You move forwards, I move backwards (and together we make nothing at all)

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You move forwards, I move backwards (and together we make nothing at all)

by cremecheesebagel

Summary

After a career-ending injury, recently retired superhero Addison Montgomery is offered a job at Superhero Dispatch Network by her mentor; there, she meets rookie legacy hero Meredith Grey. They have far more in common than either of them realise.

Notes

Hi! If this is the first time you're reading my work great to have you!

This fic was originally posted to my ao3 (same username as here) in February of this year but since the big dramatic 2-4 week shutdown I've decided to start crossposting some of my works onto other archives and platforms.

Additionally, this is a superhero fic (based off the video game Dispatch) so not everybody is going to be introduced by their names. I tried to make it obvious who is who but just to clarify:

Grey Ghost - Meredith
Brainwave - Cristina
Glacier - Lexie
Hard Head - Alex
Golden Guy - Jackson
Brightburn - Izzie
Virtue - April
Phantom - George

Anyway if you enjoy this fic feel free to comment (they make my day, seriously) or come into my askbox on tumblr (same username as here, I would put in a hyperlink but they've been acting up with me lately but just search cremecheesebagel there and i promise you'll find me)

Chapter 1: You've got the hate & the jealousy

Addison never asked for her powers.

Her childhood, adolescence & early adulthood were made up of a normal, powerless upbringing. It was only when a gas leak had set her med school dorm on fire that she discovered she could set her whole body ablaze. When she took up hero work, it felt natural; she had always wanted to save people, now she could do it a bit more tangibly. Red Rocket could do things that Addison could only dream of. She could control her fire and manipulate her flames - her skin didn't burn either.

When she woke up in the hospital she was told a different story. Her most recent fight with a villain had left her severely injured. Additionally, she had pushed her powers too far and had been charred by her own flames when she reached the higher temperatures. Their recommendation? Hang up the cape - she was Red Rocket for 15 years; she had a good run. Most heroes can't say the same.

She didn't dare hold a press conference - she knew she'd only be skewered by the media and simply issued her statement: "Red Rocket is retiring from superhero work effective immediately due to health reasons.". The phone call after didn't shock her.

"Hello?"
"Addison, It's Richard. What's this I hear about you retiring?"
She groaned, "It's... A long story."
"Health reasons, Addison? As if that's not the most derivative excuse in the boo-"
"It was the doctor's advice."
"...Oh my God, I'm so sorry."
"Turns out I'm not fireproof past twenty-five hundred Fahrenheit." she chuckled mirthlessly.
"Are you okay?"
"Just a little burnt - I didn't need skin grafts, at least. But really, enough about my tragic end of career - how are you? I haven't heard from you since you retired! What was that, five years ago?"
"Seven, actually. I've been working with Superhero Dispatch Network - I manage the Seattle branch."
She rolled her eyes, "The one founded by Golden Girl after she retired?"
"The very one. Actually, a position has recently opened up."
"Really?"
"One of our dispatchers just resigned... Look, I know it'll never scratch the itch of getting back into the field but at least you'd stay close to the action. What do you say?"
She looked down at Milo, anxiously fritting about with his rubber mouse, "I just have one question."
"Sure, what is it?"
"Can I bring my cat?"

She arrived in Seattle the next week. Her apartment was depressingly empty and she hated the rain (She grimaces at the memory of getting put out mid-flight during a rain storm) but

somehow she preferred it to New York. Too many memories of her former glory, she supposed. She still had a few days until she actually started with SDN and had slowly grown tired of crying over a bottle of wine on her apartment floor.

Sitting in a 7/11 parking lot in the middle of the night eating a popsicle wasn't much better, but at least it was progress. What wasn't progress was the fact that she had decided to wear her suit. She was self-aware enough to recognise that there was something deeply depressing about the whole affair, but she needed her most recent memory wearing it to *not* be hospitalisation. The good news was, no sane person would be pulling into the parking lot of a 7/11 at this hour.

Sane was the key word, she realised, when the roar of a motorcycle echoed in her eardrums mere moments before the driver came barreling towards her. She took off into the air and was safely out of harms way just before it occupied the space she previously sat in.
The warm familiarity of flames tickled her body once again; Addison let out a huff when she realised her popsicle had melted instantaneously, the stick being consumed by her heat a split second later.

"Do you *mind*?" Addison fretted.
The woman driving the motorcycle slowly dismounted, taking off a helmet that revealed a black domino mask underneath; it complimented her black and grey costume rather well, her short cloak billowing in the wind. Addison swore she had seen that costume before.
Dark & twisty blue-grey eyes met hers, "What? It's not like you got hurt. What the hell are you doing in Seattle, anyway? You work in New York!"
"A hero can't relocate?"
"You're retired! Or was 'health reasons' code for CTE?"
"Fuck off, I don't answer to you!"
"Hey, I didn't start this!"
"You drove into *me*!"
"Well excuse me for not believing that was *the* Red Rocket sitting there. Coming out of retirement to eat a popsicle? That's just pathetic."

She began to burn hotter, wincing in pain as her burn scars began to sizzle. She took a deep breath and lowered the flames to a lighter simmer. Addison really hated this woman.
"Who even are you anyway? Vehicular manslaughter girl?"
She scoffed, "I'm Grey Ghost."
Addison laughed, "Okay, now I know you're lying - Grey Ghost is dead."
The other woman's gaze hardened, "I know. I'm the new one." She spat before sauntering into the convenience store.

What a downgrade, Addison thought.

She thought nothing of the encounter with this supposed new Grey Ghost until she arrived at SDN for her first day. Milo sat comfortably on her shoulder as she fiddled with the buttons of the utterly hideous blouse she had to wear. At least it was fireproof.

She didn't think anything of it until she heard the familiar roar of the motorcycle behind her. She froze in place as the automatic doors to the lobby opened in front of her; footsteps approached her from behind.

"Excuse me." Said a familiar, sultry rasp as the woman she argued with in a 7/11 parking lot three nights ago sauntered past her. She is so fucked.

She collects herself and slowly marches into the lobby, assessing her surroundings. She is quickly saved from the awkward staring around the room.
Richard approaches her, "Wasn't sure you'd make it."
She smiles and reaches for a hug, "It's nice to see you Richard."
"The feeling's mutual."
He breaks the hug, "Alright. Ready to meet your team?"

He shows her around the office - including where her desk is with a corner set aside for Milo. She deposits her things before she's lead to the records room.
"I was under the impression I was meeting the team."
"Well, not exactly."
A chair carrying a lithe blonde woman crosses Addison's field of vision, "This particular group is a little... dysfunctional."
Addison cocks her head, "Teddy?"
"Hey, Addison."
A hug is exchanged, "I heard you retired - what happened?"
Teddy gives a sheepish grin, "I just wanted to get out while I was still in one piece. I'm happy you're still in one piece, too."
"I was always gonna stay in one piece. The only thing up in the air is how burnt that piece would be." Addison jokes.
Teddy laughs before striding over to the computer in the corner of the room, opening a folder and motioning Addison to sit.

"So the team you're in charge of - boilerplate stuff as far as SDN is concerned. Mostly rookies."
Addison nods.
"The team is good, too. They've got a lot of heart and they have what it takes. They're just... Sloppy. Like, next level sloppy. Way too much collateral damage for corporate's liking."
"So you want me to..."
"Whip them into shape, so to speak." Richard says.
"That I can do."
Teddy smiles, "Great! Okay, let's meet your team."

She presses a key and Addison is presented with a dossier, the photo of a woman in horn-rimmed sunglasses front and centre.
"Brainwave is a PHD-"
"Who won't stop reminding you she's a PHD." Richard interjects.
Teddy sighs, "She's also a powerful telekinetic. She can make shields, too."

Next slide - a woman with long hair and an awkward smile.
"Glacier has ice breath that can go into sub-zero temperatures. She also has a perfect photographic memory."
"Is that one of her powers?" Addison asks.
"No, she's just like that."

Next slide - A man wearing a cowl and sporting a cocky grin.
"Hard Head has, well, a hard head."
"He dishes out punches almost as well as he can take them" Richard comments.
Addison bites her lip, "I feel like I've seen him before..."
"He used to be Sparkler's sidekick." Teddy clarifies.
"Seriously?"
"He's trying desperately to rebrand himself." Richard chimes.
"To limited success. The tough guy act stops working the second a kid sees him."

Next slide - A confident looking man with dark skin & glowing eyes.
"Golden Guy is-" Teddy begins.
"Wait, Golden Guy? Any relation to-"
"Golden Girl? He's her son." Richard says.
"What's he doing here, then?" Addison asks.
"He said he wanted to work his way up like anybody else - didn't want to coast on his mother's legacy." Teddy explains.
Addison nods, "Can't blame him. It's a lot of power he's got to be responsible for."
"Okay, you'll like this next one." Teddy says.

Next slide - A blonde with a cheesy grin, waving at the camera with a lighter in her hand.
"Brightburn can control fire-" Teddy begins.
"You thought I'd like her because she has fire powers?" Addison asks.
"No, I think you'll like her because she has *total control* of any fire she can see. She can ignite it further, dim it, extinguish it entirely. Only catch is she can't create any herself."
"Hence the lighter?"
"Hence the lighter. She's also a fan of yours. Red Rocket, I mean."
Addison blinks, "Really?"
"I believe the word she used was 'inspiration'." Richard says.
"Glacier caught her crying in the break room when you announced your retirement."

Next slide - A redhead with a nervous look in her eye.
"Virtue is an empath."
"Empath is the understatement of the century, Teddy - Virtue is a *super-empath*" Richard boasts.
Teddy shrugs, "She can manipulate emotions through physical contact - she can also see people's feelings."
"What do you mean see feelings?" Addison asks.
"According to her it's more like an aura. She's not the best in a fight but give her a few years and we may just have one of the best crisis negotiators in the country on our hands." Teddy says.

Next slide - A man with a mop of brown hair covering a domino mask.
"Phantom is like... well, a phantom. He phases through walls and can turn invisible. he can apply it to anything he touches too - only issue is he has to hold is breath."
"Why is that a problem?"
"It's not really much of one - just a small limitation - like Brightburn's lighter."
"He thinks of himself as more of a 'gentlemen hero' whatever that means. Tries to model himself after the original Grey Ghost." Richard pipes.

Teddy clears her throat, "Which ends up causing issues with-"
Oh no. Please no. Anyone but her.

Teddy presses a key. Blue eyes of the woman she met that night staring into her.
"You have got to be kidding me." She bemoans, her hands pressing into her face.
Richard raises an eyebrow, "You know her?"
"I may have ran into her the other night... as Red Rocket."
"You were *in costume*?"
"I didn't want the last thing that happened while I wore it to be getting hospitalised."
Richard pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs, "Just - don't do anything stupid, okay?"
Addison nods, her lips forming a thin line.
Teddy clears her throat, "So, Grey Ghost senior was killed in action last year. As her dying wish, she wanted her daughter to carry her legacy."
Addison huffs, "Brutal."
"Yeah. The lack of powers doesn't help either, but she manages to compensate in other ways pretty effectively."
"Like the motorcycle?"
"Among other things, yes."

She leans back in her chair and soaks it in: her new normal - the people she would see day in and out. The one person she wishes she didn't need to. Maybe it's embarrassment that Grey Ghost saw her that way - her knees tucked into her chest while she licked strawberry popsicle off of her fingers. Maybe it was something else; Addison ignored the feeling either way.

Richard bids them farewell and leaves for his office, Teddy walking Addison to her desk (Milo making himself very comfortable in the corner) and sitting in the chair besides her.
"This computer looks older than us." She comments before sitting down.
She takes a breath before speaking again, "We're already starting? I thought I was meeting the team."
Teddy shrugs, "We did the slideshow."
Addison continues to stare at her.
"We like to start slow - this team's been through three dispatchers already. It's better for everybody's safety this way."
"Safety?"
"It's nothing, really. You'll be fine. Put your headset on & introduce yourself."

Addison sighs, loosely tying her hair up before resting the headset over her ears and pressing a few buttons.
"Morning team, I'm your new dispatcher Addison. Just starting my first shift... happy to be working with you." She drones.
Hard Head's icon on her screen flashes as she hears a voice, "Are you being held at gunpoint to say that?" He laughs.
Addison sighs as another icon lights up - Glacier's, "Hey, leave her alone. Half the dispatchers are retired heroes. They've seen stuff."
"Washed-up heroes, more like."
Golden Guy laughs, "Hey Virtue, read her aura when we see her in person?"
"I don't know, feels like an inappropriate way to use my powers."
"When are we betting on her quitting?" Brainwave asks.

Brightburn sighs, "Not when she can hear us."
Addison clears her throat, "Hey, can we clear the channel? Getting a lot of overlap."
Silence.
"Good."
A familiar rasp, "Bossy much?"
"I'm just trying to do my job."
Silence again.

