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"Alright," Charlotte said, tugging her shirt straight as she stared at herself in the mirror. One hand went to the tiny box in her pocket, patting it reassuringly to make sure it was still there. "How do I look?"

"You look great," Ix said, smoothing the fabric on Charlotte's shoulders.

"Alright," Charlotte said again, taking a deep breath. In a little over two hours, she would become human again. Her throat felt drier than usual; if her heart was still beating, it would have been going at a rapid-fire pace. "Get the picture and then we'll go, okay?"

Ix stepped back and raised the camera. Charlotte somehow managed a dazzling smile despite her nerves.

"This good?" Ix asked, showing it to her.

Charlotte studied it and nodded. "As good as I'm going to get, I think," she said. "It'll help to have a frame of reference when trying to perform the *frolis* maneuver," she said. Her throat tightened and she hugged Ix. "God, I can't believe the day's finally here..."

Ix hugged her back, shivering despite her three layers of jackets. "Me, neither," she admitted. "Lottie, you can always turn back now, you know. I wouldn't judge you. You're not just going to be giving up your immortality—your *face*..."

Charlotte pulled back slightly and smiled. "My face, my decision," she said. "And I've already decided you were worth it."

Ix swallowed and nodded. She still couldn't shake the feeling that this was going to be a terrible idea.

Charlotte slipped her hand into Ix's, smile widening slightly. "Let's go."

It took them longer than usual to make it to DoSAT, slowed by both agents' inability to distract themselves from what was about to happen. They finally made it, though, and pushed open the doors to find agents already gathered.

Talia and VJ were leaning against Olivine's workbench, chatting quietly with the Gem. Publica giggled as she, Vania, and Alex played with Zeke; the blue fire-lizard seemed quite pleased with the attention, trilling happily as he flew from one agent to the next. Kaitlyn seemed content to watch from the sidelines with a faintly bemused smile.

“Alright, I’m here,” Charlotte said shakily as she approached. Olivine looked up, grin widening, and she vaulted over her workbench to give Charlotte a hug.

“Finally! I thought I’d *never* be able to start calling you Squishy,” Olivine said.

Charlotte laughed. “Soon,” she said. “I hope. Where’s the cube?” She glanced at Alex and frowned when she realized he was staring at Ix, his eyes nearly bugging out of his head. “Hey. Dives.” She snapped her fingers at him. “Didn’t your mother tell you it was rude to stare?”

“Sorry,” Alex said, tearing his eyes away from Ix. He let out a shaky breath and shook his head. “Right. Cube. Farilan and Ilraen should be here in just a moment.”

<This is absolutely outrageous!> Farilan’s voice shrilled across the lab. <Authorized or not, giving morphing technology to non-Andalites violates everything Seerow’s Kindness stands for!>

<Please calm down, Farilan,> a tired-sounding voice answered. <We are not giving the technology to anyone, only the ability—very briefly—and it is for a good cause.>

The Andalites rounded a corner, hooves clopping on the Generic Surface as they approached. Farilan’s stalk eyes were focused on the blue cube in Ilraen’s hands, and her main eyes narrowed at Charlotte when she saw her.

Ilraen nodded to the assembled agents. <Hello, everyone. For those of you who have not met me, I am Ilraen-Aroline-Fothergill. Farilan, if you are quite finished glaring, you and Agent Webb may each place a hand on one face of the *Escafil* device.>

<I have to do it *with* her?> Farilan asked, tail blade quivering in anger. When everyone turned to look at her, she huffed and put a hand on the cube, stalk eyes narrowed at Charlotte.

“Here goes nothing,” Charlotte said, and touched her hand to the cube.

She felt a tingle run up her arm and she looked at Ilraen. “Is that it?”

He nodded. <It is an elegantly efficient process.>

<I should hope so,> Farilan sniffed as Ilraen pulled the *Escafil* device away. <I don’t want to stand here and watch everyone gawk any longer.>

<They would not be gawking if you had not kicked up a fuss,> Ilraen pointed out. To the rest, he said, <If you will all please excuse me, I cannot be of much help with the next part. Good luck, Agent Webb. Agent Dives, you may reassure your superiors once more that I will keep the cube safe. Thank you very much for returning it to me.> Holding the device securely against his chest, he nodded to everyone again and took his leave.

Farilan’s stalk-eyes turned to Alex questioningly.

“Just go,” he sighed.

"She's so... nice," Charlotte said to Olivine as Farilan clop-clopped away from the group.

"You learn to tune her out after a while," Olivine said, shrugging. "But go on, go on! Let's see the new you!"

Charlotte turned to the agents with her. There were so many favors she'd had to trade to get them here today. "Alright. Who's first?"

