

When the meeting is over, it's already evening. My brain is stuffed to the brim and in a state of anxious anticipation.

In about one hour, I'm going to meet Pearl and Kimo.

Tonya has explained all the necessary safety instructions in great detail, though I strongly doubt that I'm able to remember everything correctly. Dad has ensured me I wouldn't have to worry. He said she and Bill would be double-checking on me during the first weeks, and I'd also get a printed version of the rules to learn by rote.

As we're on our way to our ward, Bill occasionally looks at me and beams. He is obviously happy about my decision to agree on the new employment contract.

I'm officially supporting my father's project now.

Actually, it's rather non-officially as it's forbidden to lose the slightest syllable about it.

In addition, the men mustn't know that Bill and I are the owners' children. Dad has stated very empathically that it's important to keep things strictly professional between these very special men and us. This means no chit-chat and no private talk like I used to have with Ella and the other patients.

Not that I have the desire to get in private with the purple-eyed in the first place. I strongly hope the personal contact will be limited to nothing but the bare minimum.

When we emerge from the elevator, the new chief nurse Linda is passing by. She eyes us and stops dead in her tracks.

"Bill!", she exclaims and instantly comes over. "Doctor McDowell was here. He needs to talk to you about Andrew Mannering."

"About the test results?"

"Yes. He said he has mailed them and now he wants your opinion."

"All right. I'll check it out immediately."

"Just a moment, please," the blonde woman quickly adds, "I need your advice regarding Ann Cunning. She wants to get transferred to the day unit but I think it's too early for that. Can we have a word about her?"

"Sure. Sis?" Bill asks and turns to me. "You call me later to tell me about the experience, will you?"

I nod, frowning at his mischievous grin. He gives me a wink before walking away, Linda all but glued to his side. I watch them until they disappear behind the corner.

She kind of wants my brother.

I'm pretty sure about that.

She's often around him, flirting and smiling more than it'd be appropriate amongst colleagues. Surely he's an attractive guy, even though he has dyed his naturally hazel-colored hair jet black which I personally find a little too harsh. However, his look is up to him.

As soon as I've reached my office, I rush to the sink and refresh my face with cold water. Then I brush my long hair with the old wooden comb I keep stored in my private drawer.

A gaze into the mirror tells me I'm looking kind of worn-out.

No wonder.

It's been a tough weekend.

I've been on nightshift and spent most of the time looking after Ella and another girl, Jessica. She was taken to the hospital shortly after having a mental crack-up. She's a heavy cutter, and she also suffers chronic insomnia. It's impossible for her to fall asleep without the strongest drugs possible.

Last night, she refused taking her dosage because it'd get her nauseated throughout the day. She also generally prefers staying huddled-up on the armchair instead laying in the bed because she does not feel safe in a bed. When she was younger, her stepfather used to appear regularly for nightly visits, grabbing her under the covers and doing things a grown up man should never do to a minor.

'He is an alcoholic, but mom loves him to death', the girl has told me in tears. So basically, Jessica doesn't want to ruin her mother's joy. That's why she keeps her mouth shut and directs her dwelling anger against herself.

She's not the only one with an abusive past.

On each and every floor inside our building you'll find overall similar stories by the dozens.

I hate them. I abhor the adults who caused them. And I condemn the silent family members who are keeping their ignorant eyes shut in the face of such crimes.

The picture of two purple-eyed guys are popping up in my head as I continue brushing my waist-length absently. I don't know about their detailed life history, but certainly surviving their own misery had been extra hard for them.

'Their weakened by their own genetics,' I ponder in dismay. 'That's not fair....'

I immediately cut off my thoughts. They wouldn't lead to something useful, only to frustration and gloom which doesn't get us anywhere.

At the bottom of my heart, I'm quite an optimistic person. Despite the tragic fates I've been witnessing since being a nurse, I still strongly belief that life is just. That it has a sense, a deeper meaning, a purpose. Mankind may cause violence and grief, but we're actually good at heart.

I decide to hold on to this conviction persistently.

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The patients from the psychiatric ward are having dinner, so the hallways are empty.

Dad and I are alone in the elevator.

He's giving me a demonstration of the card's usage.

I'm watching him very closely, though it's a lot less mysterious than I've expected. He puts the card in front of the key panel. Then a symbol shows up on the display, and he presses his thumb against it until a peep sounds.

Easy as that, to my relief.

When we reach the secret underground floor, the machine stops and opens. Now Dad hands me the transmitter I've already heard so much about. It looks like an elegant necklace with a tiny gemstone, but in reality it's an expensive technical refinement.

My hands tremble a little when I put it over my head. I carefully stuff it under my grey shirt which ends a couple of inches below my collarbone.

Dad looks critically at my neck.

"Pull the fabric higher," he instructs me. "And let your hair fall over it so that the sides of your neck are covered. In the future you have to wear loose turtleneck pullovers only."

I nod nervously. Appropriate clothing that hides the technology has also been mentioned in the instructions. Next time I'll be prepared.

We pass the port and walk through a narrow corridor.

The pregnant silence makes our steps resound abnormally loud on the linoleum covering. Naturally, there are no windows down here to be seen. A flickering fluorescent tube is the only source of light. It's warm, and it stinks as if someone has used a strong disinfection as an air refresher. It's a rather uncommon tang for a place where no physical diseases are getting treated. At the floor where I've been working, the treatment rooms in which we take care of self-harming people are the only places with that smell. You wouldn't ever notice it anywhere else.

