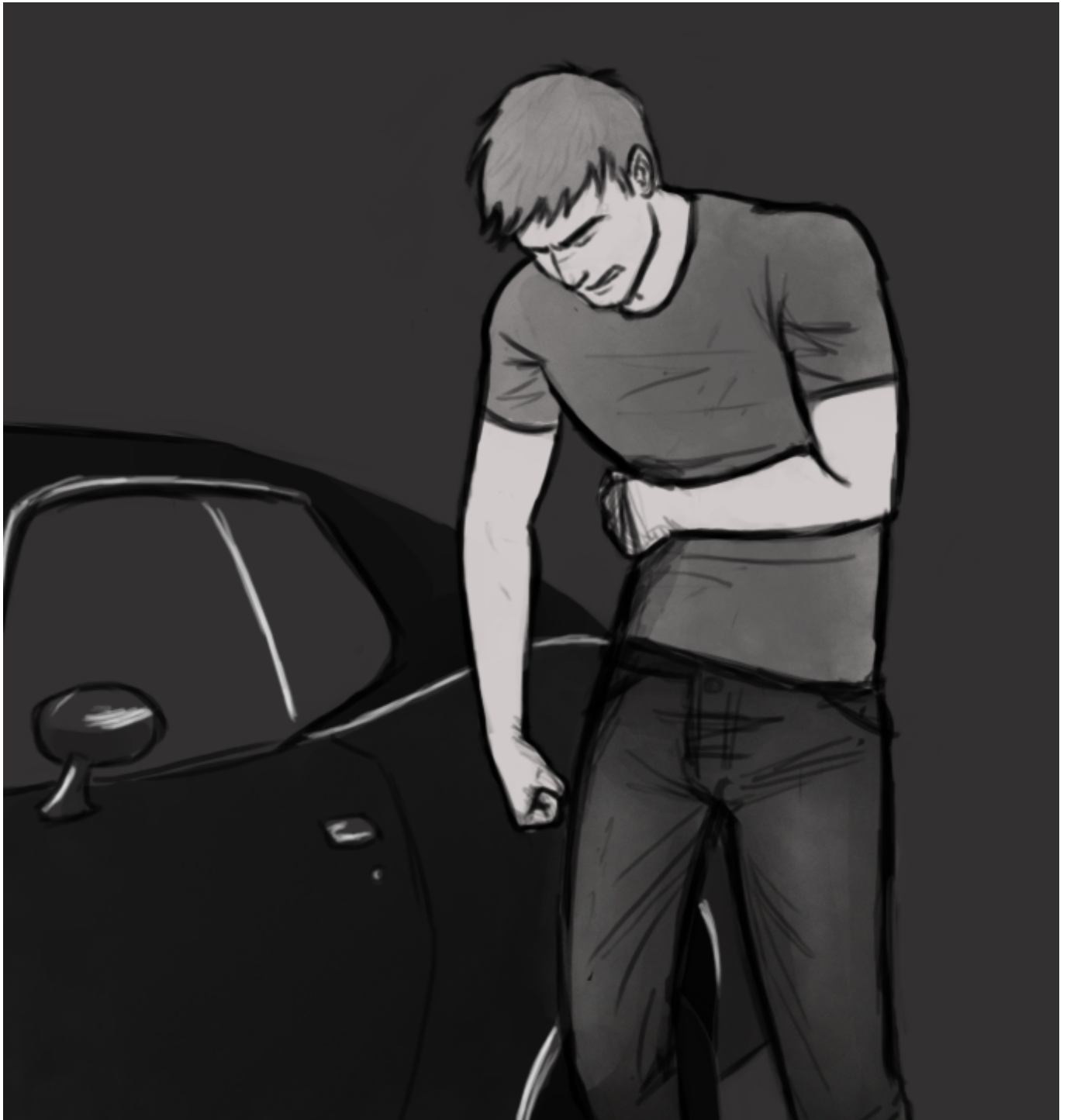


14. Initiation



It was raining on the way back. Naturally, I drove. Shaking and everything, I drove. I wasn't going to let that psychopath back behind the wheel. He sat there in silence, smoking idly. I couldn't understand it. I had been here from the start, who the hell did he think he was? He was staring at me for a period of time, smoke sneaking out of his mouth.

“So you want the terms?”

“Fuck you.”

He chuckled, smoke coming out in bursts. “Ouch. Come on kid – hear me out. I had to see what kind of heart you had in you. You’re on the same channel as the rest of us.”

“Yeah? What’s that?” I glanced over at him to see him glare and creep closer to me.

“You don’t have one. At all. Like I said, welcome to the family.”

“Everyone does this?”

He laughed. “This predates you kid. I went through it with Serkis.”

“What the hell are you ranting about over there?”

“You didn’t just think that this was a clever idea that they came up with at random? This is a circus kid. The show travels. And the actors with it.”

“Grey, can you be a jerk some other time? I’m driving.”