Talia stepped forward, and Charlotte raised a trembling hand to touch her arm. She concentrated on Talia, trying to remember how the books had described the acquiring process. When Talia seemed to zone out, Charlotte let out a quiet sigh of relief. She was obviously doing something right.

With the rest of her donors acquired, she stepped back. "Alright," she said, then paused as Ix handed over the camera. She stared down at her face for a moment before looking back at everyone, trying to swallow back her nerves. She only had one chance to get this right. "Let's do this."

She concentrated. She would do her best to try and meld the different agents' features to resemble her own, but this was her first time morphing and she had barely any idea what she needed to do.

Her skin crawled, prickled, bubbled, softened. Pale white flesh gained a rosy complexion and her features shifted. Her vision blurred, dimmed, the ultraviolet spectrum disappearing as her eyes became human. Smells became so muted they might as well not be there at all, and the sound of someone humming in the vehicles hangar faded. She could feel her teeth dull from their razor-sharp edges to softer, more rounded ones, and she ran a tongue over them curiously.

"Well?" she said anxiously when she felt it was over. She pulled a lock of black hair around to inspect it. Still glossy and long—a good sign.

Ix wordlessly conjured a mirror and handed it to Charlotte. Heart pounding, she lifted it up to inspect her new face.

She realized she had to squint. Dammit, she must have morphed Kaitlyn's vision problems. Holding the mirror closer, she finally got a look at herself for the first time.

She was still pretty, and felt a rush of guilty pleasure at the thought. Her eyes were narrower, pale blue, with long lashes. She touched her nose, feeling its bridge. A bit straighter than she would have liked, but at least it didn't seem to protrude much. Her hair was wavier, but still the same beautiful black silkiness she'd been so desperate to keep. Her eyebrows were delicate and arched, and her mouth seemed to naturally curl in a smile. When she grinned at her reflection, for a moment, she could have sworn it was her old self. It seemed her careful selection of donors had paid off.

"I think it worked!" she said delightedly. She squinted around at everyone, then frowned. "Oh god, I didn't get shorter, did I?"

Ix grimaced and held her hands roughly three inches apart.

"Looking good, Lottie," VJ said, nodding approvingly.

"And not at all like an evil clone," Kaitlyn observed. "Selene will be so disappointed."

"I think she got my smile," Talia said.

Vania grinned widely, while Publica gave a thumbs-up.

Charlotte twisted around, trying to see herself from the back. "No abnormalities or nothing?" she asked.

"Looks good to me," Alex said. "I'm willing to sign off on it for the Flowers if you are."

Charlotte looked at Ix questioningly.

"It's your new body," Ix said, shoving her hands in her pockets. "I'm not making the call for you."

"I think this is good," Charlotte said, nodding to Alex.

"Farilan!" he yelled across the room. "What's the time?"

The Andalite stopped, one stalk eye slowly swinging around to stare at him coldly. <She has been in morph for seventeen of your seconds.>

"Got it," Olivine said, and a holograph reading 1:59:43 projected from the gem on her forehead.

Charlotte turned back to her donors. "Guys, thank you so much for this. I know I said it a million times already, but I owe you."

"It was nothing, Charlotte," Publica said, smiling. "But I'll be sure to call you if I ever need a favor." She held out a hand and Charlotte took it; the ex-vampire's eyes widened at how *cool* human skin felt to her now. "I've got to be getting back, but I wish you the best of luck!"

"Yeah, same," Talia said, shoving her hands in her pockets. "You look great, Charlotte. Totally worth it. Need me for anything else?"

"I think that's it," Charlotte said, looking around. "Nothing left to do but wait out the timer."

"I'll see you around, then." Talia smiled and turned to leave.

After the last of the agents trickled out the door, Charlotte slumped against the wall. "Let's hope they don't all call their favors in at once, huh?"

"So how do you feel now, Squishy?" Olivine asked, kicking a milk crate over to Charlotte for her to sit on.

“...Kinda weird, honestly?” Charlotte said. She flexed her fingers, listening to the joints pop. “I mean, I knew what to expect with the senses thanks to the disguise generator, but knowing this is a permanent thing is still weird. It’s a lot to take in.” She glanced over at Ix and smiled. “You doing alright, hon?”

“That tech kept staring at me,” Ix muttered, hunching in on herself like she could disappear into her coats.

“I don’t blame him,” Olivine said, shrugging. When Ix looked even more miserable, she hastened to add, “He’s the one I told you about—with the sister.”

“...Oh.”

Charlotte squinted up at Ix before scooting over and patting the edge of the milk crate. “C’mere, keep me company while we wait for my time to be up,” she said.

“I think the floor would be more comfortable,” Ix said quietly.

Charlotte slid off the crate and onto the floor, smiling invitingly. Ix couldn’t keep her mouth from quirking up in a smile as she joined her.