We eventually stop at a door to the right.

Dad points to the display above the door knob. "The computer recognizes the transmitters frequencies," he explains. "If you're not wearing it or if it's deactivated, you're not gaining access. It's meant for your own protection."

He inserts his card into the slit, and then we're allowed to enter a large, also rather dimly-lit room. My eyes immediately catch Tonya sitting behind a huge desk. The wall in front of her is literally covered with large screens.

"This is where the observation happens," Dad informs me. "We're constantly checking every area of their rooms in sound and vision. Right now the sound is blocked because they're watching TV very loudly."

"Every room?" I query in high puzzlement. "How many do they have?"

"Six, in total. The layout is designed like an apartment with a bathroom, two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen. We also provide them access to a gym to prevent boredom and to keep them physically as healthy as possible."

I'm flabbergasted.

Although I like the idea with the gym, this concept is extremely uncommon.

Usually, two patients share an average-sized hospital room and a bathroom together. We also have two floors with exclusive single-rooms and large private bathrooms, but these are reserved for somewhat rich or famous people who check in for rehab.

"I know that's foreign to you," Dad says as he's getting aware of my confused expression. "When the boys hit puberty long ago, it turned out to be essential for them to get additional space and privacy."

"Considering the cameras, they're still lacking some."

"That's the way it is, sweetheart."

I cross my arms before my chest. It might be silly but I cannot help thinking of a very famous - and perverted, in my eyes - TV show.

"I'd be okay with the living room and the kitchen," I state lowly. "Though I find it highly humiliating to monitor a bathroom."

"Think twice before you judge, Ashley," Tonya suddenly voices, speaking to me in the same stern tone she used when she was teaching me the safety instructions that afternoon. "Pearl and Kimo agree with whatever is needed to be done to forestall their attacks. Over the years, we've prevented hundreds of them! And if you knew how painful they are, you wouldn't care much about a bunch of cameras. You'd rather be thankful for them."

Dad looks at his assistant with a rebuking frown on his face. "Let's give her some time to adjust to this, Tonya."

Then he turns to me again. "I do understand your concern. Though there is no total safety without sacrificing privacy. And the benefits clearly outweigh the disadvantages in this case."

I'm remembering my position as a newbie in this project and keep my mouth shut.

Perhaps Dad and Tonya are right.

Perhaps I have to adapt to the idea and have to keep it in perspective.

It's just so damn difficult to justify this shitload of screens that observe every step and every pee these diseased people take.

Dad smiles encouragingly and pulls my hand, leading me closer to the desk. "Look at the screen with the blue light on top of it. It shows you in which room the patients are currently staying. Look at it, sweetheart."

I follow his command reluctantly and with a very uncomfortable feeling.

Although the camera isn't focusing close-up on the faces, I immediately recognize the men from the pictures.

My heart starts beating faster.

They're in the living room, apparently, because they are slouching on a black sofa. Both are dressed in casual dark grey sport pants and black t-shirts. The one with the longer hair, Kimo, is sitting somewhat upright with his bare feet on the coffee table. Pearl, the younger one, sits cross-legged right beside him. His head is leaning against the back-rest, his eyes are closed and his lips parted as though he is sleeping.

To my relief, I don't detect any blood on his face. Also, his cracked lip has apparently healed. Perhaps the picture I've seen was taken after he was in an extremely bad con....

My breath sticks in my throat when the boy suddenly moves with a violent shudder. His head rolls forward, I watch in great fright red fluid shooting out of his nose like a torrent. His upper body tenses again visibly before he gets totally limp, breaking down and falling sideways against Kimo like a lifeless doll.

"O my God," I gasp, glancing with torn-open eyes between my father and Tonya. Both appear rather unfazed.

"Did you see that?" I exclaim.

"Don't worry, sweetheart."

"Aren't we going to look after him?"

"Pearl is fine."

"He doesn't look fine to me, Dad!"

"He is. Believe me."

Stunned by so much indifference, I stare back at the screen. Kimo has stabilized his brother's head on his lap. His fingers run through the fine platinum strands, gently shifting them out of the boy's blood-smeared face.

"O Gods," I whisper, my heart contracting painfully.

My father strokes my arm. "I'm sorry you have to witness this on your very first day, sweetheart. You weren't supposed to."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Pearl just suffers a harmless secondary haemorrhage. Tonya had to discipline him recently with the taser, and the medication he's been taking has a blood-thinning side effect."

I swallow against the lump in my throat.

It's one thing to hear about a stun gun's impact, but it's quite another to be witnessing it up close.

I flip my head to the coolly female at the desk, indignation building up inside me. "Why did you do that?" I demand to know, aware that I'm not in the position to snap at her like this, though upset enough not to care.

She returns my glare frigidly. "He was unwilling to interrupt his gym time to meet you today."

My eyelids flutter.

I am dumbstruck.

The boy has to bear pain and bleeding because of me?

I once again stare at the monitor, gulping hard and feeling the need to apologize. I see Kimo stroking Pearl's forehead. His actions prove that he cares for his sibling but his face is blank, his gaze staring off into space.

"These patients are no saints, Ashley," Tonya's stern voice cuts the silence. "They do not only need to get treated but also disciplined. They're not allowed to use their condition as an excuse for being selfish or stubborn - which they unfortunately are."

"We must be strict with that," Dad reaffirms his assistant. "If they ever want to survive in society, they must learn to obey the rules. And as long as they're living in this building, we are the ones who make the rules."