you think Sonia?" I ask. "His voice and attitude scream 'cop', but we ruled that out. Jennifer doesn't know him. Could be a Fed or it could be your shadow man," I sigh as I slide a denim jacket over my white shirt. "Well that doesn't help." "Anyway, I'm starving. Who wants to come with me to Matchbox?" Asking about Matchbox Pizza a few blocks away from my apartment.

"I would, but I need to get to work and go over the evidence we collected," Jennifer says standing up. "I have a case as well. Not a headline one, but a ghostly one," Sonia says standing as well. They walk out together as my crew smiles at me. "Let's go, if you are paying," Flynn smirks his boyish grin. Walking into Matchbox I feel the warmth cascade over me. I sigh in relief as we file into a booth in the back, Flynn and Nelle on one side, Max and Annica on the other, with me pulling a chair up at the edge.

"So judging from what we know, what do we think about O.R.D.E.R.?" I ask, tossing the card of one Chris Tyler onto the table. "I still think if they can help, we should let them, but something about that Chris strikes me the wrong way," Max says while reading a menu. I am about to answer as my phone rings. I pull the phone, the newest Neotech 7+ model from Lake Tech, out of my pocket and frown at the crack that happened when I dropped it earlier. I notice the hospital's number and quickly answer. "Hello? Is everything okay?" I ask worried.

"Ms. Kailani, we have a problem. Ms. Miller just had a code blue, her vitals crashed. We got her back, but the doctor ordered me to inform her emergency contact. I am sorry to give you bad news," she says hanging up without a reply. "What the fuck," I mutter as I look at my phone. "What was that about?" Annica asks. "Hospital, Alexis coded," I say softly before grabbing the card and dialing the number. "Hello Ka'lani. I've been expecting your call. How can I help?" I blink for a second, surprised at his greeting. "How did you— Nevermind. You said you can save Alexis. Do it, save her," I said, hard emotion in my voice.

"I will, but I want to show you and the others around HQ. Can you meet me tomorrow? I will send you the address," he says before hanging up. I sigh and look at my friends. "Clear your plans tomorrow," I say simply before grabbing the menu.

Walking into Police Headquarters Jennifer hears the familiar sounds. Phones ringing, detectives talking to witnesses at their desks or the criminals they brought in who proceed to yell obscenities. She avoided all contact by making a beeline for the elevator and heading down to the state-of-the-art lab Lake Global Technology gifted to the precinct earlier in the year. She slips out of her leather jacket and hangs it on a hook in her locker before grabbing her lab coat and putting it on. She puts her hair in a ponytail and slips into the lab. "Sorry I'm late, Rob. Long day," She says to the little robot moving around on a table sorting through today's evidence.

"No worries. I started sorting through this by how long it will take the tests. I tried to factor in your I.A., but since you built me and your arm, well, I just did by tests," he says in a voice that mimics my favorite actor. "Thanks buddy," She said and patted him on the head. "Do me a favor

and enter the fingerprints found into AFIS," She says as she pulls on a pair of blue latex gloves. "Then see if you can match the shoe print," she adds before grabbing the speaker to take a closer look. The robot salutes, causing her to chuckle a bit before he heads to the computer with the samples.

She turn her attention back to the speaker and, before she knows it, the next time she looks up at a clock a few hours have passed. "Nothing. Damn, I just keep failing Alexis today," She says says frustrated as she stands from the table. "I wouldn't be too hard on yourself. The shoe print found something," Rob says, causing her to look at him. "Size 12 Vans have the same sole pattern as these. I will start narrowing down the places that sell Vans. Now if you don't mind me suggesting go and get something to eat and then watch the security tapes of the car bombing," he says.

She looks down at him. "What about the fingerprints?" She asks, crossing her arms. "Still being run through AFIS," he replies. She nods and leaves the lab heading to the elevator and up a floor to the lobby. She enters the breakroom and finds someone has ordered pizza and left a note saying, "Help yourself".

She opens the box and takes two slices on a paper plate before sitting down to eat. She pulls out a pair of glasses and puts them on. Her vision changes from the breakroom into a heads-up display a few inches from her face.

The holo-glasses, better name pending, took her about a few months to create, but they allow her access to the internet along with the secure system of the DCPD. She touches her hand to the curved holoscreen as she sifts through the videos Rob must have added into the system. She chooses one with the earliest time of the day in question, today, and presses play before taking a bite of the pizza in her left hand.