The shift starts slow: retrieving a child's lost balloon (Phantom) and breaking up a bar fight (Hard Head & Virtue). Idle chatter is made over the line.
"Hey Brightburn, did I tell you who I saw the other night?" Grey Ghost asks.
"No, who?"
"Red Rocket. At 7/11."
Oh no.
"Is this the same 7/11 you got banned from?" Phantom asks.
"Not important."
Addison smirks, "How do you get banned from a 7/11?"
"I said it's not important."
She can all but hear Brightburn's smile, "Oh my God - Red Rocket? Seriously? What was she doing? Was she in costume? Did you mention me? Did you get her autograph?"
"She was eating a popsicle. She looked... sad."
The sound of glass breaking can be heard as Hard Head speaks, "Well yeah dude, she freakin' retired. Probably got injured and threw herself a pity party."
"Didn't that Godzilla wannabe hospitalise her?" Brainwave asks.
Addison is desperate to distract them, "Hard Head, what's going on?"
"Virtue's just helping them settle a disagreement."
"Is she okay?"
A moment of silence, "She's fine."

The shift continues: stopping a boat robbery (Golden Guy), security detail at a tech CEO's ribbon cutting (Brainwave), and evacuating residents from a building fire (Brightburn & Glacier). The call that closes out her shift is a bit more memorable: shots fired at 7/11.

"Addison, don't even thinking about assigning somebody else - I got this one." Grey Ghost announces.
"Aren't you banned?"
"Yeah, and now I need to get unbanned."
She shakes her head but proceeds anyway.
Five minutes pass.
"Hey, can I get a visual?"
"What?"
"Tap into the cameras - haven't you been trained?"
"It's literally my first day, Grey." She chides as a perspective view of the 7/11 fills her monitor. Grey Ghost is perched behind one of the aisles, the robber holds the cashier at gunpoint.
"How did you get in there?"
"I have my ways... Any advice?"

She taps into another camera - giving her a better view of the cashier and the robber.
The robber in question is actually just a nervous looking teenager. His hands are shaking.
"Perp looks jumpy - get him away from the cashier."
"How am I supposed to do that?"
"Is the utility belt just for show? Use one of your toys or something."
Addison switches back to the original camera angle, zooming in to focus on Grey Ghost. She pulls a set of marbles out of her utility belt, rolling them down the aisle.

The robber turns hastily, his gun pointed to the opposing corner of the store. He begins approaching Grey Ghost's location.
Addison grins, "Alright, perfect - now get the cashier and get out of there."
"Are you crazy? The guy's still armed!"
"You're not invincible, Grey; get out of there before somebody gets hurt!"
Silence.
"No."
"No?"
"I'm doing my own thing."
"What?!"
Grey Ghost takes out her earpiece.

What follows is a beautiful disaster: Grey Ghost rounds the corner of the aisle to angle herself behind the robber, creeping up to him. Unfortunately for her, she steps on a bag of chips. The robber turns to point the gun at her and Grey Ghost rushes him, tackling him to the ground. the gun fires and hits the camera Addison is looking through.
"Grey? Grey, are you there? Grey Ghost!"
Static fills her ears momentarily, "Yeah, I'm fine. Keep your pants on. Guy's unconscious, police will be here any second to get a statement from the cashier."
"Is anyone hurt?"
"The other guy will probably have a black eye soon but he'll be fine."
She frantically switches between cameras, getting a view of the register where Grey Ghost is paying for a slushie. The cashier looks mortified but neither of them look maimed, at least.
Her headset buzzes, "I'd say that was a success."
"Including or not including the property damage?"
"Hey - nobody's hurt and the perp didn't get away."
Addison bites her tongue and sighs. She's grateful the shift is over.

She goes to the break room and suppresses the urge to bash her head into the glass of the vending machine. She pours herself a cup of coffee when Glacier is done with hers.
"Milk?"
"No thanks, Glacier."
She takes a sip and begins to calm down.

Until Grey Ghost walks into the room and sits down at the table, a smug grin on her face and a slushie (blue raspberry? really?) in hand.
"So how'd I do, chief?" She teases between long sips.
Her coffee is beginning to simmer, "Are you serious right now?" Addison growls as she sits adjacent from her at the table.
"What? I came by to celebrate a successful call."

"You call that a success?"
"Nobody got hurt."
"You almost got hurt! You disobeyed a very clear instruction so you could go play Rambo! It's a miracle you *didn't* get hurt! You think when people sign up for SDN they expect their stores to get trashed?"
"Hey, shit happens. Who knows what would've happened if I didn't rush him?"
"Don't do that. Don't use hypotheticals to justify it. The point is I make the calls. Not you."

Grey Ghost glares, "Look, here's some advice: I don't know what kind of sad little hole SDN found you in, but you're not a hero anymore, okay? Just because you can do things nobody else can do doesn't make you better than me. *I'm* the one putting my ass on the line, not you." She could feel her skin begin to burn, "My powers didn't make me a hero. How I did my job made me a hero. And from the way you're doing things there isn't a superpower in the world that could keep you from being a reckless asshole!" Addison growls, standing to slam her hands against the table. Grey Ghost stares at her in contempt as it catches fire and walks away.

The fire is quickly put out - Addison looks down at the scorched, wet piece of wood and turns her head to face Glacier, who has frozen her coffee.
"Uh - you're still..." She stutters, gesturing vaguely to her head.
"Right, thanks." Addison says, quickly extinguishing herself. "Good shift."

Chapter 2: And now you're in my eye range, I'm gunning for you

Chapter Summary

The team get swept into friendly competition. Addison and Grey talk.

"Care to explain?" Richard asks. He slides the piece of paper across his desk close enough for her to read.

INCIDENT 108-C: Reported by Addison Montgomery (Dispatcher).
During a verbal disagreement between Dispatcher Montgomery & Operative Grey Ghost, the break room table was ignited by Dispatcher Montgomery's powers. Fire put out by Operative Glacier, who was present during the verbal disagreement. Table was superficially burnt - no major smoke or fire damage worth recording. Superficial water damage likely.

She presses her lips together, "She disobeyed a direct order, Richard. Yeah, it worked out but it was reckless. She could've gotten herself seriously hurt - she could've gotten the cashier seriously hurt, too."
"Look, I agree that the call didn't go well - but I'm not very fond of the fact that you're already setting tables on fire on your first day."
"She's a liability, Richard."
He frowns, "I've known Grey Ghost for a long time. I worked with her mother - I used to babysit her. She has a good heart. She cares about people." He sighs, "She's been through a lot."
She rubs her eyes, "Richard..."
"That incident notwithstanding though, I think that was one of the team's best shifts."
"Seriously?"
He shrugs, "The bar isn't extremely high for this group - you should be proud."
She pouts, "Well, I'm not. I'm a professional, Richard. If you want the team to succeed, we need to raise the bar."
"...What did you have in mind?"
"I need to be around them. I need them to see that I'm taking this seriously - this only works if they trust me."
A pause.
"Alright - I'll set up a meeting on Monday. You and the team are doing a double so I'll just schedule it between shifts." He declares.

She leaves his office, the rays of the setting sun streaming through the window. The light bathed the bullpen in a golden hue as people pile out for the day, ready for the weekend. When she turns the corner to her desk, Teddy is still standing in front of the cubicle next to her.

"How'd your meeting go?" She asks.
"Well apparently that was one of their best shifts - which worries me considering what Grey Ghost did. He also wasn't pleased about the table fire."
"Grey Ghost is... a lot. But she's she's smart, and kind, and very stubborn. She reminds me of you, actually."
"Me?"
"In the early days, rushing into problems headfirst, thinking you were invincible."
"I have powers, she doesn't. It's different and you know it."
"Then show her what to do. You've been doing this for fifteen years and she's been doing it for one. Help her."
Addison sighs, "She doesn't seem very willing."
"You never know until you try."
"Okay. I'll try - but no promises." She resigns.

She comes in on Monday with a different approach: more confident, more assertive - less Addison, more Red Rocket. She struts down the hallway to her desk confidently, the clicking of heels echoing as she goes.
Teddy leans back in her chair, "Is this the new strategy to get the team to take you seriously? The sexy librarian look?" She jokes.
She takes off her glasses, wiping them and putting them back on, "It's all about the way you carry yourself, Teddy."
"Whatever helps you sleep at night." She teases, picking up and taking a sip from the mug on her desk.

Richard strides over to their corner of the bullpen, "Addison - I wanted to discuss something with you."
"Go for it." She says, walking closer over to where he stands by the wall.
He gestures to the large frames in front of them, "By now, I'm sure you've seen the leaderboards."
"I have - not sure how I feel about ranking heroes, though."
"It's based mostly on their track records - successful calls add points, collateral damage reduces. It's all in the name of friendly competition."
She bites back a reply, her eyes scanning the names and numbers across the leaderboard, settling to the last eight positions.
"As you can see, though..."
"My team's dead last."
By a large margin, too; Golden Guy - the highest score of the team (150), was still behind the person ahead of him by 200 points. Grey Ghost sat at the bottom, with a score of 84.
"You said you wanted to raise the bar, right? Here's the first step."
Her brow furrows, "And how exactly am I supposed to do that?"
"Oh, I already let the team know - it's a competition now - whoever has the most points by end of day wins."
She nods slowly, clenching her jaw, "What's the prize?"
He grins, "It's a surprise."
"From me as well?"
"From you as well."

Teddy ends the conversation for them, "Hey Addison? You're getting a distress call."
She gives Richard a strained, closed-mouth smile before returning to her desk.
"Why is it that when there's a problem it's usually you?" She bites, taking in the security feed in front of her.
Grey Ghost pulls on the handcuffs around her wrist, chaining her to the squat rack in the gym, "In case you didn't notice, I'm actually the wronged party here."
Brightburn steps forward, coming into view of the camera feed, "You sent a distress call? Seriously? Seriously?"
"Brightburn, please tell me why the hell Grey Ghost is handcuffed right now." Addison groans.
"It's nothing, seriously. Just a little spat between roommates."
Phantom's voice fills her ear, "Grey Ghost used up all the hot water this morning."
Addison scoffed, "Brightburn - you have *fire powers*."
"Even if my powers worked that way - which they don't - it's the principle of the matter, Addison! It's like, roommate 101."
She sighed, "She better be un-handcuffed before shift starts - I mean it." She takes another moment to collect herself, "Look, I know Richard's set up this competition with the leaderboard but try not to let that get in the way of doing your jobs, okay? No doing anything stupid or restless just for a couple extra points."
Grey Ghost's rasp sends a chill down her spine, "Why do I feel like that's targeted?"
"Relax, Grey - I'm this tough on everyone."

As Addison expected, the competition clouds everyone's judgement. In the effort to make themselves look better and score higher, the team is unfocused and uncooperative. It starts when Glacier accidentally freezes Virtue in place while trying to redirect traffic; then Phantom and Hard Head spend so much time arguing that a jewellery thief gets away. Brainwave tries to show off while cleaning up debris from another team's fight with a villain and Brightburn threatens to kick her "pampered, Beverly Hills ass.". She doesn't have much hope when she sends Grey Ghost and Golden Guy to break up a brawl at Seahawks Stadium - she has even less hope when they somehow manage to escalate the brawl by refusing to work together and do it themselves.

"You know, this is really immature guys - you're not going to win this way. This competition is really stupid." She groans, massaging her temples.
Golden Guy comes in over comms, "No, it's not stupid. It's exactly what my mother had in mind when she came up with the leaderboard. Find some way to keep heroes motivated, make them take it to the next level - even if they're already at the top of their game. That's exactly what it's doing today."
A moment of silence, then Brainwave speaks up, "This message was brought to you by Superhero Dispatch Network. For more information, please go to www dot nepotism dot com."
Golden Guy groans as the rest of the team laughs. Addison suppresses a chuckle of her own. The remaining laughter dies down until Grey Ghost is the only one left giggling at the joke; Addison finds herself softening at the sound.
"Seriously though, I want that prize."
The channel is flooded with overlapping sounds of agreement.

The lack of team synergy continues - to even more disastrous results. Brainwave traps Golden Guy in one of her barriers on the way to a call (which she then fails on her own) and Virtue accidentally makes Phantom have a panic attack when they phase through a wall together. Her sanity was slightly restored when Brightburn and Glacier get in each other's way trying to catch the same perp that got away from Phantom and Hardhead, the fire and ice combining to create a very anticlimactic puddle that the fleeing drug dealer slips on. Her sanity is just as quickly taken from her when she sends Hard Head and Grey Ghost to resolve a burglary at end of shift.

The call initially goes fine: Hard Head charges in from the front while Grey Ghost sneaks in from the back to flank the burglar. Blows are quickly exchanged - Hard Head is far stronger but the burglar is far more agile. Grey Ghost inserts herself into the fray - overwhelming the criminal now that he had to deal with two attackers. It all goes wrong when a knife is pulled out. Hard Head incapacitates the attacker but only after Grey Ghost gets in over her head, reaching to strike and getting sliced as a result. She flicks through cameras anxiously, failing to get a good view no matter the feed, "Grey! Hard Head! What happened?"
Hard Head swings the burglar over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, scrunching the knife into a ball with his free hand, "Guy had a knife. He got Grey."
"I'm fine." She spits, clutching her forearm, fingers digging into her skin.
"Dude, your blood is on the freakin' carpet."
"It's just a flesh wound."
Addison groans into her hands, "Everybody in the conference room in twenty minutes."
She takes off her headset in a huff.
Teddy leans back in her chair, "Want me to get the first aid kit for Grey?"
"Please."
"They'll be fine - you just need a reset... A very hard reset."

