

*'Maybe I should ask Danpo for another cut?'*

These past few days, Charna noticed inconsistencies in her hairstyle. This gave her enough reason to freak out.

*'But he said it looked fine, right? But I don't want to come off as messy. They'll think I'm not taking this seriously.'*

She had been unable to flatten the locks that erupted from her now medium haircut. They kept reverting to their messy state. Kari's healthy bronze hair sprung into focus.

"Uhm... ya like my head, Charna?" Kari asked. "I mean, thanks, but, uh..."

No reaction.

"Oh! You're turning invisible!"

"—Ah! Sorry," the blonde lamented, her hand becoming tangible again. "It happens when I'm, uhm, in thought, I suppose."

"Don't sweat it! That's why we're here!" Kari reassured her friend. They sat at the wide, light wood windowsill of the Sentinels' headquarters' lounge, gazing into fake windows. Their blurry blue lights and quiet trickling gave off the illusion of a rainy evening. It helped everyone stay sane thirty levels below ground. Kari sipped on chamomile tea she got from a vending machine. Charna did not. "How're ya feeling, Charna-babe?"

"Nervous," Charna smiled. It was by no means a secret. Her shaky hands could have profited from tea, but at the same time, anxiety repressed any hint of thirst.

March had meant lying low at any cost. Cherize City was still in a slight unrest, so until the 31st, both girls were to stay put. Kari attended school, Charna practiced delving into her mind. The Sentinels used this month to seek out Sennin, but with no hints, no progress was made. The unspoken worst case became the most probable one. Right when Corner Link and the Lampagna finished renovations and started to serve customers again, Kari began dabbling with aura. Now, she and Charna were waiting for their first real day as a part of Cherize's Sentinels.

"How about you, Kari? Can you feel your aura?"

"Hmm. A little. It sometimes creeps up, but most of the time it's just kinda... there," she said, undermining just how alien her own body felt.

"Wish I could say the same. Haha."

"Aw, come on! Y'can turn invisible!"

*'Which still happens when I don't want it to,'* the young woman wanted to say, before realizing it may sound ungrateful. "True... but the nervousness isn't helping it. I can usually stop it—"

"Actually," Kari leaned in, "Doctor Penn told me that the leader mighta promised too much. Might be just one member that's arriving. One! Don't sweat it," she repeated cheerfully.

"One's already enough," Charna answered as she was mustering herself. The hair may be a mess, but at least she had the fitting clothes? Or perhaps she should have picked less black? Maybe her bordeaux shoes didn't suffice and she'd be told to change, and then Kari would feel even more pressured to pick something correct—

Two people neared. As their steps arrived, the girls turned toward them.

"Good morning, recruits," representative Alberc said calmly, with his vice Harmann nodding a well-meant 'hello'. "I see you've found the... vending machine."

"Tea's good!" Kari commented with a burned tongue.

"Mhm," the olden man replied absently as he focused back on the elevator next to the lounge. "She's almost here."

This made both girls shoot up. Expectations were high. The tension was tangible. But what the girls couldn't tell was that Harmann, of all people, was the most nervous. By far. It was like that every time. And his heart reached its climax when the doors opened with a sharp 'ding'. A pair of legs skipped out, prancing

into the lounge, aimed at the vice-representative.

"Ooooh my god honey, I've missed you so much!" a tall woman sang as she flung into Harmann's arms for a deep hug, then a peck on the cheek. The big, bearded man blushed up.

"Me too, Aly," he replied faintly, content and deeply embarrassed. The girls watched in silence. None knew what to say. The woman, wearing a black coat that tied well with her huge, curly bordeaux hair bound back with an orange hairband, nuzzled some more against Harmann's body. She followed with a direct kiss that separated her from his arms. Next on her list, the recruits.

"Hello! Hello, hello! Miss Alycia Bernice, *very* pleased to meet the two of you!" she said, exchanging not handshakes but hugs with the overwhelmed girls. "Kari," she said first, "Charna," she then added as she embraced each, "correct?"

"Y-yes!" even Kari stuttered. "Can say *you* name a-gain? Haha!" she asked in broken Eulanima.

"Uhu! You've only been exposed for a couple of days, right? Impressive! It's A-lee-cha, honey~"

The mysterious lady turned toward the oldest member of the group.

"But knowing Alby, he probably introduced me as *the vice-rep's wife*. I'd bet 200 dollards flat."

"Miss Bernice, do you really believe I'd disrespect my team like that? Unlike you, I suppose," Alberc replied more flustered than angry. Kari couldn't help but whisper "*Alby?*" to her friend.