As she watches the footage it suddenly goes static. "No, no, no. Don't tell me he messed with the cameras!" She cries out typing a few things with one hand to try and fix the camera footage. Suddenly a message pops up center screen. "Pardon the interruption. I thought you would enjoy a break from work. Would you like to come be a guest on my stream and test my new game?" it says. "Hayden Lake, how the hell did you hack my system?" She mutters as she sets down her half-eaten slice of pizza. Her phone rings with an unidentified number. She picks it up and answers the phone. "Walker." Hayden's voice speaks from the other end. "Same way I got your number. I'm just that good."

He leans back at his desk and groans while running a hand through his shaggy black hair. "Local cops are stalling. Just because the victim is the kid of a retired detective? Or because of my being a Fed?" He asks the picture of his daughter, Mia, and his deceased wife, Michelle. Of course it doesn't respond, but a passing agent says, "You know local LEOs hate investigations getting taken by Feds, especially when it involves their own." He groans again. "Thank you for being Captain Obvious, Agent Matthews," The agent says to him. "No problem," he says sarcastically. "Seriously though, Xander, go home to your girl and get back on it tomorrow. You said it yourself that the vic is still unconscious, right?" Xander nods. "Yeah, and the friends seem to have disappeared. I got the footage from the hospital's security cameras and they never leave the room. But they weren't there when I checked," He says as he looks over at the older man.

"It's a mystery. But focus on the crime. Go to Police HQ tomorrow and try again. But go home tonight. As a senior agent I order you to go home," he says with a smile. Xander's phone rings at that moment. "Agent Storm? You handed me your card earlier." The voice of the nurse rings out when he answers. "Yes. Has Ms. Miller woken up?" He asks, sitting up straighter.

"No. She actually coded earlier, but we got her back. I just thought you should know that some government types just came and are moving her to another facility," she says. He shoots to his feet and grabs his tan trench coat. "What! Where?" He asks looking at Agent Matthews. He looks back with curiosity and worry. "They won't say. Just said that they were asked on behalf of her girlfriend to move her," Xander gets told. "Girlfriend? Not her?" He asks as he starts to the elevator with Matthews behind him

"Yes, I thought that was strange as well. But they had the paperwork," she says. "I'm on my way. See if you can't stall them," Xander says before hanging up. "Well?" Matthews asks. "Another hitch. Alexis Miller is getting moved by government types," He relays.

"Kidnap?" Matthews suggests. "My thoughts exactly," Xander agrees. "Need me to come along?" he asks while Xander slides his trench coat on. "No, Alan, take your own advice and go home," Xander responds as he subconsciously twists the ring on his finger. On his way to his agency-issued vehicle, a black Ford Mustang GT, Xander pulls his phone out and calls his daughter's babysitter. "Hey Leah, it's Mr. Storm. How's Mia doing?" He asks when she picks up. "She's good! She finished her homework and is now playing in the living room with Griffon," she replies.

He smiles as he imagines his daughter playing with the 200 lb. German Shepherd puppy she begged to adopt. "Okay. Tell her I love her and don't let her have too many sweets or talk you into staying up late," He says to the teenage babysitter. "Okay Mr. Storm. See you later," she says before he hangs up.

He unlocks the car and slides in. He sighs and runs a hand across his tired face, trying to wipe the sleep away. He turns over the engine and pulls out into the street to make the drive to Haven Rock Hospital. He pulls up to see men in suits pulling Alexis into a private, unmarked ambulance.

He parks the car and gets out quickly, pulling his gun. "Stop! FBI! Step away from the girl!" Xander yells. They look at him and a man who looks like he was an NFL quarterback in another life goes to pull a gun. "Lower your weapon," He hears behind him. Xander looks over his shoulder to see a black-haired man a few feet away. "Everything here is perfectly legal, Agent Storm. No need for violence," he adds with a smile.

"And you are?" Xander asks gruffly. "A member of a government agency. Well, rather, the director. You will be receiving a call soon from your SAC to stand down. Not your investigation, but letting us take and help Alexis. She will be awake and able to answer your questions soon enough," he says. Xander's phone starts ringing. He looks at his pocket and then back to the black haired man. "That would be for you," he says as he gestures for his men to continue.