The team is already seated at the table when she arrives - Teddy comes in just after her with the first aid kit in hand, Richard following at the more leisurely pace.
"Can we start already? There's like, 3 hours until our next shift and I wanna use that time doing something useful." Brainwave drawls.
Grey Ghost is seated next to her, tightening the bandage around her forearm, blood slowly trickling through the dressing, "Yeah - what's this even about?"
Addison rolls her eyes, "Look, I think we could all agree that this shift didn't go so well-"
"We weren't *that* bad." Glacier argues.
"No, we were pretty bad." Golden Guy laments.
Addison nods, "Exactly - you're all so caught up in this contest that you're forgetting the bigger picture here. This contest & this prize mean nothing if you're not out there doing your best. Fighting and trying to one up each other keeps everyone from doing their jobs and it puts lives at risk."

The room is silent, Addison continues.
"Most people would look around this room and see amateurs. Rookies way too in over their heads. I'd guess that's what your last three dispatchers saw. Lucky for you though, I'm not them; because when *I* look around this room... I see potential."
"Here we go." Phantom remarks.
"The bad thing about potential is that it's often put to waste, and people never forget it. It follows you when you leave the room, 'They had so much potential, it's really a shame'." She

feels her throat tighten, she looks at Grey Ghost, "It follows you forever. I'm here to make sure you *use* that potential, and the best way you can do that is by working together."

Virtue raises her hand meekly, "But what about the contest?"
Addison grins, "I'm so glad you asked, Virtue." She turns to Richard and winks, "We've discussed it and we've actually decided to change the conditions."
Richard blinks, "We have?"
Teddy elbows him gently, "Oh, yes! We have!" Richard lies.
Addison turns to the window behind her and picks up a whiteboard marker. She writes a number.
"This is your combined score on the leaderboards."
She writes another number - a much higher one.
"This is the combined score of the next team up. If you want to win, your score needs to be higher by the end of the day."
"Then who wins?" Glacier asks.
"You all do. By sharing the prize as a team."
A collective groan is echoed through the conference room.
"Or we just stop the competition now. Your choice. We can give the other team the prize instead." Addison declares.
A collective "No, never mind." is uttered at once.
She smirks, "Good. Have a better second shift."
Teddy hands her the first aid kit with a smile as she, Richard and the team begin to filter out.
"Grey, stay for a minute."

The other woman walks over to her slowly, "What is it now?"
Addison looks down at her arm, the bandage almost fully red, compressed against the wound, "You're hurt."
"I'm fine."
"You need stitches."
"I'll just get Brightburn to seal it shut."
"If it's bleeding that much cautery's not ideal, come on - sit. That's an order."
Grey Ghost sighs, sinking into the nearest chair as Addison grabs the suture kit and snaps on a pair of gloves. She gently unwraps the bandage - the cut is deep, but didn't hit any major arteries.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Grey Ghost asks.
Addison gently dabs the wound in disinfectant, "I went to medical school, so yeah - I am."
A pause, "You're a doctor? What the hell are you doing here, then?"
"They don't let walking fire hazards work in hospitals."
"Oh."
"Yeah."
Addison sutures in silence.
"Ow."
"You took the cut, you can take the stitch."
"Fantastic bedside manner, Dr Montgomery."

A glare, "How did this happen anyway?"
She sighs, "It's not as easy as it looks. I don't have powers to rely on. I can't just set tables on

fire and fly away. I'm not *Red Rocket*."
Addison freezes, turning her head up to face Grey Ghost's smirking face.
"I knew it."
"Who did you tell?"
"No one, because I wasn't sure until now."
"Good. Keep it that way."
"What's the big deal? You're retired."
She returns to suturing, "You literally cover your face, Grey. You know just as well as I do how important it is."
A short, mirthless laugh, "This is just tradition. I practically *am* the mask."
Addison shakes her head, "You don't mean that."
"It's true! I mean, I kinda had a life before all this - I was distancing myself. But then... you know."
"You didn't have to do this, no one was forcing you."
A shrug, "This is the only thing I really know how to do. Not that I'm any good at it."
Her gaze sharpens, "You're doing fine. Reckless, but fine."
"What happened to me being an asshole?"
"You're still a complete asshole - but who cares as long as you get the job done?"

"You know the whole pep talk doesn't really work when you practically had a perfect career, right?"
"I wouldn't say perfect."
"Right - that Godzilla guy. I mean, you didn't die in the suit at least. That's good."
She scoffs, "The press would beg to differ."
"Fuck the press. They called me a legacy killer. They think I don't know my mother was a legend? The first hero without powers, without a mech suit, without *anything*. It's hard to live up to as is - I don't need *other people* telling me I'm doing it wrong, too."
Addison sighs, "That was different and you know it."
"Was it? From where I'm standing it's just more judgement."
"I have experience, they don't."
"So you can judge me and they can't?"
"So I can help you and they can't. If you would just listen."
They sit in silence.
Addison ties up her stitch and rewraps the wound, "Try not to get into any more knife fights, Grey."
She winks, "Don't worry, I like playing with fire better."
Addison takes a deep breath, cooling the inklings of flames as Grey Ghost strides out of the room, fighting the heat threatening to spill over.

To her relief, the second shift goes far better: Golden Guy & Hard Head prove themselves effective bodyguards for a foreign diplomat, Virtue & Brainwave de-escalate the *second* brawl at Seahawks Stadium. Brightburn successfully manages to disperse a cult gathering (by accidentally convincing them she's the devil), Glacier helps an old woman cross the road & Phantom tries (but fails) to scare a juvenile pickpocket straight while escorting him home.

"I'll take Golden Guy." Brainwave says.
"My money's on Glacier." Hard Head replies.
"I think I'll go with Brightburn on this one." Phantom chimes.

"Aw, thanks."
Addison chuckles, "What are you betting on?"
"Who gets the winning point this shift - winner gets like, 20 bucks." Golden Guy answers.
"What about the person who actually scores the points?"
Grey Ghost clears her throat, "They get free drinks tonight. We're not *animals*. Also, I'll bet on Hard Head."
"Addison, making any bets? Golden Guy and Virtue are boring so we've got room in the pool." Brightburn asks.
"Uh, I'll go Grey Ghost, I guess."
Hard Head scoffs, "You better hope that 7/11 gets robbed again."

When the call lights up her monitor, she grins.
"If I didn't know any better Hard Head, I'd say you were psychic."
"No way." He groans.
"Yes way. Grey - get over there. Don't worry, no guns this time."

The attempted robbery this time is much cruder - two attackers with metal bats, far more manageable.
Grey Ghost stands outside, hidden from view behind a car in the parking lot, "Any suggestions?"
"You're listening to me now?"
"Only if I like your ideas."
Addison rolls her eyes but can't help the smirk creeping up on her face, "What's in the utility belt?"
"A little bit of everything, really. Pepper spray, caltrops, a smoke bomb-"
"Use the smoke bomb."
"I have tear gas, too."
"The smoke bomb. Try to avoid harming the poor cashier."
"Aye-aye."

She watches as Grey Ghost approaches the store, bowling the small device into the group as the doors open. She loses her view.
"Grey! What's going on? I lost my visual."
She hears the sound of grunting and clattering, "Yeah, that's kind of the point of smoke bombs, dummy."
"Then tell me what's going on!"
More crashing, a yell and glass breaking, "One of them hit the other."
"That's good, that's-"
A loud thud.
"Grey!"
"I'm okay. That was the other guy."
It takes a few minutes for the smoke to clear, but when it does Addison sees it. Both attackers, unconscious and tied together.
"Good job, Grey."
"Couldn't have done it without you - those dummies couldn't fight blind."
"Most people can't."
"Did I get us over the point goal?"
Her eyes flick over to the leaderboard and watches as Grey Ghost shoots from eighth to third

on the team.
"You did."

The rest of the team huddles around Addison's desk, waiting for Grey Ghost.
"Was it really fair to let Addison bet? She is the one controlling who goes where." Brainwave complains.
"You're just mad you're not getting anything." Hard Head remarks.
Grey Ghost saunters into the bullpen, the rest of the team greeting her enthusiastically.
Brightburn claps her on the back, "Come on, let's celebrate! Drinks tonight?"
"Not tonight - I'll cash in those free drinks later."
Virtue pouts, "Really?"
"Yeah. Not feeling it."
Phantom clears his throat, "Addison? You wanna grab drinks with us?"
"I'm okay, thanks. Still need to file some paperwork." She lies.
The rest of the team walk away from the two of them, the sounds of conversation slowly fading.

Addison coughs, "Happy?"
"The call went well - but the last time I thought that you set a table on fire."
"That was because you made a bad decision."
"I still disagree."
She takes a deep breath, forcibly extinguishing the embers beginning to dance on her skin, "Look, you had a good call today - take the win."
Grey smacks her lips, "You have serious control issues, you know that?"
Addison chuckles - quickly, mirthlessly - "And you have an attitude problem."
Grey steps closer, "Is that so?"
Addison enters her personal space, "Oh, I know so."
Grey's eyes flit down to her lips.
"Don't even think about it."
"About what?"
Addison works her jaw, "Are you capable of listening to me or was that recent display an exception?"
Grey's eyes remain on Addison's lips, "I don't know, you tell me."

She realises that they are the only two left in the building.
Grey bites her lip when she kisses her, she can taste the iron filling her mouth. They knock teeth as Addison pushes her against the desk.

Chapter 3: I'm surprised you're allowed out (don't make me get loud now)

Chapter Summary

Inappropriate office sex with coworkers and intermediate wound care.

Grey is not gentle, Addison learns. She does not play it safe - all she wants is to rile Addison up and utterly ruin her. It's how she finds herself in their current predicament, having sex in the showers of the gym, Addison uncontrollably lighting up only to be extinguished before she can truly burst aflame and cause real harm. She's propped against the wall, Grey's mouth pressed into the base of her neck, teeth harshly baring into her skin and fingers between her legs. She feels the heat simmering through her body, the water from the shower head hissing as it makes contact with her skin, steam near blinding her.

"Grey." She moans.
She either ignores or doesn't hear Addison, as her mouth begins to wander further down.
Her head is swimming, "Grey, I'm getting-"
Grey's tongue gently traces itself around a nipple. The steam is deafening.
"Grey, I-"
Grey's fingers curl.

She ignites as she climaxes - the water extinguishing her just a second later as Grey recoils to the other side of the shower. Grey's lips are bright pink, her gaze flicks down to her fingers in the same - arguably worse - state. Addison's pleasure quickly replaces itself with fear - had she hurt her? Did she screw it up? This is why she never had sex with normies - her last boyfriend had water powers to avoid this exact problem (although he was *way* too into ferry boats).
"Oh my God, I'm so sorry, I really didn't-"
Grey experimentally moves her fingers together and apart, "How bad? In your... professional opinion?"

She tilts her head, clinically examining her fingers, occasionally looking to the crook of her own elbow and thighs to compare burns, "Maybe first degree? You should ice it."
Grey's eyes - still mask-clad - darken as she steps forward, invading Addison's personal space, "Don't worry about it."
"But-"
"I'm serious. Don't worry about it." She whispers.
Grey kisses her again - firmly, roughly - moving Addison's hands to either side of her waist and guiding her fingers to dig into the skin. Addison presses her against the wall, frantically moving her knee between Grey's legs. She feels her hands heat up, hearing a faint sizzle and Grey moaning deeper into the kiss. Addison breaks it, sucking on the nape of her neck.

She can't help but stare afterwards, when they dry off in the locker room in silence, at Grey's back: bite marks beginning to bruise overtop a small collection of scars and the imprint of Addison's hands lingering on her hips, the skin red and tender.
"Stop looking at me like that."
"Like what?"
"Like I'm made of glass."
Addison huffs, fingers struggling to button back on her shirt, "I'm just making sure you're still in one piece. You know, because we need to work in two days."
Grey hops into her pants, "Well, I'm fine. I may not have powers but you won't kill me with a little post-orgasm fire."
"I never said that."
"You implied it."
"I implied nothing - you're reading between lines that aren't there."
They glare at each other, now fully dressed, eyes trailing up and down each other's figures.

Grey clears her throat, "Wear your hair down next shift, you have a hickey." She suggests, trotting away. Addison's fingers trail to a tender spot below her ear, feeling the indent of Grey's teeth. The next day is a haze - her thoughts are tormented by flashes of the night before: Grey's teeth on her neck, the flames dancing on her skin, the flames dancing on *Grey's* skin, the kissing, the biting, the scratching, the patch of burnt off hair on Grey's leg. She's relieved that she doesn't work that day - her head sinking into her hands as she groans, Milo eyeing her judgementally.