"*Miss Bernice*. So elitist. As per usual, hehe," Alycia giggled. "But he did mention I'm your mentor, yeah?"

"*Whoa! What?*" each girl thought in their own way.

"Ack-chally, h'say nothing a-boot you," the bronze-haired one put into words before the blonde had the chance.

"Pff, cool. Even better. Hey, lemme get my things and let's go grab a bite! What do you guys think?" she said, before sizzling "I'll get to you after that~" to her husband. He felt goosebumps. But the girls only looked to the ground, a little drab.

"We... we don't have too much money right now," the periwinkle-eyed one murmured.

"*Sure*. I invite you for dinner expecting *you* to pay. Of course it's on me. Let's have some fun!"

Charna's expectations were blown away. Just a minute ago she was tensing up, now she cracked a light smile. "Okay! S-sounds good!"

Over the past months, Charna learned that it was nigh impossible to distract Kari from food once she got hold of something she liked. So when she saw her friend's order of not one but two fish with chips arrive in the British diner they sat in, she knew she'd do the talking. Strangely enough, that was okay. Alycia's company felt warm, and seeing her in a casual grey pullover with her hair downed increased her comfort. Charna changed to a soft, pink cardigan as well, but the messy hair remained.

"And what were you doing before you returned?"

"Mostly looking for our lingering disaster, Sennin. Partly working 'round the outlying towns. They usually get info first when some scheme is developing."

"Scheme?"

"Raiders, for example. Thieves, nomads from the former Tsuga," and before Charna found a way to respond, she added "see? You don't know about them, meaning I'm doing a good job! Hehe. And how about you?"

The blonde wanted to comment on 'Tsuga' but found no time; Alycia's brain worked quicker than hers. "I-I'm trying to train my aura! I'm not too good yet, but I don't want to hurt people again."

"Yeah, I heard about it. Corner Link and the Lampagna. Rough. Sorry, sunshine. We'll flex those astral muscles, don't you worry~" the lady reassured her newest students. "But you could've picked a better bar to lay waste to than Penn's fave, haha! Oh, sorry if that was insensitive."

"It's fine," Charna said with sincerity. She'd grown past the past. She wanted and needed to move on. "I'm-I'm kind of excited. It's great to finally have someone who can really teach me."

"Gosh, you're so cute. I wanna take you home and cuddle all the stress out of you, but hubby would probably not like another pet," Alycia joked, to which her pupil blushed hard.

"It was so cool when ya called him 'Alby!'" Kari finally said in Pangaean like her company, so to not raise suspicion. "Like, he's sooo intimidating, but ya just kinda blew him off!"

"Oh my god, you're so sweet, I'll take you home too!"

"Wouldn't be the first one to say that," Kari laughed. That was darker than Alycia intended. She staggered, which happened once a year at most.

"Y-yeah. Haha. Uhm, I... How about you, Kari? You know what you're gonna do with your aura yet?"

"Nope," Kari lied. "Nothin'!"

"Hmm. Okay! How 'bout we start, then?"

"Uhm! Start what?" Charna interjected.

"Training!" the woman sang as she rose up, passing a few ten dollards onto the table in a blur. Next to it, a piece of paper. "Pay the meal and see what you get with the rest. Good luck, honeys!" she added and left the diner for Cherize's sunny spring weather. Pressure could not have been bigger as Charna unfolded the paper with quaking hands. As the girls viewed its contents, they faced confusion.

'A shopping list?' both guessed. Suddenly, Kari inhaled sharply, causing her friend to shoot up.

"Oooh! I know what this is for!"

—

"Oh boy. I didn't expect that many."

Forty minutes after his latest twelve-hour shift in Cherize's [Main Hospital], Doctor Penn neither returned home nor went to visit his mainstay, repaired bar-restaurant hybrid. Instead, he held a loose promise that was made one month ago. And while he expected some fun to be had, he also dreaded the stress that came with seeing his second workplace in hours that he should be relaxing. So leave the hospital, speed home, get dressed, don't forget deodorant and seriously don't forget the present. After slipping into a simple white shirt and making his way downtown, Penn remembered that he forgot the present. So have a deep, exhausting sigh, turn around, get the present and hope you're not too late. But as the elevator's doors opened with a ding and he instinctively counted the people in the lobby, he arrived at six. Already.

"I'm last? Aly, come on, you could've pretended to be late for me," he semi-joked.