Chapter Four: Training Day

After meeting up at my apartment in Chinatown we all pile into Max's truck and jump onto the I-395 heading towards the Washington Channel and O.R.D.E.R. "I called Jennifer and let her know. She's on her way as well." I say leaning forward to the front talking to Max and Flynn who occupy the drivers and passenger seats. "Alright, just remind me when to get off, Miss

Navigator." Max says from the driver's seat. "Just keep going until the E Street exit." I say leaning back and looking out the window watching Washington D.C. fly by around us.

Soon we pull up outside a concrete complex that rivals The Pentagon. Flynn lets out a low whistle as we all sit at the security checkpoint staring at the building. A tap at Max's window jerks us all back to reality. He lowers the window and smiles at the guard. "IDs from all occupants and reason for the visit." He says shortly. We provide our IDs and Max says, "Chris Tyler invited us. He is helping a friend of ours, Alexis Miller. She should have been brought in last night from Haven Rock."

The guard nods and walks to the booth to check us out as another two guards, one with a K-9 unit, check out the vehicle. The first guard comes back and hands back our IDs. "You are clear. I was told there was supposed to be a sixth person. A Jennifer Walker," He says. "She is on her way," I say as another car pulls up behind us. "That should be her." I add as he moves away motioning us to go. Max pulls away and heads to the facility. Once parked we climb out of the truck and wait for Jennifer. "Huge place." Flynn says as he slides up next to me, hands in his black hoodie which is unzipped and showing an old work shirt of his fathers. "Yeah and Cherry Blossom is somewhere inside." Max says leaning on his truck in a black button down shirt and blue hoodie. Annica stands next to him wearing a black crop top and her DCFD jacket.

"Alright, I don't need to be a PI to know something is going on here. You two dating?" I ask them. They look at me with wide eyes. Max coughs as Annica starts stammering for words. "Don't worry neither one of you is a supervisor of the other so it's not against the rules." I say with a smirk. "And you don't have to keep it hidden anymore." I add just as Jennifer pulls up. "Then yes, we are." Annica says softly as she takes Max's hand. Jennifer walks up in the same outfit from yesterday which is heavily wrinkled. Her hair is a mess as she runs a hand through it. "Woah, looks like someone had a good night." Flynn comments.

"If you call getting nowhere on an investigation and then getting distracted by a billionaire tech genius and game designer who asks you to test his new game on his Twitch channel a good night, then yes." She says walking past us towards the building. "Wait, you spent the night with Hayden Lake?" I ask, following her. "Yes but as I said we just spent the night live streaming. No sex." She says.

We come to the facility's door and it opens as soon as we reach it. Quinn Worth stands holding the door. "Follow me." She says before turning and walking into the vast facility. We follow her to an area that has two doors right next to each other. "Boys to the right, ladies to the left. We laid some workout clothes out for each of you. Please change, and put your belongings, phones included, into a locker." She relays. "Workout? I thought we just had a tour." I say, confused. "It is part of the tour." She states simply. I look at the others and Flynn shrugs. "Might as well get it over with." He says as he leads Max into the room. I sigh and go into the locker room on the left.

We find four sets of workout gear on a bench and look at each other. "Well let's get it over with." I say as I slip off my jean jacket and blue shirt. I then take my phone and wallet out of my pocket, kick off my shoes, and unbutton my pants before sliding them down and off. Grabbing the closest set, I slide on the black spandex pants and black dry-fit t-shirt that has O.R.D.E.R.'s logo on the sleeves.

I slide my running shoes back on and look at the others who are now dressed the same as me. "Ready?" I ask standing up and grabbing my discarded clothes, phone and wallet. "Yup."

Annica says while tying her hair up. I shove my things in a locker and walk out of the room. The boys are already back when we make it outside. They are dressed similarly to us, except they have baggy nylon pants not spandex. Max's eyes immediately go over Annica's body as Flynn's drifts from Jennifer to Nelle. "At least they know better than to check me out." I think as we follow Quinn again.

She pauses at a door and a red beam passes over her body. "Omega-07. Codename Eagle Eye." A computerized female voice says as the door opens in the middle and slides apart. I step up after Quinn goes through and the beam passes over me. "Omega-01. Codename Totem." The computer says. "Totem? Codename? Why?" I mutter as I continue. "Omega-02. Codename Shade." It says, I turn to see Nelle walking in after me.