Grey is staring at her when she sits at her desk - her gaze is hungry.
Teddy leans over the cubicle partition, "What did you do to piss her off this time?"
She breaks eye contact, shaking her head to look at Teddy, "No idea." She lies. She hates that the lie comes so easily.
Teddy simply shrugs in response, reaching over to scratch Milo behind the ear.
The sound of heavy footsteps divert their attention, "Addison."
Teddy straightens as Addison adjusts her hair, "Richard."
"Can I steal you for a second? I wanted to have a word before your shift."
Part of her panics - does he know? The last thing she wants to do is talk to Richard (or God forbid Ben in Human Resources) about her - albeit extremely inappropriate - sex life. Then she realises that Richard is using his 'friend' tone and not his 'boss' tone.
"Yeah, sure" she squeaks.

He directs her to sit at the head of the table in the conference room - the rest of the team (sans Grey) already sitting.
"Alright, now that..." his eyes scan the room, he raises a brow, "Where's Grey Ghost?"
Glacier fiddles with her fingers, "She said she needed to go to the bathroom."
Richard sighs, "I guess we'll just-"
The door is opened abruptly, cutting him off as Grey Ghost strides in, flopping into the seat between Hard Head & Brainwave, "Sorry."
Richard waves her off, "It's alright." He clears his throat, "I just wanted to say that I am really pleased with everyone's performance last shift and as promised..." He reaches into his pocket, pulling out a bedazzled brick.

"That's the prize?" Virtue asks.
Golden Guy tilts his head, "What is that?"
"A pager?"
Richard grins, "It's not just any pager Addison, this is a sparkle pager."
"So? What's so special about it?" Phantom asks.
"It's the holy grail. For the next three months, any interesting calls across the entire branch go to this pager and you have the right to take it from the team that got it."
A small chorus - sounds of approval.
"Because you all agreed to share it as a team, I'll leave it to Addison's discretion." He announces, walking over to her side of the table and gently placing the pager in front of her.
"Good luck on your shift today." He says, walking away.
A moment of silence.
"So what? We suck up now?" Brightburn jokes.
Addison laughs, "Just - just do your jobs."
Grey glares at her neck the entire meeting.

She goes through the motions: Brightburn performs a wellness check, Glacier goes to a ribbon cutting to represent SDN, and Virtue dissolves a domestic dispute. She's grateful the calls are tame so far.
"Hey, has anybody been to The Pink Door before?" Virtue asks.
"Yeah. Great Italian, why?" Grey Ghost answers.
"I have a date."
Brainwave gasps, "Wait, seriously? Who?"
"Matthew?" Golden Guy asks.
"Yeah."
Brightburn squeals, "Finally! God, what took him so long?"
"Maybe he's gay. No straight guy waits two months to ask a girl out." Glacier laughed.
Grey scoffed, "Why would he ask her out in the first place, then?"
"Maybe he had herpes." Brainwave suggests.
Hard Head chuckles, "That wouldn't stop him from asking her out."
Phantom sighs, "He was probably just nervous. Dating is scary, especially when you're out of practice. You've just gotta relax, be mellow-"
"She knows how to date, Phantom." Brainwave chides.
Golden Guy huffs, "Do we have to talk about this now?"
"I do have to agree guys, these calls are recorded." Addison interjects.
"Seriously?" Glacier asks.
"Yeah, for training."
"Oh come on, Addison - it's not like anything fun is happening right now, anyway." Brainwave jabs.

The sparkle pager goes off twice: the first time, she sends Brainwave to disarm a bomb (Golden Guy accompanying as insurance) - the second, she sends Phantom, Hard Head & Grey Ghost to dismantle a fight club. As always, something goes wrong. She's trying to have her lunch in peace, her and Teddy seated in the break room as they pick apart their food.
Teddy becomes preoccupied, looking behind Addison to the doorway, "What happened to you?"
Addison turns around. She notices the bruising first. Grey's Jaw and cheekbone are a bright red, almost beginning to purple. It trails to the bridge of her nose, where she sees the worst of

it. It's a brighter shade than the rest of her face, swelling to match. A tissue has been hastily shoved into a nostril, soaking blood. There's a small cut across the bridge.
Grey reaches into the fridge to grab a sandwich, "You should see the other guy."
Hard Head and Phantom trail in behind her, looking equally bruised but less bloody and broken; they reach for their lunches and leave the room. Grey leans against the counter, slowly unwrapping the foil.
"Your nose looks broken." Addison observes.
"First time for everything."
"You should really get someone to look at that."
"I'm fine."

Addison returns to her food in a huff, exchanging an exasperated glance with Teddy. Teddy simply shrugs. Addison hears a crunch. She whips her head around to find Grey's fingers pressing against opposite sides of the bridge of her nose.
"No!" Addison barks.
Addison strides over as Grey groans, "Relax, I'm - fuck."
She grabs her wrists, "If you're going to set it, do it right."
"Jesus, why do you care?"
"Because you injuring yourself makes my job harder."
Teddy wordlessly sets the trauma kit on the counter, leaving with her container.

Grey smirks, "So you can excuse burns?"
"That's different."
"Is it?"
"Shut up." Addison growls, opening the kit.
"Make me."
She shoves Grey's sandwich into her mouth.
A huff. She removes the tissue in silence, crouching slightly to look into the nostril with a flashlight.
A swallow, "What are you doing?"
"We're not in a hospital, I have to improvise."
The internal bones look fine, nothing she needs to directly interfere with. She reaches for the tape.
"I had a dream we were having sex last night. We were airborne, I think."
Addison rips off a strip of tape, "How was I?"
"I didn't finish."
"Not what I asked. We're talking about me."
Grey smiled, only to wince a second later.
"Hold still, I need to make sure you can't mess this up again."
She complies. Addison finishes applying the splint in silence.

Addison carefully packs the bleeding part with gauze, "What did I tell you about getting into fights you can't win?"
"You said knife fight, actually. I didn't get into any of those."
Addison huffs, "You seriously need to be more careful Grey. You're not immortal."
Immortal comes out sharper than she intends, Grey's gaze hardens.
"Whatever." She growls, stuffing the sandwich into her mouth and storming out.

Grey seems hellbent on pushing her buttons for the rest of the shift. She volunteers for the riskier, more confrontational calls. Addison ignores the requests.
"I really don't want you fighting with your nose the way it is."
"It's really not that bad."
"Well, I don't want to deal with you choking on your own blood mid-fight, Grey."
"Come on, put her in, coach." Hard Head goads.
"She fights better than half of us." Brightburn chimes.
"Isn't it like, discrimination to bench her because she doesn't have powers?" Brainwave teases.
"I'm not *discriminating*, she's injured."
"Hard Head & I got hurt too, you're not benching us." Phantom observes.
"Did you guys break anything?"
"...No..."
"Exactly."

She's grateful when her shift ends, the afterglow of the sunset illuminating the office. She throws off her headset in a huff, leaning back in her chair.
Teddy looks over the partition, "Rough shift?"
"Grey is... Grey."
She nods, "You wanna grab a drink?"
"Absolutely."
Teddy takes her to a hero bar named Joe's. It's surprisingly close to the SDN building.
"What are you drinking?"
"Gin martini."

Teddy nods, scurrying away from their corner table over to the bar. Addison lets her eyes wander, taking in her surroundings. She settles at the bar, Teddy picking up their drinks with a smile. Her breath hitches when Grey Ghost scowls at her. Brightburn is sitting next to her, happily chatting away and occasionally diverting Grey's attention. Phantom appears from nowhere in the stool beside Brightburn, joining in the conversation. She catches a smile on Grey's face. Her heart is in her throat.

"Hello? Earth to Addison?"
She whips around to Teddy, now standing over her, drinks in hand.
"Hey, don't let her get you down. She'll come around."
"I wasn't."
Teddy sits down, her tone is teasing, "Right."
"I'm serious."
Teddy chuckles, shaking her head, "Alright. How're you feeling though, really? Getting used to it all?"
She stares over Teddy's shoulder at the commotion in the other corner of the bar - Hard Head & Brainwave are in an argument of some kind, Glacier & Virtue are standing between them.
"I think so."
Teddy grins, "Great! I'm so glad."
"You're more glad than I am."
Teddy scrunches her mouth, "Well, my girlfriend and I may or may not have... Bet on it."
She raises a brow, "You're seeing someone?"
"Yeah. Cris- Brainwave & I are..." Teddy looks back over her shoulder to Brainwave, doing

shots with Grey, she smiles.
A quiver in her throat, she smiles, "I didn't know that was-"
"Allowed?"
"Well, yeah."
"I'm not her dispatcher so there's no real conflict of interest. Besides, we cleared it with HR and we keep it out of the office."
"And if you were?"
Teddy laughs, "It'd be a HR nightmare."
Addison purses her lips together in a tight-lipped smile, forming a straight line.

She drinks more than she probably should. Teddy leaves later, half-carrying a horribly drunk Brainwave.
"Are you sure you're okay?"
"Yeah, Teddy. I'm fine."
"You're sure? I can come get you after I drop her off, maybe call you a cab?"
"It's okay, Teddy, really."
Teddy sighs, "Okay, just... Call me if anything changes, okay?"
"I will."

She moves to the bar - it's faster to get her drinks that way. Her head starts spinning. She feels... lighter. Her internal monologue fades into gibberish. Her peace is short-lived.
"Two tequilas."
She turns - Grey is sitting next to her, the splint around her nose is unchanged and the bruising is morphing into a bluer colouration.
The bartender wordlessly hands them to her.
Addison clears her throat, "I thought you were getting free drinks."
Grey downs the first shot, "I am. It's on Jac- Golden Guy's tab."
She swallows the quiver in her throat, "Where is everybody, then?"
"They went home. Where's Teddy?"
"She went home. Why are you still here?"
She downs the second shot, turning to face her (She never realised just how piercing her eyes are), "I don't know. Why're you?"
A familiar heat - she's scared she's going to light the stool ablaze, "I don't know."
Grey's pupils dilate ever so slightly.
Addison takes a deep breathe, "Your place or mine?"
"I have roommates."
"Mine it is."

She's grateful she owns fireproof sheets. She can't think much else as Grey is on top of her, grinding on Addison's thigh as her knee presses between Addison's legs. The sheet acts as a kind of barrier between them, Addison using any and all concentration to *not* ignite.
Grey kisses her again - firmly, with intent, "Stop it."
"Stop what?"
"Holding back."
Her head swims, "I don't want to hurt you." She breathes.
She nips her neck with her teeth, "You won't."
Addison flips her.

They lie next to each other in the afterglow, their breaths overlapping like countermelodies. She turns her head to look at Grey, the faint pink shadow of Addison's hands over her chest, her collarbone bruised.
Grey huffs, "I'm fine."
"I didn't say anything."
She turns to face Addison, laying on her side, "You didn't have to."
She had taken the mask off - for such a small change it feels so different. Somehow her eyes felt more vivid that way. Like deep blue pools Addison had to resist drowning in.
Addison turns fully, "I just don't-"
"Want to hurt me? You said that already."
Addison rolls onto her back, presses her palms into her eyes and sighs.
"Look, do you want a safe word or something?"
"This isn't going to happen again."
"We both know that's not true."
The silence is deafening.
"...Rocket."
"What?"
"The safe word."
She clicks her tongue, "Rocket it is."
Grey doesn't stay the night.

It becomes routine: they go to work, they fight, Grey runs headfirst into danger, Addison patches her up, they fight, they have horrendously inappropriate sex (usually at Addison's, occasionally in the office), they fight. The safe word is used four times, always by Addison. The first time, she's kissing Grey's neck as she digs into Addison's back with her nails, her head steaming in response. The second time, Grey's head is between her legs as Addison grips into her hair, her face burning. The third, Grey is whispering into her ear everything she's going to do to her as her fingers are wedged between Addison's legs, the sheets beginning to smoke. The fourth results in the two migrating from the bed to the shower.

She makes the mistake of not paying close attention to her reflection one morning, walking to her desk and setting Milo down, sinking into her chair with a groan.
Teddy turns to her, "Rough night?"
"Something like that." Addison sighs, leaning further back into her chair, swiveling slightly.
Teddy's eyes flicked to her collar, "Looks at it was a pretty good time, at least."
"Sorry?"
"You have a uh-" Teddy gestures around her collarbone, "A hickey."
She checks herself with her phone, frantically buttoning her shirt higher, "Shit. Thanks."
"No problem."
Here it comes.
Teddy rolls her chair closer to Addison's, "So, how long has *that* been going on?" She whispers conspiratorially.
"Teddy-"
"What? I'm trying to be supportive! I'm happy you're getting some."
Addison fiddles with her fingers, "It's complicated."
Teddy nods, "Complicated can be good. Great sex comes from complicated."
If only she knew.

"Look, we can talk about it later, okay? This isn't exactly a... safe for work conversation." Teddy chuckles, pretending to zip her lips.

Chapter 4: One more time & we can't see out the windows

Chapter Summary

Meredith: An interlude.