"No mercy to the working class," Alycia winked in response. "Welcome to the, uh, welcome party, Doc!" she said as Harmann waved a trusting 'Yo'. They stood near the abundant bowls of potato and noodle salad that Kari and Charna had to prepare, obviously eager to dive in. The entire lobby gleamed in pink-ish lighting while loud alternative rock was playing. Not too in line with Penn's style, but Kari explicitly wished for it.

"Gotta deliver something first," he answered as he headed toward the girls at the left windowsill. They looked slightly tired. "Heya!" he called out as both answered with warm waves. "Hope you could enjoy the introduction. Aly's a piece of work, but her advice's invaluable."

"Think she cool!" Kari said as fiery as ever. Charna agreed with enthusiastic nodding.

"Well, then you've got more patience than I do. Anyway, here's a little housewarming present, if you will," he said as he handed each a slim box, furnished with a red stick-on ribbon. Surprise colored each girl's face.

"Books from Juniper. Specifically on Style development. Light material, really; each can be read in two days," he explained as both opened their respective stack, one more and one less visibly happy. "I know getting books as a present is just above getting socks, but trust me that they'll aid you. —Okay then! Enjoy yourselves, I'll snack on some potato—"

But as he caught Charna's look, he staggered. While Kari smiled with obvious disdain toward books, Charna held back tears, barely able to suppress them.

"Thank you!" she said with heart. The warmth of everyone overwhelmed her. "Thank you! Really! I'll make good use of them! I promise!"

"So dramatic, Miss Chierke," Penn smiled back. "No, I'm happy that I could help you. You too, Miss Ormina."

"This is so adorable, Adel~" it suddenly rang from behind. As it did, Harmann's eyes shot open. He knew what was coming.

"Shit, Aly, seriously?" Penn said as Alycia joined the circle of him and the girls. "Now?"

"C'mon hun, I'm just kidding. It is seriously sweet of you."

The doctor hoped that this posed the end of it. But as Kari repeated "Adel?", his hopes were torn to shreds. He whispered swear words to himself.

"Yeah! Did you know our dearest doctor's first name is—"

"Alycia, I swear to—"

Too late.

"—Adelguard?"

Immediate giggling from both girls. Really, they couldn't hold it if they tried. The loudest was Alycia herself, though.

"Uhuhu! You look so *cute* whenever your first—"

"No. Come with me," Penn hissed as he took his colleague by her arm. That disturbed the bright mood, setting a far more serious tone. Only three people were left unaffected: Alberc and Danpo, who were quietly talking in the background, and Harmann, who was smart enough to keep himself busy with salad. Penn and Alycia occupied the final, empty corner of the lobby, a good ten meters away from all the others.

"Hun, you know it's always in good fun—"

"Today was *hard*, Aly. The past few months were *hard*. You weren't here much, but things got out of control multiple times."

"Hey, hey, hey, Penny—"

"No. Let me talk, Alycia," the platinum blonde said decisively. His long-time friend shut up. "I'm trying not to show it, but I'm on *edge*. You should be able to tell, right?"

Understanding silence.

"The cat's out of the bag. I know it wasn't meant in harm. But please, no additional mentions. I want to de-stress a bit and not deal with this shit. Not today. Okay? Please?"

"Okay. I'm sorry," the woman said. Penn nodded. He knew she took the issue seriously. "You get a freebie for me," Alycia added.

"I can't think of anything that would embarrass you, Aly."

"True, true. Maybe a few drinks will jog your brain?"

And finally, Penn's heart relaxed. "Yeah. Sounds peachy. Let's involve the rest too, get this room a bit livelier," he proposed with a slim grin.

Three hours passed, and as the consumed alcohol jumped from cheap beer, which the girls had fetched in crates, to liquor, the room's mood became lighter. Its music drifted to a more electronic vibe which tore down everyone's social barriers, even Charna's. As the only minor, Kari resorted to grape juice. She felt hyper enough to compete with the rest either way, save for Danpo who mostly stood by himself.

"Yeah. Total womanizer. It was actually problematic," Penn told to Kari and the married couple, which knew his story but kept listening still. "One— one time," he hiccuped, "he tried to impress some random flirt from Corner Link. So. How do you impress a girl, hmm? What do you guys think?"

"Choc-late!" the minor squawked in Eulanima.

"If only," the doctor grinned. "If only. No, nonono, Sennin was more extra than that. Sennin wanted to prove a point, so he boozed her up and brought her *sss-tright* to the alleyway."

"*This al-ley-way?*" Kari shot up, to which even Harmann couldn't hold back laughter. Before Penn answered, he already gave an excited "yup". Alycia took great pleasure in seeing her quiet husband open up; she couldn't hold a giggle either.