The room before us is huge. There are three different work benches with a wall of toolboxes to the left. Pedestals with different items on them next to mannequins on the right. On the far side of the room is a long glass case empty except for the tusk Max left from the escape from the hospital. "Hey! That's my trophy!" He yells when he sees it. "Which is why it's displayed Mr. Reed." Quinn says. He rushes forward and the beam scans over him. "Omega-04. Codename Mech." The computer says. "Well what is this place?" Flynn says as he walks in. "Omega-03. Codename Shift." He looks around and sees a little lounging area close by with three couches and a flat-screen TV.

"This is The Hub. It will be your base of operations while you work with us." Quinn says. Annica walks in looking around. "Omega-05. Codename Spark." She turns her eyes on Quinn. "With you? And seriously what's with the codenames?" She asks.

"Well. You accepted our help. We want to ask if you will help us. Director Tyler has a whole thing planned, but the gist is we need you and your powers. That creature you fought isn't the only one O.R.D.E.R. has seen and we don't know what they are or where they are coming from... We call them Alpha-Morphs, or A-Morphs, because the most we have is that they were once human..." As she talks she walks to the center of the room where a holographic screen pops up. Chris's voice rings out as he walks out of a similar door to the right of the trophy case.

"Omega-00 codename Watcher" The computer says as he smiles at us.

"First order of business is to get you trained and used to your powers. However before we do that and before we give you these." He points to the pedestals to his left, "We need to know if you are willing to take up the fight." I look at my friends who look probably just as confused as I do. "You want us to be superheroes?" Flynn asks, folding his arms. "Essentially. Yes. You will be the heroes of O.R.D.E.R. We will let you pick a team name."

I pull my friends aside. "I think we should do it. We were investigating who gave us powers. What if it's the same person who created the A-Morphs?" I say in a whisper. "I was thinking the same thing." Jennifer says. The others nod in agreement. "Alright." I say turning back to Chris. "What's on the pedestals?" I ask him. "Your suits." Says a voice I didn't expect to hear. Eliza Lake wheels in from the door behind Chris. "Theta-01. Elizabeth Lake" Says the computer. "Designed by my brother and me using nanobot technology..." Eliza continues as she wheels over to the closest pedestal.

Hayden walks out of an elevator to our left and introduces the items, showing the suits on a screen. "Theta-02" The AI says. "Thank you, MAI." He says as a hologram shimmers to life. It looks like Hoshi from Star Trek Enterprise.

"Hayden..." Eliza starts. Hayden holds up a hand, "Anyways, here's the suits."

The nanobots deploy to form a unified aesthetic: sleek, form-fitting tactical black armored suits detailed with sharp, interconnected crimson-red lining, featuring a prominent glowing red Omega symbol dead-center on the chest and matching utility belts. Annica takes her silver-accented earrings, Nelle takes her ring for Shade, I take my tiki pendant necklace for Totem, Max takes his belt for Mech, Flynn takes his watch for Shift, and Jennifer takes her anklet for Bionica.

"If you were going to give us these, Why give us the workout gear?" Annica asks, "You aren't going to train in the suits. Plus they don't have any weapons yet..." Chris replies.

He leads us through the door to the training room—The W.H.R.E.C. Room (Weapons and Holographic Robot Exercise Course)—where MAI boots up Scenario 57. Walls shift up from the floor, turrets pop out, and holographic A-Morphs drop in. We dive into the simulation, fighting side-by-side to clear the maze using our new abilities, coordinating our strikes until the simulation ends and the systems power down.

Meanwhile, deep down in the facility's secure basement holding cells, things take a dark turn. The twins, Eliza and Hayden, are tracking data when alarms suddenly blare. "Someone let the Alpha-morphs out!" Eliza yells as containment breaches. Down in the dark, restricted cell blocks, a high-level prisoner is being kept under heavy lock and key: Ryan Cross (Infinity), a notoriously powerful, chaotic-good independent metahuman with world-threatening electromagnetic manipulation capabilities.

When the chaos erupts and the containment doors blow open, Ryan stands calmly in his cell, his snow-white hair messy against his dark tactical clothing and his ice-blue eyes glowing brightly in the dim light. As the mutated Alpha-Morphs and rogue agents flood the basement, Ryan steps out past his broken cell barrier, smirking faintly at the chaos. "Looks like security is slacking," he murmurs, his hands crackling with invisible electromagnetic force as he prepares to carve his own way out of O.R.D.E.R.'s facility.

Chapter Five: Zero To Eleven

We reached the elevator and paused. "Fuck, power's out. Is there a staircase anywhere?" Flynn asked as I started prying open the door using my bear strength.