“You’re so warm now,” she said as Charlotte wrapped an arm around her.

“Gonna take off all those coats, then?” Charlotte said, bopping her on the nose.

“It’s too cold in here,” Ix said automatically, and Charlotte laughed, leaning in to kiss her. It was no longer tantalizing, in the sense that she was kissing *food*. Now, she could kiss her and not have to worry about losing control in all the wrong ways. Ix’s eyes fluttered shut as her fingers knotted in Charlotte’s hair.

“Jeez, you two, save it for when you get back to your RC,” Olivine said, wrinkling her nose. “We don’t need any biological impulses in the work room.”

“Well, have you got any better suggestions for how to pass two hours?” Charlotte asked, squinting up at her.

“Well, for starters, sending a message ahead to Medical that you’ll be on your way for some glasses later,” Olivine said, her limb enhancer’s fingers flying across her keyboard. “And... done.”

“Got any suggestions for how to pass an hour, fifty-nine minutes, and fifty-five seconds?”

<Actually, you have been in morph for three of your minutes,> Farilan’s thought-speech echoed in their heads, and they looked up to see her staring disapprovingly at them from her workbench. <As *clearly* indicated by the Gem’s projection.>

“Thanks,” Charlotte muttered.

“How about your handwriting?” Ix suggested quietly. “You did say you’d likely need practice with that.”

“Got a pen?” Charlotte asked.

Ix drew her wand and flicked it to conjure a roll of parchment, a quill, and ink.

“That works,” Charlotte said, pulling them to her.

Ix leaned over to watch as Charlotte set to work. Charlotte’s writing speed was drastically reduced, but her calligraphy was still as beautiful as ever.

“I just realized something,” Charlotte said, setting her quill down. “I’m going to lose my *Overwatch* ranks now that I don’t have vampiric reflexes.”

“You’ll have to start over learning Widowmaker like the rest of us puny humans,” Ix said, unable to hide her smile.

“Yeah, maybe for once I’ll be able to get through a match without hearing accusations of aimbotting,” Charlotte said with a laugh. “Though maybe I should change my main to Roadhog—it would certainly fit my username.”

“SomePig?” Ix said, and ducked her head, shoulders shaking. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t laugh—”

“Heckin’ yeah, you should! It’s hilarious!” Charlotte poked her in the arm. “What do you say? I could use a Mercy main to back me up while I relearn the game.”

“I’ve never done competitive before,” Ix said uncertainly.

Charlotte shrugged. “So? I’ll basically be back to square one, too—I’ve never played as a human. Heck, for all I know, I’ll need to pick out a new main.”

“I think you would enjoy Symmetra—”

“And then I can torment you with her lock-on beam!” Charlotte cackled at the idea, laughing harder when she saw the look of terror on Ix’s face. “I’m kidding, I promise I wouldn’t want to play without you, anyway, AurorA.”

Ix cringed and hid her face in her hands when Olivine laughed.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help overhearing,” the Gem said, hopping over her workbench to sit on the edge closer to the agents. “That’s a nice username. Also...” She leaned backwards and rummaged through one of the top drawers of her bench. “I’ve got an old Nintendo 64 in here, if you’re looking for something to do.”

Ix and Charlotte looked at each other and grinned.

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Charlotte threw down her controller in frustration. “Human reflexes *suck!*”

“I’m having to play with malunion in both my hands, Lottie, and I’m still doing just fine,” Ix said, reaching for the controller Charlotte had thrown away. “You’ll get used to it. Humans are good at adapting.”

Charlotte folded her arms and muttered something very rude under her breath as she watched Ix expertly navigate Luigi through the flaming obstacles of Bowser’s castle. When Ix managed to successfully flip the lever and dump Bowser in the lava, Charlotte turned away to look at Olivine. “Are we done yet?”

“Just a few minutes to go,” Olivine said, looking up from the remote activator she was repairing to show the timer.

Ix looked anxiously at Charlotte. “Last chance to back out.”

“I’m not going to,” Charlotte said stubbornly. “You’re not gonna become immortal, right?”

“It’s not exactly on my to-do list,” Ix said, biting her lip.

“So this is the next-best thing,” Charlotte said. “Lifetime with rather than eternity without, remember?” She swallowed; the box in her pocket suddenly seemed to be much heavier now.

Ix frowned, her eyes flickering over Charlotte’s face. “Is everything alright?” she asked. “You look...” She trailed off uncertainly.

Charlotte let out a nervous laugh. “Well, um, actually, there was one thing I really wanted to ask you.” She reached into her pocket for the box. And then, she hesitated.

Ix wasn’t ready for this. Not yet.

She pulled her hand out of her pocket and placed it on Ix’s. “What do you think I should eat for my first meal as a human?”

