

Asthma can be really scary for a little kid. And not just because it makes it harder to breathe. Asthma, like an active imagination, a penchant for learning, or easily influenced emotions, is a clear signal to others that you are a weakling, and an easy target for predators.

Ash learned fairly early on to hide the signs of it whenever they moved and she found herself in a new school. Sometimes, if she was lucky, she could hold out until they were re-stationed again... but more often than not, it was P.E. class that would do her in. Running, she lagged far behind, and if she tried to counter the taunts of "fattie" with her condition, she would inevitably be nicknamed Asthma Ashley. Sometimes they would even make wheezing noises at her, the fuckwits. It's not like it really bothered her, but when it was done day in and day out without end, it really got on her nerves. Fighting them never worked, either; she would become winded long before they would, and the conclusion was inevitably her bullies standing and laughing while Ash gasped on the ground.

She had gotten used to the school counselor song and dance. They always seemed so worried that constantly moving and changing schools would hurt her social and emotional life. They never understood when she tried to explain that moving was the best thing FOR her, so she eventually gave up trying. Polite, thoughtful, and reserved was how they came to view her. She couldn't care less what they thought as long as they stayed off her back.

Then, one day, came the news that she was dreading.

"Ashley, your father's gotten a permanent post here! No more moving around! We can finally become part of a community! Isn't it wonderful?" Her mother looked so delighted, she didn't have the heart to disillusion her.

"Yeah, it's great, ma," she said, forcing a smile. Inside, she began to put up the walls.

The attack came sooner than she expected. That was probably her undoing. The bullies had gotten into the habit of chasing her to within a block of her house after school was over, laughing as she pounded down the streets, her lungs threatening at any time to seize up on her. In a way, they had been helping her, she'd thought. Each time, her lungs felt a little stronger. Maybe someday she'd outrun this curse. Unfortunately, that day, for whatever reason, she didn't make it home. Two measly blocks away, her lungs gave up the ghost, and as she stood, doubled over and panting on the sidewalk, she watched them surround her in her peripheral vision.

Ash took the beating of her life, that day, but that wasn't the scary part. She'd been expecting it ever since she'd tried to instigate a fight with them a few weeks back, when she still thought she'd be moving eventually. The scary part was when they held her down, pinched her nose shut, and when she'd finally opened her mouth to gasp for air, stuffed it with grass. She was nearly blue in the face by the time the ambulance arrived - called by a passer-by who'd broken

up the fight but been unable to retrieve the grass from her windpipe.

When she woke up, she screamed until her throat was raw and the doctors gave her a sedative just to calm her down. It wasn't the violation of her personal space, or the beating, or any of the rest of it. It wasn't even being unable to breathe. It was the complete and utter helplessness to do anything but watch her vision fade to black, and more than that, what came after.

Nothingness. Nothing to fight or flee. No angels or demons. Not even an endless trek across a desolate wasteland. Not even a sign to say, "The end." That would have been superfluous. Just... nothing. And there was nothing she could do about it.

After a few weeks, she was handed over to a therapist to see what was wrong with her. She tried to give the old counselor shuffle, but it didn't work anymore. Every time she closed her eyes, that void howled in on her, and it was showing through every line in her face and every shake of her hands. She slept in waiting rooms and cafeterias, on buses and at sports games. Anywhere that she could feel the roar and press of humanity around her. Anywhere that she could sleep sitting down, and not trying to lie on her front or back, hearing every breath grow ragged in her ears.

It wasn't enough, though. It was never enough. And eventually, when she lost the energy to keep fighting, she gave up and let them take her away.

It's almost comforting in here, really. When you feel the void pressing in, you can focus on the white of the walls and feel it start to counteract that vast nothingness. The routine here is almost comforting in its mundanity - certain foods each day of the week, events at set times every day, and each week the same as the week before it. Humanity plodding on in the face of darkness, refusing to acknowledge its existence. Even the people here are comfortingly normal, despite all their insanities. Anna the kind doctor, shy and timid but willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of her patients. You've given her a hug when she looked like it was overwhelming her, and the look of startled gratitude on her face was worth more than words. Donna, petty and cruel, but so predictable in the way she does it, trying to play on other peoples' fears. Bitch can't even fight; you broke her nose before she knew what was happening, and she started screaming bloody murder at you, like she'd never been hurt before. You got three days in confinement for that, but it was worth it. Even Melissa is comforting, because when you look into her eyes, you can tell that she knows the void, too. She hears it, rather than seeing it, but she knows it's there.

In the end, it all comes down to the days. Some days, you shouldn't even be in here. You're more well than all of them combined, even the doctors. On others, you can feel the iron claw constricting about your throat, and see the darkness in the corners of your eyes. On those days, the screaming doesn't end. This place is home, though, for better or for worse. These people are the pillars of your fortress, and the place is the concrete of the walls. You've heard the rumors about the director, but never encountered her yourself. And whatever she is, whatever she does... she can't be worse than what's out there, beyond the safety of this box. Nothing can.