You were four years old when you learnt how to throw a punch. You remember Sal Scafarillo pushing you over and saying you couldn't play with them. He said something about cooties that you thought was stupid at the time (you still think it was stupid now - not to mention kinda sexist). You remember running a few feet over to the park bench where your father sat as you told him what happened, crying into his pant leg. He picked you up in his arms and walked you the short trip home.

When your mother came home that night - tired and bruised - he told her about it while he fetched an ice pack out of the freezer. You remember your mother sitting with you later that night, bandaids wrapped around her fingers and her bottom lip split open (it didn't scare you anymore - as far as you were concerned she just always looked a little messed up); she made it very clear that Sal Scafarillo shouldn't have done that to you. It wasn't fair that boy got to throw you around without consequence. She asked you if you wanted to do something about it; you were four years old and desperate for her affection - of course you said yes. When you punched Sal Scafarillo in the stomach the next day, your mother took you for ice cream and told you she was proud of you. Looking back, you think that might have been the only time she ever told you that.

You were five years old when your father left. You remember carefully tiptoeing from your room to the top of the stairs, the sounds of their voices increasing in volume the closer you stepped; you were supposed to be asleep. You never gave them any indication that you weren't, so as far as they were concerned you never heard their argument. You remember every word twenty-five years later.

"Ellis, you are going to *die* doing this! You are going to *die* in that *stupid costume*! I know that there is nothing I can say to stop you from doing it, but please Ellis - for God's sake think of *Meredith*! Think of *us*! Is your *ego* so important that you're willing to leave our daughter without a mother? Is it, Ellis?"

You don't know what your mother said in response. You realised you had heard something you were never supposed to hear and decided whatever came next would only hurt you further. You remember crying when you heard the front door slam shut. The next morning you kept waiting for your father to walk into the kitchen - you hoped he would apologise for oversleeping and give you your cereal with a kiss on the top of your head. You hoped your mother would follow him in with a smile on her face like nothing had happened the night before and what you heard was nothing but a bad dream. Your hopes were not fulfilled.

You were twelve the first time your mother was hospitalised. You remember Uncle Richard picking you up from school that day - you assumed your mother was just busy. You were proven wrong when he took you to the hospital. You had never seen your mother look that frail before, her arm in a cast with pins in her leg and stitches on her forehead. She acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. Your father's words haunted your mind and for the first time in a long time you found yourself terrified. You remember asking her if she was truly okay.

"Oh don't be ridiculous, Meredith. We're not ordinary, you & I."

You never asked again. You remember seeing the news coverage about your mother being injured in a fight with a villain the next morning and Paul Waxman saying something insensitive in first period English. You were suspended for two weeks when you punched him during lunch. When Richard picked you up, he froze. You had a black eye and bruised knuckles and for a moment you saw genuine fear in his eyes. You remember looking in the mirror when you got home and realising how uncanny the resemblance was between you and her. You didn't like the way it made you feel, being compared to her. You made it a point to avoid violence from then on.

You were fifteen when you saw photos of a woman made of fire flying through New York City. You had been around heroes your entire life - when you were younger and your mother didn't trust you to stay home alone, you stayed at Brave Brigade HQ until she was done with work. Superpowers and the people with them should have been old hat. But this time it wasn't. Something felt different about this one; this woman who could burst into flames and soar through the air on a whim. She destroyed everything she touched but always found a way to help people. She saved people from burning buildings and stopped robberies, she walked people home after they had a bad night or needed a guiding light.

They dubbed her Red Rocket and you were obsessed. You remember the fight you got into with your mother later that month. She saw you reading an article about Red Rocket saving a car that veered off the Brooklyn Bridge in a collision; no-one was harmed but the car's chassis ended up melted. Your mother scoffed. She believed in perfection; people with destructive powers shouldn't be heroes. You disagreed. You remember saying that perfection was unachievable, that if someone was able to do good things they had a moral obligation to do those things - to hell with the consequences (you still believe this, you tell it to yourself every time you come home bleeding and questioning why you even do what you do). The two of you agreed to disagree.

You were seventeen when you were accepted into Dartmouth. You remember your hands clamming up as you took the letter out of the mailbox and holding your breath when you opened the envelope. You remember the shaky laugh that escaped your mouth when you read the words 'congratulations' and 'accepted'. Your mother came home late that night slightly less beaten than usual and you remember the way her lips curved slightly upwards when you told her the news.

"Good." She said, "I did raise you to be extraordinary, after all. I expected nothing less from you, Meredith."

You remember the disappointment in the pit of your stomach when you realised that was all she had to say. When it came time to select your major, you gave pause. Your knee-jerk

reaction was Criminal Justice - it felt natural, like everything you had lived was leading up to you becoming Grey Ghost II. You changed your mind when you remembered the horror in Richard's eyes when he picked you up from school for fighting. You decided on Paramedicine instead.

You were nineteen when you got into a fight again. You remember going to a frat party with your roommate and losing track of her in less than twenty minutes. You remember doing tequila shots with a guy in your Human Anatomy & Physiology class. You remember wandering off to find the bathroom. You remember seeing a girl backed into a wall looking uncomfortable while a guy talked to her, his arm keeping her in place. You started trying to talk to the guy and distract him so the girl could get away. He told you to piss off as he tried to cop a feel of the girl. You threw the first punch.

The girl patched you up in the bathroom ten minutes later. Her name was Sadie. She thanked you with a smile and you felt like the luckiest girl in the world. You remember her running a thumb over your broken lip and holding your face in her hands; you remember kissing her, lips that tasted like lime and vodka. You woke up the next morning hungover, limbs tangled in her sheets as she slept soundly. Everything with her felt like a rush - your ears ringing, your hands shaking, your lips numb. She was a drug and you were addicted.

You were twenty-two when you graduated. You remember the phone call you had with your mother the previous night - she wouldn't be able to come to the ceremony because of some stakeout that you no longer care to remember the specifics of. You remember Sadie kissing you gently and leading you into your bed as her way of cheering you up. You remember getting a call that morning from Richard, who was going to come in your mother's stead. It wasn't the same - it was never the same any time she sent him to be there for you as a substitute but you didn't care anymore. After you threw your cap into the air he hugged you and said he was proud of you. You remember the way your eyes welled up with tears at the words as you cried into his shoulder. Sadie took a photo of the two of you with your terrible digital camera. You hated that photo - your eyes were still puffy and your hair looked matted but Richard loved it (he still keeps it framed on his desk, all these years later). You and Sadie moved in together after graduation - a shitty little apartment three blocks away from the hospital you both worked at. You loved every second of that life with her before it came crashing down.

You were twenty-three when you died for the first time. You & Sadie had been called into the aftermath of a domestic incident. You remember entering the house and seeing the blood on the floor. You remember an officer restraining the husband as you and Sadie put the wife onto a stretcher. You remember loading her into the back of the ambulance and closing the door. You remember the husband running out of the house with an officer's gun. You remember feeling the pain before hearing the gunshot.

You saw the officers tackle the husband to the ground. You smelt the smoke coming from your chest. You felt your blood stick to your uniform. You heard Sadie scream your name. You remember waking up in the hospital with the taste of iron in your mouth. The doctors said it was a miracle you were alive - the bullet went straight through and hit nothing vital. It was the easiest surgery they had ever performed. You couldn't shake the feeling that something was very, very wrong. You remember Sadie treating you differently after it

happened. It wasn't the same anymore - she acted like you were fragile, damaged goods. You bought tickets for Amsterdam in an attempt to reignite the passion. You broke up in your hotel room.

"No, Meredith, you don't understand, I watched you *die!* You - you shouldn't be alive right now. You lost too much blood - you didn't have a pulse! I don't know what happened... but I know what I saw, Meredith and it scared the fuck out of me. I'm sorry... I love you... but I can't do this."

Your father's words echoed in your ears on the flight back home.

You were twenty-five when your father died. You remember walking out of the hospital after handing in your letter of resignation (you couldn't stay there anymore - Sadie kept looking at you like you were seconds from exploding into pink mist and your breath caught in your throat every time you got called in for a GSW). You remember your phone ringing and seeing a number you didn't recognise with a Washington State phone number - you answered, assuming it was another one of your mother's burners.

It was instead your stepmother. She got your number from your mother - who had already RSVPed 'No' to his funeral as quickly as humanly possible. Your father had suffered a heart attack and passed away the previous week. Susan - you learnt her name was - asked you if you were interested in coming. She knew it had been decades since you saw him (it felt like longer, you could barely remember his face anymore) but he was your father and that fact was never going to change (no matter how much you wished it did). You opened your mouth to fabricate an excuse or simply muster up the courage to say no; instead, quiet mornings with a bowl of cereal in front of you as he ruffled your hair filled your memory and you found yourself telling Susan you would be there.

You met your sisters at the wake. Molly was seventeen and didn't talk to you besides a stilted introduction. Lexie was nineteen and desperate to know you - rambling nervously in between mouthfuls from the charcuterie board. You wanted to hate her - you were entitled to, after all; why did she get to have *your* father in her life when you didn't? No matter how hard you tried though, you couldn't bring yourself to. When you looked at her, all you could think about was the scared little girl who used to cry into her father's leg and get excited over chocolate-covered donuts. Could you have been like her if things were different? Were you sweet once? Despite your instinct to push her away, you let her in. You gave her a hug and tried to tell her a story about your father (it wasn't hard picking - you only had a few).

You remember Lexie's sobs as you watched your father being lowered into the ground. You remember Susan handing you the shovel to throw the last bit of soil over his coffin. You remember the bouquet of Marigolds you dropped in front of his headstone. You remember standing in front of his grave as everyone else left, your heart sinking as you finally realised you would never have a relationship with him again. You remember calling your mother for the first time in months and laughing when you heard her voicemail.

You were twenty-seven when Richard offered you a dispatcher job at SDN. You were slowly growing to hate New Hampshire; everything reminded you of Sadie or made the scar in the centre of your chest sting. You moved back to Seattle a month later. You remember calling Lexie before you flew in and practically being able to hear her smile as she offered to help

you move in. You remember smiling for the first time in weeks and being happy you had your sister in your life.

Lexie was helping you move in when the two of you discovered her powers. She had just finished helping you get the last box into your apartment. You remember offering to cook dinner as a pseudo-payment. Lexie laughed, insisting she help you. You remember a fire starting and Lexie hissing as the flames engulfed your poor chicken. You remember blinking and seeing the chicken wet and burnt, Lexie's hands covering her mouth in shock.

You remember you & Lexie's first day at SDN; she was crawling out of her skin with anxiety and you were thinking about the irony of your father's second daughter becoming a superhero - especially considering powers were a recessive gene.

You were twenty-eight when your mother got herself killed. Your shift had just ended when Richard rushed to your desk - he had gotten a call from the hospital. You remember how frail your mother looked. It was different from when you were twelve and she had just broken a leg, or when you were fourteen when she had lost her left kidney or even when you were twenty and she was in a medically-induced coma for two weeks. She was on her deathbed - something about internal bleeding in her heart and her lung collapsing. You remember the way your hands shook as the doctors told you she had signed an order to not resuscitate. You remember sitting by her bedside for hours, Richard leaving minutes before she woke up.

"Meredith..."
"I'm right here, Mom."
"Meredith, I want you to... continue."
"What?"
Her breathing was laboured, her eyes were half-shut, "Continue... what I started... as Grey Ghost."
"Mom-"
You remember the way she used the last of her strength to speak, "Meredith, this is my dying wish. I raised you to be an extraordinary human being, don't disappoint me by choosing to be so *ordinary*."
You remember the way she wheezed the word *ordinary* before the light vanished from her eyes.

You were freshly twenty-nine when you finally gathered the courage to walk into your mother's house for the first time in over a decade. It had been a month since the funeral and your mother's lawyer telling you in no uncertain terms that you were the sole benefactor of her estate. Your stomach churned when you thought about her dying wish. Everything was exactly as you remembered it and you found it deeply unsettling. You remember walking into the garage, seeing the suit laid out on the desk and your mother's motorcycle standing in the corner. You remember the grief burning the back of your throat as your eyes stung and your vision blurred. You remember putting on the suit for the first time. It was a perfect fit - you felt sick. When you put on the mask and looked at your reflection, you realised that it was always going to end this way and there was nothing you could have done to stop it. You stared into the mirror and your mother stared back at you. You remember the sound the glass made when you broke the mirror.

You were thirty the second time you died and realised something was very, very wrong with you. You remember leaving the SDN building after your shift, exhaustion seeping into your body as you mounted your mother's (you still haven't thought of any of this as yours yet) motorcycle. You remember going just a little too fast. You remember losing control. You remember flying off the bike headfirst. You remember hearing your skull crack open.

You woke up five hours later with a migraine and two black eyes. You remember your hair feeling sticky as you tore off your helmet, cringing as it pressed against the bruises behind your ears. You gasped for air as you felt your nose run, resisting the urge to throw up into the gutter. You picked yourself up off the ground - your hands shaking and muscles aching - and drove away.