“Oh! Erm.” Ix paused. “You... want to go to Rudi’s, don’t you.”

“Please, Ix?” Charlotte squeezed Ix’s hands. “I won’t know what to try without you there.”

Despite her best efforts, Ix’s mouth twitched up in a smile. “Of course you will. You just want to drag me into a public place and not have me run off on you.”

Charlotte looked around at the department. “What, DoSAT not good enough for you?”

“It’s... quiet,” Ix said. “And aside from that one bloke... Look, it’s different, okay?”

“Rudi’s is normally pretty quiet around now, too, from what I hear,” Olivine piped up. “After you’re done seeing the Marquis to confirm your change of species, I don’t see why you can’t swing by there.” She smiled at Ix. “Once you go, you’ll like how laid-back the place is. It’s kinda like... like the Three Broomsticks!”

“I’ve never been there, either,” Ix muttered, her cheeks going pink.

Olivine didn’t even miss a beat. “Well, you’re gonna love it,” she said. “Nice quiet booth in the back, just you and New Squishy enjoying your first proper meal together.” She grinned. “I’m not into the mushy stuff, but that sounds perfect for you two.” She tilted her head, going very slightly cross-eyed as she looked at the timer she was projecting. “Ten seconds, Charlotte.”

Charlotte wrapped an arm around Ix’s shoulders, feeling her heart beginning to beat very fast. This was the beginning of their forever.

When the timer ran out, Charlotte looked down at herself. She didn’t feel any different—but when she concentrated, she couldn’t change back.

Olivine’s projection flickered and vanished as Alex wandered over.

“I’ll go ahead and send the forms over to the Flowers,” he said, holding out a datapad so Charlotte could read the screen. “Just need you to sign here.”

Charlotte gave it a quick glance—then a longer look when she realized she could no longer read as fast as she used to. She took the offered stylus and shakily scrawled her signature on the line before offering it back to Alex.

He shook himself out of eyeballing Ix and took the datapad, fingers flying over the surface. It beeped, and he blanched; Zeke let out a loud screech, flapping his wings and clipping Alex’s ear. “So, um, the Marquis de Sod was expecting you five minutes ago,” he said.

“But five minutes ago, I was still—!”

“Look, it’s not my job to question the Flowers being impossible,” Alex yelped, taking a half-step back. “I’ll message him back and try to keep him from being too angry, but I really suggest you go now!”

Charlotte and Ix looked at each other before Ix lurched to her feet and pulled Charlotte up, and the two of them ran out of DoSAT as fast as they could.

Within just one corridor, though, Charlotte stopped and leaned against a wall, doubled over and wheezing. “Go... on... without me,” she gasped, clutching at a stitch in her side. “Can’t... go any... further...”

Ix doubled back and got underneath Charlotte’s arm, letting Charlotte lean against her while they walked. “Just going to have to get used to running like the rest of us, too,” she said, smiling.



“How do you *do* it?” Charlotte wheezed. “With your leg, too.”

“My gait doesn’t exactly look pretty, but it gets me where I’m going,” Ix said. “We’ll get you into shape soon enough.”

“Wait. Is that the office?” Charlotte pulled away from Ix and made to stroll over to the door, but paused after two steps and bent over, hands on her knees. “Oof. I still need a moment.”

Ix rubbed circles on Charlotte’s back, wondering what, exactly, her girlfriend had expected she’d be able to do once she became human again.

After a few minutes, Charlotte straightened up and brushed her hands on her shirt. “Eugh. Are my palms sweating?”

“That happens sometimes, yeah,” Ix said. “You ready for this?”

Charlotte made a face and pushed open the door.

The Marquis’ back was turned to the agents when they entered. *Agent Webb. You’re late*, he said without looking at them.

“Yeah, *real* sorry I couldn’t travel back in time to meet your stupid deadline,” Charlotte said, crossing her arms.

*I would not be so belligerent if I were you, Webb. Especially not after we so graciously allowed you access to an Escafil device.*

Charlotte uncrossed her arms, scowling at the floor.

*Now then.* The daisy readjusted his hat. He still didn’t turn around as he continued. *All of your paperwork appears to be in order. I would say ‘have a cookie’, except I don’t have any cookies, and I don’t reward agents for doing what is expected of them.*

“Never would have guessed that,” Charlotte said. “So, can we talk about our transferral back to regular Floaters, now?”

*We agreed that, after a year of service in the Eclectic Subdivision of Advanced Species, you would be allowed access to an Escafil device to become human.* The Marquis turned around at last, disc florets surprisingly intimidating despite the lack of a face. *We never agreed that your service would be over after that year.*

An agent passing by outside heard a wordless shriek echo through the door to the Marquis’ office. He shrugged and kept walking, glad that he wasn’t in that poor soul’s place.

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