"Aly and me caught him. Sh— she—," two hiccups, "she pulled away the poor girl while I talked some *sense* into his ass. *Idiot.*"

"Crazy! What he say?"

"Wait, wait, lemme recall. Okay. 'But Penny, I *really* just need this night and I'll punch out some deal with Alberc to hex her and— and come on, be a bro, love your neighbor, take a risk,' and so on and so forth," Penn sang. "No dice. She had to leave. Idiot."

As Kari curled from laughter, the mood shifted a little.

"I miss him, man."

The 17-year old had no idea what effort each member put into finding the lost Sentinel. Alycia sensed his friend's gloomy mood and put her hand on his shoulder. Seen by none, Harmann whispered "me too".

"You wouldn't know it, but something's lacking. He was, no doubt, an idiot. But he brought life. You girls are awesome, seriously, but Sennin... was unique," he mused in his most sober tone. "I hope he's enjoying life in some foreign country. Free from responsibilities, getting girls by the hour. Really. That's all I hope."

"You such a cool friend," Kari said in hopes of relieving some pain.

"Same goes— same goes for you, Miss Ormina."

"When you will say Kari?" she added.

"Haha. I'll get used to it."

"Regardless, you and Ormina have a long way to go."

"T-true, but we're working hard!"

"I'm aware," Alberc smiled. "I praise your commitment. Don't disappoint me."

"We won't, sir!" Charna sparked with power. "I also, uhm, wanted to thank you. For accepting Kari and me. I heard it was a gamble."

She expected the olden man to reply with a light "no problem".

"There were two methods of solving the problem, Chierke. We chose the harder one."

Two methods? What did that mean? Her entire train of thought derailed.

"Morality's a luxury that we Sentinels must afford. Even when we feasibly can't."

"I— I'm, uhm," she stumbled without direction.

"I appreciate the sentiment. I'm content our gamble worked out. By the bye, perhaps you could serve company to our superior. I'm going out to smoke some."

'Smoking?'

"At-at your age?"

"Ex-cuse me, Miss Chierke?" Alberc shot at her with a gaze as hard as stone. Charna felt guilty immediately, until the gaze softened up. "I'm jesting. I'm nearing sixty. That's a fact. Also, they're menthol. Enjoy the night, young lady," he waved as he pressed for the elevator.

'*Mister Alberc has a sense of humor,*' she noted after recovering a steady heartbeat. The next order of action took a breather. She stuck with beer and the alcohol affected her a little, but a talk with the leader of Pangaea's Sentinels required courage nonetheless. Every time.

"How are you feeling, Charna?" Danpo opened conversation as the young woman walked to his side.

"Good! I love it here! But how are *you* feeling?"

"Haha! The subordinate looking out for the leader? I must look terrible!"

"It's-it's not like that!"

"It's quite alright. No offense taken. I'm not delusional; I know how I'm feeling."

A small break as Charna geared back from panicking. A break in which the leader took a meditative breath.

"Seeing the team laugh fills me with joy. It always does. But I feel a tad lonely from time to time."

"Lonely? You lead Sentinels around the globe though, right?"

"Very true. And all of them carry parts of my heart. But one... one holds the most important part. Not a Sentinel. And I don't see that one too often."

"Uhm, your—" Charna couldn't believe she'd dare speak her assumptions, "your lover?"

"Hahaha. Perhaps," Danpo laughed more quiet than usual. "With this position comes pressure. Sacrifices. Immeasurable satisfaction too, but that has to be earned."

"Wow. I— I can't imagine leading even one Sentinel group."

"Hah! That's what I thought back then as well. It's nothing to dread over. It just happens. Let life happen and face the harsh decisions. Don't run away. That's all I can say," the wide man mused.

Despite the jumping music, succinct silence filled their talk. Understanding came with it. Respect, too.

"Oh! I actually wanted to ask you something!" Charna said as she twirled her medium hair into locks. "It's about my hair—"

"Oh! M-my apologies! I'm still getting used to young, frizzy hair and—"

"No! No! No problem here!" Charna vehemently defended. "I wanted to ask you if you could cut them again! I loved the short look!"

"Uhm, yes! Sure! I would love to! Haaa—" and Danpo caught himself blaring a full laugh again, "—hahahaha!" The periwinkle girl couldn't help but join the laughter.

"I haven't heard you laugh all day 'till now!" she said with unusual confidence.

"Haha! Indeed. Perhaps that is your doing, Charna. You radiate compassion."

Unsurprisingly, she blushed up. As the night went on, this tiny fraction of time remained in her mind for a long while.

*'What did the other method entail?'* was the other thing that remained.