You remember seeing the lights of the 7/11 and breathing a sigh of relief. You remember panicking as your brain took notice of the woman sitting down right where you were speeding to park, your body too slow to respond in time. She sat crumpled on the ground, absentmindedly licking popsicle fluids off her fingers with a despondent look in her eye. You were painfully reminded of the twenty-three year old that moped around the apartment after being shot in the chest. You remember your jaw falling to the floor when the woman burst into flames and flew into the air before you collided. You remember the way *Red Rocket* scolded you, bitterness in her tone. You can't remember what you said, all you can remember is the anger in your chest and the sadness in your throat - tears in your eyes as your heart pounded in your ears. You felt uncontrollably hysterical and hated every second of it.

You remember stumbling into the 7/11 asking to use the bathroom. The cashier took one look at you and squeaked out a "sure, over there.". Your looked awful; your scalp was coated in dried blood - *your blood* and the bruising somehow looked worse than it felt. You cautiously touched a finger to your scalp, expecting to come away with a soaked red hand. Instead you felt a mild soreness, your hand dry. Sadie's voice echoed in your ears like a song you couldn't get stuck out of your head and you ran out of the store in a panic.

You can't remember how you got to Lexie's doorstep, all you can remember is finally regaining feeling in your extremities when she opened the door and muttering, "I didn't know where to go." Before collapsing on her carpet. When you woke up the next morning - grateful you had the day off - you told her everything. Being shot, your miraculous recovery contradicting your/Sadie's accounts of what actually happened, and everything that led up to and followed your crash.

Lexie nodded along as she dug into a bag of mini peanut butter cups, eyes wide. When she froze the next mouthful on accident, she sighed and set the bag down on the coffee table.
"Meredith, do you think that maybe... you have powers?"
"I can't. That's impossible."
"We're sisters, Mer. If *I* have powers-"
"Half-sisters, technically. And it's recessive."
"It's the only explanation."
You swallowed a lump in your throat and ran your hands through your hair.
"But my mother-"
Lexie sat down next to you, "I know, Mer. And I'm sorry. But if everything you said is true - and I 100% believe you're telling the truth - it's the only thing that fits."

You sigh, your head in your hands, "No one can know, Lex."
"But-"
"I'm serious, Lexie. I don't want to know what would happen to me if people found out *I can't die*. Not to mention-" You gestured frantically to your crumpled, bloodied suit on her floor, "I'm already a legacy killer. I don't want *this* on my plate too."

Your phone buzzed from it's resting place on Lexie's couch, screen cracked after the previous night's events. It was a text from Izzie, "Mer, are you okay???? Where are you?"
You turned back to face your sister - you felt wracked with guilt, "Please, Lexie."
She sighed, "Alright, no one will know."
"No one will know."

Chapter 5: The summer will warm (but the winter will crave what is gone)

Chapter Summary

Arguments become cause for concern become mutual understanding

The weight feels heavier than it used to. She can't tell if it's because of disuse, muscle atrophy or the scarring over her joints making her skin ache as she presses the bar down to her chest. Addison tries to ignore the feeling of utter failure when she has to arch her back to rack a weight she used to warm up to. The disappointment lingers in the back of her throat like bile as she sits up on the bench, panting with her head in her hands.

She sighs into her palm, "You can do this, Addison." She whispers, "You're not defined by what happened to you - you are still just as strong and capable as you used to be."
Her fingers tremble as an ache starts to seep into her wrist; she tightens the brace around it with a huff, "Come on, Red." She scolds.

She collapses onto the bench, shoulder blades digging into the leather as her fingers wrap around the bar. The bottom portion of the rep is far less controlled than she'd like; the bar falling onto her chest rather than the intended slow sink. The scar over her elbow whines as she feels the skin being pulled taught, grunting as she pushes the weight off of her. Her arms are shaking when she locks out at the top; she sighs before lowering the bar again. Pushing the barbell back up is agonisingly slow - Addison grits her teeth as her shoulders begin to ache. The aching devolves into shaking at the halfway point, she scrunches her eyebrows with a huff. The weight refuses to move higher, settling back down onto Addison's sternum.

"Need help?"
She tilts her head back to see Grey - masked, but not in costume - standing behind her, hands hovering under the bar. Addison gives a small nod as she lifts the bar off of her, racking it.
"You shouldn't lift a weight you can't hit without a spotter."
She swallows, blinking back tears that make her feel even more pathetic than failing the set, "You're the last person who should be giving me a safety lecture, Grey." Addison spits.
Grey walks over to the squat rack, picking up a plate and loading it onto the bar. She scoffs, "Why? Because I'm a reckless asshole? You're a walking fireball."
Addison sighs, standing up to leave.
"Hey, wait!"
She turns. Grey is standing underneath the squat rack, bar pressed against her upper back, "Spot me?"

Grey does the set with ease, legs flexing as she moves the bar. It looks effortless when she does it - she didn't even need the spot, Addison thinks to herself. She grimaces, trying to

suppress the memory of the last time she tried to squat that weight (she couldn't move the same anymore - weights felt too heavy and her joints were too uncomfortable, the only saving grace when she failed the first rep was that she had the safeties at the right height).
Grey moves to rack the barbell - Addison reaches for her waist, "You can do one more."
"I really can't."
"You absolutely can."
Grey's neck flexes, "I'll fail."
"I'm literally spotting you right now - unless you just wanted to show off to me."
Grey laughs sourly, "Fine."
She doesn't fail the rep - not quite anyway. Addison has to step forward and support the barbell as it goes up to the rack, Grey's legs quivering. A small part of Addison takes pleasure in seeing her like that - even for just a moment.

Grey walks away from the squat rack, panting.
"Told you you could do one more."
Grey tilts her head up at her, glaring, "Shut up."
She grins predatorily, "At least say it like you mean it."
Grey tenses, "At least I can lift my weights."
It hits her like a gut punch. Her hair smokes and she feels immensely grateful that their shift is over and no one else is in the building. She lets the fire cover her face, hearing the tears in the corners of her eyes sizzle as they evaporate.
"Don't come over tonight."
"Wasn't planning on it."
"Good." Addison lashes, storming away.

Grey calls her that night anyway.
"What the hell do you wa-"
"I need your help."
Her voice is urgent - a thin layer of panic seeping through a tone of practiced calm under pressure. It's a tone she's practiced far too well.
"What do you need?"
"There's a fire. FD's not here and there are people stuck inside."
Addison's heart sinks, "Oh my God."
"I'm gonna send you my location and-" a muffled scream over the line, "I'm going in."
"What?"
"Get here when you can."
"Grey!"

The line goes dead. Addison runs, crawling out her window and taking off from the fire escape. Her heart pounds like a drum as she flies. The building is almost engulfed in flames; Grey is nowhere to be found. She dashes in, hands shaking and ears ringing. The smoke fills her lungs like an old friend and she holds back a coughing fit. She hears a yell coming from an apartment. Addison reaches for the handle - hot metal irritating her hand and refusing to budge. She steels herself before driving her heel next to the lock. It doesn't budge.
"Oh fuck it... Hey! Can you hear me?!"
She can't make out the words through the door but she definitely hears a voice.
"Get away from the door!"
The voice responds indistinguishably. She presses her palm against the door and blasts a

flame from her hand - white hot, concentrated, only for a moment. The door disintegrates, her hand hisses. She comes face-to-face with a little boy in a Red Rocket t-shirt.

She sinks to her knees, "Hey, are you hurt? Can you walk?"
The boy nods, smiling proudly and revealing the gap between his front teeth, "A little fire won't take *me* down." He proclaims (his eyes betray him - he's terrified).
Addison laughs, "Okay, we're gonna get out of here, alright? I've got you."
"Promise?"
"Promise."
He takes her hand as she leads him out of the building - a doorway bursts into flame in front of them. The boy screams.
She scrambles for her coat, "Hey, what's your name?"
"H-Henry."
"Okay, Henry. I need you to take this," She wraps the coat around his shoulders - he's so small he's drowning in it, "I need to hop on and hold on really tight, alright? Cover yourself fully."
He nods shyly, climbing onto her back.
"You ready?"
She feels a nod against her back.
"Okay, let's go."

She runs through the doorway; the fire nips at her nose, barely even a tickle - she laughs. Henry laughs with her. When she exits the building onto the street, sirens fill her ears as she sees a crying mother and a horde of firefighters scrambling towards the hydrant. She breathes a sigh of relief and sets Henry down.
She crouches in front of him, "There - we're safe now. You did a really good job back there Henry."
"You think so?"
"I know so. You were very brave."
The woman sprints over to her, tears coating her face.
"Mommy!"
"Henry, oh my God!" She hugs him, "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"
He still has Addison's coat around his shoulders - it's blackened with soot, "I'm okay, Mommy. Red Rocket saved me!" He exclaims.
Addison stammers, "Oh, I'm not a superhero I just-"
The woman looks at Addison, "I don't care who you are just - thank you. Thank you for saving my son."
The woman wraps Addison in a hug - she hesitates for a moment before reciprocating. After Henry returns Addison's coat she hears footsteps behind her.

Grey stumbles out of the building with an infant in her arms - she hands the child off to the firefighter that's run towards them, coughing up a lung.
"You came." She wheezes (she's out of costume - she looks so fragile).
Addison shrugs, "You called."
They're ushered over to the ambulance nearby - Grey presses the oxygen mask into her face, breathing deeply and hacking loudly between breaths. Addison takes two performative breaths before gesticulating with it.

"What were you thinking, Grey? You could've gotten yourself *killed*." Addison hisses.
She narrows her eyes, her breath fogging up the oxygen mask, "What was I thinking? Addison, the building was *on fire*, people were *stuck inside*."
"And you're not a firefighter! FD was on it's way-"
"They weren't here."
"You called me-"
"*You* weren't here either. And you're *not* a firefighter either, you're not even *a hero* anymore."
Addison grits her teeth, "At least I'm not going to be *cooked alive* if I go in there. Why do you always have to rush headfirst into danger when everybody else has the sense to avoid it?"
"People were going to die! You think I went in there for kicks?"
"No, I think you're careless! Do you have a death wish or do you just think you're invincible?"
Grey glares at her like she's just been slapped, "This is what we *do*, Addison, we *save people*! If you can do good things, you have a responsibility to do those things-"
"But you're not equipped for this! What's gonna happen the next time you put yourself in this situation and you're not so lucky? What happens when you get yourself killed, Grey? Is it family tradition or something?"
"You don't get to talk about-"
"You are going to *die* if you keep doing this! You're going to die in that suit because you walk on the line between life and death and wait for a strong gust to push you one way or another!"

Grey's eyes widen and she swallows. She throws the mask to the floor of the ambulance, "So what, I'm supposed to just pussy out the second I get hurt? Is that what you want? Am I supposed to clock in for my fifteen minutes of fame and spend the rest of my life as some - some washed-up dispatcher?"
"That was not my-"
"Of course it was! You *chose* this. You chose *yourself*, Addison, and you have to live with that. Not me - I made my choice."
A weight sinks down on Addison's chest as she watches Grey storm off. She shakes her head and leaves, the smoke still burning the back of her throat.

She's back at the 7/11. She stares at the Slurpee machine, watching the mixtures churn and rotate. She decides on cherry. She reaches a hand to grab a cup and her fingers hit something warm; she turns her head and sees the last person she wants to.
Grey groans, Addison sighs. They fill their cups in silence and walk out the sliding doors after paying. Grey's hair is slightly darker, pieces of ash stuck to her scalp. She starts to walk over to her motorcycle.

"I was a band kid."
Grey pauses, turning around to face her, "What?"
Addison steps towards her, "Violin. I played in the school band. An orchestra, technically, I - I went to prep school. I was pretty good. Our conductor said I had 'a gift'."
"I missed the part where that's-"
"I'm not fireproof. Not fully. I - I can go pretty hot but after a certain threshold I burn. I burnt myself a lot. I used to stay lit for hours at a time - sometimes whole days would go by and I'd be lit from waking up to falling asleep. I didn't know any better. So every time I stayed lit for hours, shooting even hotter fire out of my hands I would - chip away at myself. Little by little. I didn't realise how bad it really was until I ended up in the hospital and now... I can't

play the violin anymore."
"Addison-"

"I *loved* being Red Rocket, Grey. Red Rocket was *my life*. I didn't hide my identity because I had people to protect as Addison, I hid my identity because I didn't want to *be* Addison. Red Rocket was strong and capable and fearless and Addison was... Addison was a band geek with braces and a lisp. Addison spent her prom night talking to Skippy Gold about the Star Wars prequels. You said it's a good thing that I didn't die in the suit but... it's hard to agree with you sometimes. A lot of times, actually. All I want to do is fly without thinking about how many nerve endings I've burnt away or how much of my skin is covered in scar tissue but I *can't*. I'm stuck - I'm stuck as Addison and I haven't *been* Addison for almost twenty years!"