"Totem is way ahead of you, Shift!" Max said as he activated his power and helped me flash-open the door.

"What's the plan? Jump?" Flynn asked.

"You can shape shift, I have my strength, Mech is indestructible, Shade has portals—she can take Bionica—and Spark has her energy to slow us down. So yes, we jump!" I said, looking down the shaft.

"Perfect! The car is still at the bottom. We can drop on top and crawl inside through the hatch." With that, I let myself drop into a freefall, summoning my strength as I closed in on the bottom. Only, it felt a bit different this time as the energy glowed across me. I feel lighter, my speed slows—I reached down lightly on the car and looked at myself. Eagle. I have flight!

"Awesome," I said, looking up to watch the others. Max jumped in after me and landed with a thud in a crouch. He stood, moved to the hatch, and pried it open. Flynn jumped next, shifting into a raven as he glided down before shifting back to walk over to us. "Not so bad," he commented. Annica was next, dropping in and positioning herself feet first before lightening

both hands using her power to slow her fall. She landed in a crouch as well, flipping her hair out of her face.

"Two to go," she said, looking up. Surprising everyone, Jennifer jumped into the shaft, grabbing the cable with her metal arm. She slid down, and when she let go, she had a red-ish glow.

"What?" she asked as we stared at her.

"Nothing," we said in unison. Nelle appeared from the darkness. Nelle told me, "Went over to the hatch. She is going to try to get MAI and the power back online." I nodded and dropped down the hatch.

The sight wasn't good. The door was jagged and broken, and a singular flashlight illuminated the car's dark interior. "Shit!" Max said behind me as he dropped into the car. "What? Please tell me nobody's dead," Jennifer said from the other side of the hatch. The others dropped in: first Flynn, then Annica, Nelle, and lastly Jennifer.

"Well, at least no bodies," she said when we didn't answer. We walked through the door into the basement, making our way slowly through the dark. "Man, I wish we had night vision," Flynn said over the comms.

"Ask and you shall receive," MAI said in our ears. My vision lit up with a pinkish tint showing the entire area as if the lights were on.

"Sorry it took so long, power's still out, but MAI's screen is popping up in the better part of my vision," I said.

"Not yet," Jennifer muttered. "These masks are pretty advanced tech. So cool."

"Anything happening up there?" I asked while walking and checking all the cells we passed.

"Nothing. Looks like our missing tech got the lockdown off immediately. The A-Morphs never made it out of the basement. At least not through The Hub," Quinn said.

"That 'missing tech' is my brother," Eliza growled.

"I'm aware. I was praising him and MAI, just trying to keep our comms clear of chatter," Quinn argued back.

"Ladies, please, if it is not important information, keep the comms clear, I can't hear myself think," Annica said, her eyes glowing blue with annoyance.

"How many A-Morphs did you say were down here?" Flynn asked.

"Twenty. Why?" Quinn answered.

We found a corner and paused. "They are gone," Max said. Light shone in from a hole in the ceiling, and rock and steel girders were scattered on the ground underneath. Every cell control panel was sparking and ripped apart.

"Who did this?" I wondered aloud as I walked up to the hole, looking up at it.

"A-Morph 3. We called it The Colossal because it was huge and packed a great punch," Quinn said.

"You can see it?" I asked, talking about the hole.

"Yeah. The masks have a video feed. We can see all of your perspectives," Eliza said, speaking over comms. "Shade. Walk closer to the rubble," she ordered.

Nelle moved closer and kneeled down as she saw something. "What is it?" I asked, looking at her.

"Not good," she said, holding up a shoe. "That's Hayden's."

Meanwhile, down in the restricted basement cell blocks, the containment breach and the chaos caused by the escaping A-Morphs had triggered a massive failure in the facility's security grid. Amidst the blaring alarms and red emergency lights, the heavy blast doors to the highest-security isolation ward finally buckled and hissed open.

Stepping out from the darkness into the ruined corridor was Ryan Cross—codenamed Infinity—his signature snow-white hair messy against his dark tactical clothing and his ice-blue eyes glowing brightly with volatile electromagnetic energy. As rogue monsters and malfunctioning automated defenses flooded the lower levels, Ryan smirked faintly, his hands crackling with invisible force. "Looks like O.R.D.E.R. is finally falling apart," he muttered to himself, deciding to use the chaos to carve his own path to freedom.

Chapter Six