He crept back to his side of the car. “Yeah, yeah, so I see. But don’t you want to know the real story? Don’t you want to know how Mr. All American got caught up with street trash like us? Come on. I know you’re just itching to know.”

“Am I *that* transparent?”

Grey laughed nonchalantly, he was curled up on his side of the car. I glared over at him, his eyes averted elsewhere..

Crash.

Fuck.

Hello Mr. Policeman.

I slammed right into a police car. I put the car in park immediately, killed the engine, and took my hands off the wheel. Grey smiled wider, puffing smoke in my face.

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle this.”

How the hell I managed to get into this mess, I’m not sure. But I did. I sat there shaking as the officer stormed over to my window, his body fuming. You could feel the anger from him. But he tried to stand firm and calm, eyes hidden behind dark glasses. I looked up, seeing only my own miserable self.

“Can I help you, officer?”

“License and registration. Now.” I started fumbling through paperwork, killing time as Grey slipped out of the passenger side. I heard the officer address him – I heard a brief dialogue. And another cop surfaced from the patrol car. Damn.

Grey and the first cop moved off to the side to talk. The other one came over to my side again, looking idly at where his partner had sauntered off. I looked at the new guy, younger, darker...sketchy. He asked that I step out of the car. Which I did. Stupid.

“So who let a fool like you get behind the wheel, huh?” His voice was arrogant, a tone that condescended on my entire generation. I put my eyes to the ground. He kept talking and I kept shaking my head in regret.

“You busted up our car real nice, you know how much that’ll cost the state? You know how much of my time you’re wasting? You kids don’t have any respect for authority these days. I don’t know what the hell it is anymore. I was raised with respect, with morals. You never undermined the law. Never. And you’re wasting my time. You owe me.”

I wanted to scream. To kick and cry and go home. I wanted to get away. I couldn’t stand the corruption. Grey was right,

something was amiss, but if he didn't come back and save me, it wouldn't matter. The officer was too close to me as it was. I heard a scuffle elsewhere, I moved to get past when his arm reached out and stopped me. He slammed me back against the side of the car, bracing an arm across my neck.

"Stay."

The more sounds we heard, the harder I tried to fight him. When gunshots started, I tried to roll away and found myself on the ground. He'd hit me across the face, another hit to the stomach, and I was down. He might've gone as far as kicking me, but I couldn't be sure. He got down to my level, rolled me on my stomach and put a knee to my back. I felt the cold sting of cuffs as I coughed up blood. I was heaved to my feet and told to stay put. He went off to investigate.

More shots and another eternity passed. Grey came stumbling back, holding at his side. He was cursing like a fiend. He grabbed hold of me and shoved me into the back of his car, which he spun around, wheels burning, and took off. I didn't ask questions. I didn't want to know. I was in pain. I was bleeding. My wrists were killing me.

Grey continued cursing and muttering as he drove, flooring the gas. I hung out in the back, minding my own business. He glared at me in the rear view mirror.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I coughed. He pushed the car harder.

"I can't believe this. He knows the drill. He knows the score. He tried to protect you. His interference will get someone killed." Grey pulled his hand up, revealing blood that covered his palm and fingertips. "Fool."

"Who?"

"My father."

“What do you mean?”

He glared back at me through the mirror. “You haven’t figured it out, have you? Daddy’s not half as straight edge as you think. You’re the baby – he was trying to protect you from the big bad. So he sent his boys to come save you. But his boys were more crooked than he is.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Dear Daddy Max has a bit of a chemical dependency problem. Or so we think. We never figured out if he did it for work, for himself, or for Mom. I don’t know. He got himself caught up in a spot a long time back. He needed to pay off a favor with my crew. They already had me. We were picking up shop, moving the show. He gave us Layne.”

“You’re insane.”

“Am I? Why do you think the boy left? He was bored of being popular?”

And I was quiet. He was right. Layne had left suspiciously. The boys’ mother must’ve known and she wouldn’t condone her husband’s decision. So she took off. Layne went off with baby brother. And he learned the ropes.

“Who broke him in?”

“Layne?”

“Who the hell else would I mean?”

“Requiem. Nobody broke in anybody like you’d think they would. The least likely breaks in the new one. The one that they’re the most leery of. It’s a question of trust. Devotion.”

“Nearly getting killed?”

“You trusted me. You didn’t grab me, yell, kick, scream, cry...nothing. Yeah.” He grinned back at me. “I’m shocked you

didn't know all this sooner. Being the ringleader and all."

"I still don't understand."

"My father takes care of you so well because he did such a bang up job with his own kids. There's no wife to go home to for him. Just the television set. And his job. Which he's good at screwing up. He might still be using, who knows. He's good at what he does. Years of practice."

"How do you give a person away? Didn't Layne protest? I don't get it."

He smiled wide back at me. "You ask him."

And the ride was silent from there. I was still coughing and he was still bleeding. But we made it back in one piece, minus parts of the bumper.

"You killed them both, those cops, didn't you?" I whispered. Grey looked back at me as he shut the car down.