Her hand are shaking, part of her Slurpee has spilt onto the asphalt as she's been gesturing. Grey stays in place.
"Sometimes, when I can't fall asleep, I think about what could've happened if I *didn't* make it to the hospital in time, or if I had burnt a little hotter - if that villain had been just a little stronger or if I was just a little weaker and got thrown headfirst into the Empire State Building and... it comforts me. Because at least then I wouldn't have to figure out what happens next. Because there wouldn't *be* a next."

Grey sets her Slurpee down next to her feet and steps into Addison's personal space; she brings her hands up, cradling Addison's face and wiping away tears she didn't realise had come out.
"Red Rocket is overrated. She's an ideal - indestructible and perfect and never changing. But Addison... I like Addison more. Addison's *real*. Addison is the one who went into that building and saved that boy. Addison is the one who keeps patching me up even when she's sick of it. Addison is the one who thinks cherry is an acceptable Slurpee flavour and I think she's great. Because Red Rocket may be strong and fearless but Addison is kind and brave. Red Rocket walks through fire because she knows it won't effect her, *Addison* walks through fire because it's the right thing to do."
"Grey-"

"I used to be a paramedic. One night, we get called into a neighbourhood because the police had just arrested a man for beating his wife... I've still never seen as much blood. We were loading her into the ambulance and I when I turned around... the husband had stolen an officer's gun."
She lifts the hem of her shirt to her collarbone, exposing the small scar Addison had always been too scared to ask about. She takes Addison's free hand, pressing it into her chest over the bullet wound.
"I woke up in the hospital. My surgical team said it was a miracle because the bullet missed my heart by less than a centimetre. It's been seven years and I still hate the cold because it gives me chest pain and I feel like I lost something that night that I can never get back."

It's not an apology, it's not an excuse, it's not an explanation. It's understanding. In another life, maybe Addison wouldn't care. In a more perfect world, where she still felt in control she wouldn't accept it, storming away again. But in this world, she stays. In this world, Addison presses her forehead against Grey's and they spend what feels like an eternity listening to

each other's breathing. Their Slurpees are half-melted and neither of them mind. When they step away from each other, Addison offers her a small smile and Grey nods. She picks up her Slurpee, raises it slightly in toast, and walks away.
"Addison, wait."
She stops.
"Do you want a ride home?"
"There's only one helmet."
"That's not what I asked."

Grey wears the helmet. Addison sits behind her, chest against Grey's back and arms wrapped around her waist. The wind flows through her hair as the streetlights of Seattle blur around them. For the first time in a long time, Addison feels at ease.

Chapter 6: I'm tuning into you (you're turning me on)

Chapter Summary

Addison and the team bond. Addison also learns to open up a little bit more.

The elevator ride up to Addison's apartment is silent. Grey spins her keys in one hand and loosely clutches her helmet in another. Addison scratches an unburnt section of her forearm (a rarity these days) rhythmically, moving her fingers in the other direction when she feels a scar border. The bell chimes and the doors part in front of them. They walk down the hall wordlessly before stopping at Addison's door.

"Well this is me... thanks for the ride home."
Grey clears her throat, "Yeah, all good, I - I figured you probably didn't want to fly home after... our talk."
Addison smiles, giving Grey a small nod.
Grey's gaze flicks down to her lips - she swallows, "I should - I should get goi-"
"Do you want to come in?"
Grey's eyes widen - the ghost of a smile leaves her face as quickly as it arrives, "It's getting pretty late."
"Your hair is still covered in-" she gestures vaguely, "-from the fire."
"I have a shower, Addison."
"So do I. And you have roommates who'll probably want to know why you look like you just got into a fight with a lump of charcoal."
Grey snorts, "I guess you might have a good point there."
"I have a lot of those."

Addison opens the door, Grey follows her in.
"Just know that I am fully taking advantage of you for your shower. No other reason." Grey whispers as Addison closes the door, breath tickling the back of her neck.
"Sure. No other reason."
She hears a faint meow and the sound of her bathroom door opening. Grey clears her throat; Addison turns to see her dropping her henley (red, covered in soot) onto the tiled floor next to the shower, "You coming?"
"I thought you were just taking advantage of me for my shower."
"I am. It's just more efficient if we shower together."
Addison laughs, "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you just wanted to see me naked."
"But you know better?"
Addison enters the bathroom, shutting the door behind her and leaning into Grey, lips hovering ever so slightly over her ear, "I do. I *know* that you just want to see me naked."

Grey's lips taste like smoke and blue raspberry. She hums in contentment as Addison's hands press themselves into the small of her back, gently massaging tense, lithe muscles. Grey

breaks the kiss and Addison finds herself whining, tilting her head to see Grey caressing her shoulder with her lips.
"You know I can't feel that, right?"
Grey pauses, facing Addison again, her brows raised, "Nothing?"
"Mostly just pressure. Delicate touches? Not so much." She faintly recalls an incident where she nicked herself on a sharp corner and hadn't realised until she bled through her shirt.
Grey's gaze softens, cupping Addison's face.
"I'm fine, really. Just go back to kissing me."
Grey laughs, kissing her before pulling away again, eyes fixed on her shoulder.
"What did I just-"
She moans when Grey's teeth dig into her skin, cold hands tracing small circles into Addison's sides. She smiles, fingers pressing deeper into a knot in Grey's back.

Steam has fogged the mirror completely when they finish, Grey's hair smelling of Addison's aloe vera shampoo. Her eyes trail around the curves of Grey's body: solid, lean back muscles marked by the silhouette of Addison's hands and angry red lines where her nails dug, the scar in the centre of her torso a pale violet. Addison keeps her gaze away from the mirror behind Grey - dread pooling in her gut at the thought of her damaged, feeble reflection.
Grey gently grabs a towel from the rack, wrapping it around her shoulders, "Like what you see?"
"I *was* enjoying the view, until you so rudely obscured it."
Grey chuckles, turning around with another towel in hand, offering it Addison.
"I'm okay, don't worry." Addison assures, lighting up before quickly extinguishing herself - a faint hiss filling the room as dry, shiny red hair falls back down to Addison's shoulders, steam lingering around her figure.
Grey smirks, "Neat party trick."
"Hey, these powers have to be good for *something* these days."

Grey steps closer, just on the boundary of Addison's personal space, "I can think of a few other things they're good for."
A grin, and a single step forward - chests nearly touching, "Really? Like what?"
Grey's hands stroke her shoulders, trailing down her arms before grabbing her hands, Addison smiles, leaning into the touch, "Like..." A thumb strokes her palm - Grey's brows furrow, "Jesus Christ, your hands are flaky."
"I light myself on fire, Grey. Not exactly good for your skin."
She rolls her eyes, "You should probably invest in like - a lotion or something."
"I do, it's under the sink."
Grey's brows rise - she turns and steps away, crouching down to open the sink doors.
"What are you doing?"
Grey stands with the red bottle in hand, flicking open the lid and squeezing a generous portion into her open palm, "Making up for being a dick today. And paying you back for all those times you stitch me up."
A smile takes over Addison's face, she nods, "Alright."

Grey is thorough rubbing the lotion into Addison's body, cool fingers massaging the crevices of dry, burnt skin ("My back? Really, Grey?" "What? You can't reach it." "My mobility isn't *that* bad." "No, it is." "Shut up." "Buy my silence."). Addison finds herself leaning into the touch on instinct, a sigh escaping her lips.

"Am I boring you?"
"No, actually. Your hands are cool. It's... nice. Refreshing."
Grey hums, "You're pretty warm yourself. It's soothing."
"Soothing? Really? First time I've heard that about a resting temp of 104."
"You're a human space heater, Red. Take the compliment."
Addison cranes her neck to make eye contact, "Red?"
"I'm Grey, you're Red. It works."
A laugh, "Or I could - I don't know - call you *your name*."
A simper, "But where's the fun in that?"
Addison doesn't find it remotely funny - she smiles anyway; if only just to see the shine in Grey's eyes for a little bit longer.

Grey borrows an outfit from Addison's closet - damp hair falling onto the shoulders of a shirt with sleeves she fills out far too well.
"Thanks for the shower. And the sex."
Addison smirks, "I'm still kicking you out, you really shouldn't thank me."
"I've never slept over, you kicking me out isn't really surprising."
Addison considers taking it back: grabbing Grey by the wrist and dragging her back into bed with her - strong, cool arms wrapped around her fragile, scorched figure. She recalls the way she woke up to her smoke alarm going off the previous week and decides against it.
"Yeah, I just - I tend to..." She lights her hand ablaze as she gestures, putting herself out with the flick of the wrist, "In my sleep. It's not fun."
"Seriously? You think you're gonna wake up to the smell of burnt flesh while we're spooning or something?"
"We don't *spoon* but... yeah."
"You're being neurotic."
"I'm being realistic. I'm a hazard."
"You really aren't dangerous."
"Tell that to my nerve damage."
Grey shrugs, "Alright, I get it. I'll leave."
Addison nods gratefully.

She's dying in her dream. Or that's what it feels like, at least. A fire blazes everywhere she sees, sucking the air out of her lungs to fuel the inferno she's drowning in; she opens her mouth to scream and all that comes out is a whimper. In the distance she sees a woman with long, blonde hair, back turned to her. She reaches forwards only for the woman to dissolve into ashes. Red falls to her knees, the floor collapsing underneath her as she falls into the abyss, her body burning away.

When Addison wakes up she's lit - a hole scorched into her shirt and Milo hissing on the opposite side of the room. She coughs in response to the smoke in the room, quickly extinguishing herself before she opens the window, swatting at the air.
Addison sighs, "This is exactly why I wanted her to leave." She accepted that she was a danger to others a long time ago; she doesn't understand how Grey can't see it, too.
Milo purrs, curling up in the now-blackened spot of the bed in the shape of Addison's silhouette.
"*And* I forgot the Diazepam." She hadn't needed it in years, the daily activities of a superhero tiring her body to the point where her mind was more concerned with resting than with

torturing her sleeping psyche. The prescription was new, retirement bringing an incendiary restlessness into Addison's sleep cycle for the first time since medical school.
Milo opens his eyes to stare at her.
"Don't look at me like that."
A huff, Milo turning his head to look away from her.
"And now I'm a crazy lady talking to my cat. Great."

She arrives at the office ten minutes early, the hum of her car engine filling her ears as she parks. She slides her glasses to the top of her head and cringes at the way her vision blurs, unable to distinguish the borders of the giant SDN sign in front of the building. She sighs, resting her forehead against the steering wheel. She sits in the car motionless, breathing deeply to steady herself. She hears a whoosh, looking up to see Golden Guy lowering himself onto the ground, cape fluttering in the wind and Addison finds herself fantasising about how she used to soar through Times Square; her daydream is ruined when she recalls the way her ribs cracked when she was thrown into a billboard.

She's grateful that the team is talkative. It makes for a good distraction - she'll take anything over being alone with her thoughts today.
"Have you guys ever noticed the Seattle vibe kinda... sucks?" Hard Head asks.
"It's the rain. Seasonal depression." Brainwave remarks.
"I love the rain." Virtue comments.
"I hate the rain." Brightburn remarks.
"But you're from Chehalis." Glacier observes.
"Yeah, but it's hard to light a fire."
"That sounds like a you problem." Golden Guy jokes.
"Well according to my shrink I have 'severe pyromania' and I'm 'lucky I have a job that lets me release my impulses' so it's technically-"
Addison clears her throat, "Guys. Respectfully, shut up and let's do our jobs."
Grey chuckles, "Who twisted your panties this morning?"
Addison rolls her eyes.

The shift goes by slowly: A middle school talent show in need of judges (Hard Head and Brightburn, who both come back to the office covered in stickers), a broken down ice cream truck (Glacier refreezes a kid's snow cone, seeming very proud of herself), a car pileup (Brainwave to clear the wreckage, Grey Ghost to do triage), an explosion at the refinery (Golden Guy & Phantom, who stink up the building with the smell of gasoline) and a jumper (Richard seriously wasn't kidding about Virtue being a good crisis negotiator).

She watches the steam from her mug waft through the air of the break room, taking a sip and smiling when the coffee hits her tongue (for anyone else it would be scalding, for Addison it's just barely warm).
Brightburn and Hard Head stand next to the vending machine, chattering.
"Maybe she cools things down with her mouth. Do we know anyone like that? Freezing kisses?" Brightburn asks.
Hard Head shrugs, "Frostbite? But she's a blonde and like, really jacked."
Brightburn clears her throat, "Hey Addison - did you recently lose like, twenty pounds of muscle?"
Fifteen from a medically-induced coma, actually, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Addison asks, taking another sip from her mug.
"There's a pool on which superhero you used to be. Winner gets seventy-three dollars, twenty-five cents and a Chilli's gift card." Hard Head supplies
Addison raises an eyebrow, "That's an extremely specific number."
Brightburn bats her eyelashes, "And that extremely specific number could be ours if you just gave us a tiny little hint. Please?"