"You don't know that. Go on, the man will be waiting for you. And he'll probably know a way to get those cuffs off you."

Grey helped me out of the car, dusted me off, and sent me on my way. I looked the building up and down before I stepped in. I was soaked. Bloody, bruised...broken. He wouldn't be mad, how could he? In the shape I'm in, he'd take me with open arms. I started up the stairs painfully, awkwardly. It would take awhile to get there. Give me some time to think.

I got there in no time, deciding that I would tell him the truth. This was the man. Doyle was the main one. Grey would have to deal with him. I wanted Serkis.

I knocked on the door. And guess who answered?

Serkis.

Ain't that something?

She looked me up and down in a rush and pulled me in, not realizing that I was still cuffed together. I was told to stay and wait. The second time today...and they honestly expected me to? Oh man.

Serkis came out with Gothik in tow. She sat herself a little ways away. Gothik came out, my coat clenched tightly in his one hand. He held it out to me.

“You forgot this. This morning. When you left. Abruptly.”

I couldn't reach out to take it. He knew this. My resistance would be seen as an insult. I couldn't take it though. I was physically unable. And he knew. He liked to see me struggle. He threw the coat on a chair near me and took a step closer. He gripped me by my shoulders, locked to him. I couldn't look at him. And he hit me hard, square across the face. I hit the ground in tears, bleeding again, choking on the tears in between. Serkis was on her feet, but dared not move. Gothik turned his back to me.

“You left here this morning without a word. Grey is trying to tear this apart from the inside out. You never should have gone. And you aided in killing two cops. This will be investigated – we're going to be shut down. We're screwed into the ground, and then some.”

Serkis crept off the couch to Gothik's shoulder, where she rested a cautious hand. “Now, now, let's not be too hard on the kid. I don't think this was all her fault. You know how Grey can be when he wants to be. He pulled the trigger and you know it.”

I saw Gothik's body shake, I saw him set up for it. But she had her hand up in time to catch it before he could touch her. And she was well out of his reach before he could think about trying again. I just stayed on the ground, embarrassed and ashamed. We were screwed. But how in the name of anything remotely holy was this madness *my* fault?

Gothik just walked away, leaving me where I was. I coughed up whatever was left in me, trying to roll to where I could get to my feet. Serkis came over quietly to help me. I looked into her tear stained eyes, realizing that she'd known all along. She's come here immediately after I'd left and she'd been working to calm him down since then. And even with all that time and effort, he still hit me. She helped me to my feet, holding me steady.

"You okay? He's..."

"He loves me, right?"

Her eyes shot to the ground. "Maybe. Come on – let's get you home. We'll catch one of the boys and see what they can do with you."

"What about Grey?"

"Doyle and Cassidy will deal with him. It's a matter for the gang section of the family. The circus folk are merely that, just entertainment. We don't do clean up."

"He was bleeding."

"Then they'll treat him."

"Or they'll kill him."

She looked at the ground again. He was Layne's brother, sure, but he'd seriously screwed up. He might just have to pay the price for this one in blood. Or Layne would pay it for him. Family. It was two halves of the whole pitted against one another. This would be interesting.

She helped me get home, walking behind me in the streets so as not to appear too obvious. I felt like I was being walked to the gallows, about to hang for my crimes. She walked me to the bar, which was closed early for a change. From there, we traveled further and knocked on Doyle's door. Pandora opened

it.

“Is he in?” Serkis questioned softly. Pandora took a step aside, her eyes beyond us. She might have still been sedated. Serkis led me in carefully, keeping a step in front of me, just in case. Doyle came out of somewhere, his eyes beyond this. He was tired of all this. He moved over to me and took my face in his hands. I jumped back but Serkis held me. He tilted my chin up toward him, over from side to side, inspecting the bruises. He let go when he was satisfied.

“How do you feel?”

“Bad.”

“The cop used something to hit you I think. Hence why it hurt so much.” He pulled my shirt out and looked at my stomach, he poked places until I jumped. “Yeah, see. It’s all bruised.”

Serkis held onto me so I wouldn’t freak out. Her hands didn’t dig into my shoulders, they were locked there as a sort of comforting support. She was showing her dedication to me. Doyle stepped around and moved behind me, inspecting the cuffs. He went through his pockets, produced a ring of keys, and in another few seconds, I was free. I wrung my wrists softly, showing the red bands on each. He moved back to face me.

“This is not your fault, understand me? Gothik and I will have a talk. Grey is to blame, and he’ll be punished.”

“Please don’t kill him, please?”

Doyle smiled a faint glint of a smile. “Kill? Family? Of course not. His ransom’s already been paid, child.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know, and you’re not meant to.”

And I remember him getting close to me again, and taking hold of me. Serkis helped him. And I was out cold in a few seconds. I remember the prick of the needle and the soft whispering voices to silence my protests. And I remember heavy eyelids, too heavy to keep open. I had to let them fall, I had to let go of this and go home. I didn't care where I was or why. He'd make it all better somehow. I went to sleep with that promise to keep me sound.