She stares down into the brown abyss of her mug, considering it. She decides on honesty, even if it's a misdirection.
"Sure. These-" She uses her free hand to gesture to her forearm, sleeve rolled back to her elbow and displaying the angry, burnt skin, "are actually *very* ironic."
Brightburn furrows her eyebrows as Hard Head tilts his head, "That's... so vague."
Addison shrugs, walking to the door, "Well it's all you get. You'll just have to earn your seventy-three dollars and twenty-five cents some other way. I'll let you know if I *work* out how. Get it? Because we're at-"
A Twinkie flies at Addison head and her empty hand moves to catch it on instinct; the scar tissue near her elbow whining at the sudden extension.
"Good reflexes." Brightburn notes.
"This is mine now!" Addison huffs over her shoulder as she leaves the room.

Teddy's at her desk picking apart her food with a fork. Brainwave leans against the cubicle, laughing. Teddy looks lighter as she and Brainwave talk, happier. It's nice to see Teddy look so unburdened when she can remember the way she grieved Henry like it was yesterday.
Addison sinks into her chair with a sigh, setting the mug down on her desk and fumbling with the plastic wrapping.
"Since when do you eat Twinkies?" Teddy teases, leaning back in her chair with a smirk.
Brainwave snorts and leaves, giving Teddy's shoulder a brief squeeze.
"Brightburn threw it at me to test my reflexes - apparently there's a betting pool on my identity."
Teddy laughs, "Wait, really?"
"Really. You didn't tell Brainwave? Give her the easy win?"
"She never mentioned it. I doubt she'd want me to tell her, anyway. It spoils the fun."
"There's 'fun' in uncovering my secret identity?"
A shrug, "A little. It's almost like a puzzle."
"Except it's my personal life."
Teddy sighs, "But it's not anymore. Red Rocket is just as dead and buried as Blonde Blur is. We're just Addison and Teddy now, and that's okay. We don't have to be these big, strong, infallible heroes anymore. We can just be... us."
Her mind wanders to the previous night when Grey had cradled her face as she told her she prefers Addison to Red Rocket. She nods, "Thanks, Teddy."
"Anytime."

The rest of shift goes by rhythmically. She goes through the motions, turning over the last twenty-four hours in her mind on repeat: the pride that bloomed in her chest for the first time in months at the fire, the trepidation in her throat as she poured her heart out in the parking lot holding a Slurpee, the repulsion in her gut when the scent of burnt cotton filled her bedroom, the-
"Who's up for drinks?" Hard Head suggests.

Right. Her shift had ended. She had almost forgotten until the team started talking over each other on comms.
"Joe's?" Virtue asks.
"Obviously."
Addison sighs as she leans back in her chair, moving to take off her headset, "Good shift, guys. See you tomorr-"
"What's the matter? Too cool to get a drink with us?" Grey rasps.
"Yeah come on. We know you don't have plans." Brainwave teases.
"Relax. It'll be fun, we promise." Brightburn swears.
She laughs, bowing her head for her hair to cover her eyes despite no one looking at her (a habit formed in empty, cold Connecticut halls where she was never allowed to be vulnerable that she can't quite seem to break), "Yeah, okay. I'll meet you guys there."
She's deafened by the overlapping sounds of cheering. A smile creeps up on her face.

She can't help but fiddle with her sleeves as she walks into the bar - shame pooling in the back of her throat like bile at the thought of masked eyes looking from her to the SDN logo and feeling pity for her. Because now she's broken. Now she can't do the one thing she was good for - the one thing she was *made for*. Defective. Useless. She can't tell if she's relieved or disappointed when she realises no one is looking - nobody cares.

She spots Glacier & Virtue first - posted up near the dartboard. She realises Phantom is also with them when he says hello.
"You made it!"
"I did. By popular demand."
Virtue squints, gaze focused just above Addison's head, Glacier smiles, "Brightburn and Golden Guy are settling a bet with a guy who owes her money, Brainwave and Hard head are playing pool? I think? And Grey..." She pauses, head turning to scan the room, "Is over there."
Addison turns her head to the direction Glacier points at, seeing Grey at the bar.
Addison smiles, "I'll go say hello."

Golden Guy gives her a small nod when Addison approaches the table he's sat at, arms linked with a man in blue spandex. Brightburn grins with a wave ("Changed your mind on that hint?" "Absolutely not. But it's cute that you tried."). Brainwave and Hard Head ask her to settle an argument ("Is it cheating if you use your powers to manipulate the cue?" "Of course it is! Use your hands like everybody else!" "Oh please, you broke two with those mittens of yours last time we were here. It's a miracle Joe didn't ban you.").

Grey is trying and failing to catch the attention of the bartender, Addison walks over and stands besides her - Grey sighs dramatically.
"Buy me a drink, will you?"
"Well, isn't that cozy? What will HR think?" Addison jokes.
"I think HR would be more interested in how I lost my sense of taste last week."
"Really? Not about the bruise on my shoulder that matches your dental records?"
Grey laughs, "Hey, not my fault that you-"
A voice Addison can't quite place interrupts her, "Hey, Grey! I got a bone to pick with you!"

Grey looks over Addison's shoulder and groans, "Ugh, what do *you* want?"
Addison turns - the man in front of her is clad in a tacky, black costume with an obnoxious fire pattern stitched into it. She rolls her eyes.
He has a deep scowl set in his face, "In case you haven't noticed, this is a *superhero bar*-"
Grey's tone is impassive, "Wow, are you a superhero, Molotov? I didn't realise. I just thought you did shitty Guy Fieri cosplay for fun."
Addison snorts, "Molotov? Like the Premier of the Soviet Union?" She jokes.
Molotov seethes, "No, dumbass, like the cocktail." His eyes flick down to the warped skin of her forearms and grins predatorily, "I'm a fire hazard, doll. And from the looks of it your worst nightmare."
She swallows the sparks in the back of her throat that threaten to leak out of her mouth as a fury pools in her hands, knuckles aching to ignite.

Molotov turns back to Grey, "This is a hero bar, pipsqueak. You know, for *real*, actual superheroes. Not powerless crybabies who coast by on mommy's legacy and their pet geeks."
Addison's thoughts are invaded by the impulse to light him on fire. She presses her tongue into the roof of her mouth, fist clenched.
Grey stills - unnaturally so - gone is her usual sway or lean, replaced by a statuesque immobility and a clenched jaw, "Leave her out of this."
"Or what? You're gonna go crying to mommy? Oh wait a minute, you can't! Because she's-"
Addison claps sharply, hoping no one noticed the way her fingers sparked at the contact, "Okay, look! It's been a long day, we're all just looking to have a good time. How about I buy you a drink? Forget about... whatever this is supposed to be."
Molotov laughs, "You hitting on me, sweetheart? Cause I gotta warn ya, I'm *way* too hot for somebody like you to handle."
She really hopes her eyes aren't glowing right now, "Just - leave her alone." She utters, voice an octave higher than it should be.
Joe furrows his brows, sliding a whiskey over to the end of the bar at the woman in a cape standing behind Addison.
Molotov sneers, "Oh, no can do baby. You see, your friend here happens to be the biggest poser this side of the Space Needle and I just can't *stand* her-"
He doesn't get to finish his sentence. Addison interrupts him when she lights the glass of whiskey at the bar with her fingers and throws it in his face.

"You ever have a flaming shot before? Or is that too hot for you to handle?" Addison bites, breath blazing.
He swings at her - it's far too easy to dodge. The same can't be said for the headbutt she gets from the woman in the cape.
She reels, gums bleeding, "God, did I miss this." She laughs, guarding her face with her hands as a familiar adrenaline consumes her anxiety.
Molotov shakes his now eyebrow-less head, charging at Addison - Grey sends him tumbling with a kick. Another of Molotov's friends starts yelling obscenities before his mouth is quickly frozen shut and he trips over an invisible barrier. Addison turns to see Glacier give her an anxious nod, Brainwave raising her drink in toast. Virtue taps him on the shoulder and he crumples to the floor. Molotov raises his hands to shoot at Addison, jaw dropping when nothing happens - Brightburn laughs when Hard Head pins him to the ground. The woman in the cape punches her square in the jaw - Addison slaps her, hearing a sharp hiss as she tries to

shake off the punch. She moves to kick Addison until her leg is grabbed by a now visible Phantom, Golden Guy standing on the other side of her.

And then everything goes to shit. She can't remember at what point between the obscenities, multicoloured energy blasts and blood spatter it does, but they all end up kicked out of the bar, bruised and bloodied - Molotov & Friends aren't far behind them, looking far worse for wear. The cool night air tickles her sore, split lip as they limp over to the ever-convenient 7/11. The cashier looks at them wide-eyed, a faint squeak escaping his throat. They all split up, grumbling as they buy their items and sitting outside in the parking lot.

Addison hisses at the cold pressed against her quickly bruising eye.
Grey withdraws the sealed lemonade popsicle from Addison's cheekbone, smirking, "Come on, don't be a baby."
"I'm fine, Grey. I've had way worse."
"That's not a brag."
"Never said it was."
"You phrased it like one."
Addison laughs, hissing at the sharp pain in her cheekbones, "It's just a bruise, seriously. *You*, on the other hand, look like shit."
Grey shrugs, the bandages Addison wrapped around her usually gloved knuckles already stained red, "This is my normal, relax."

Phantom groans as Glacier splints his nose, "Hey, can you guys like, give us a warning next time you start a fight? I wanted another drink."
Brightburn laughs, taking a bite of her steaming hot dog, "It was with *Molotov*, who cares?"
"I've been wanting to kick that guy's ass since day one." Hard Head adds, stealing a piece of liquorice from Virtue's bag ("Hey!).
Addison nods, "He is... a piece of work."
Brainwave hums, "Understatement of the century. Takes balls to pick a fight with him though, guy's tough."
Golden Guy sips on an Arizona Ice Tea, "Yeah, what kind of hero were you? Sentinel? Those were some crazy moves."
"Yeah, seriously. I mean, we all now this Addison chick's a front." Hard Head comments.
The team look at Addison expectantly - she tilts her head, sighing at the way the hair in her face filters out the outside world, letting her collect her thoughts. She looks down at her bruised, burnt knuckles, opening and closing her hands slowly - her gaze flicks over to Grey, who simply nods.

"You're right. 'Addison' is... a mask. One I haven't worn in a long time. She's the one who sits behind the desk, biding her time and dreaming of the day she can get back in the fight - even though she never will. Because the real me... I have no idea who she even is. I thought I did. But now I don't know. I didn't tell you because I think I just wanted to... bury it all. But the difference between this team getting by and this team really succeeding is trust - and trust is based on truth. So the truth is... I'm Red Rocket. Or well, I *used* to be Red Rocket."
She notices the way Brightburn & Hard Head's jaws drop, gaze flitting to Addison's hands and back up to her face. Golden Guy and Brainwave's eyebrows shoot to the top of their foreheads but otherwise stay silent. Virtue and Glacier's eyes widen the way Addison

imagines they would when putting together the last pieces of a puzzle. Phantom chokes on his drink.

"So... does anybody have something they'd like to say?"
Grey shifts in her peripheral, "Yeah..." She peels off the domino mask, wincing as the adhesive stretches the skin around her eyes, "I'm Meredith."
Addison smiles, "It's nice to meet you, Meredith."
Glacier clears her throat, "Lexie."
"Alex."
"Cristina."
"I'm Jackson."
"Izzie."
"My name's April."
"George."

Cristina laughs, rubbing her eyes, "So what now, dance it out?"
Alex scoffs, tearing off his cowl and running hands through his hair, "Please no. Think I'm concussed."
"At least your nose isn't broken." George grumbles.
"George, you phase through stuff - how did that even happen?" Izzie teases.
The rest of the team chatter away, leaving Addison and Meredith in their own little bubble three feet away.
"What happened to Grey & Red?" Addison whispers.
Meredith smiles, "Maybe sometimes I don't want to just be 'Grey'."
"Sometimes I just want to be Red."
"I could always scream it when we're in the throes, if you want."
A giggle, "No, I should... I should probably get used to just being 'Addison' now."
Grey moves her hand closer to Addison's, interlocking their pinkies.
"Good. I like Addison."
"I think I'm starting to like Addison, too."

Chapter 7: But we're dancing to the rhythm of the plastic anthem

Chapter Summary

Consequences? To our actions?

Dr Turner is silent until Addison sits down, squinting slightly.
She clears her throat, "Okay, my colour correction isn't *that* bad."
"I was looking at your lip, actually." Dr Turner corrects.
Embarrassment. She brushes a thumb against it, fingertip touching the thick scab, "Right."
Dr Turner pouts, "Are you okay, Addison?"
She has to remind herself that lying is counter-intuitive to the point of therapy. She deflects instead, "You should see the other guy."
"You got into a fight?"
She rubs a thumb over the bruises on her knuckles thinly concealed by foundation that doesn't quite match, "Did you know Washington's a mutual combat state? New York & Connecticut aren't, which doesn't surprise me but... Washington. Of all places."
"You got into a fight." Dr Turner sighs.
"I... Yeah. I did."

Dr Turner smiles sympathetically - Addison knows on a basic, intellectual level that it's out of empathy and respect but she can't help but see pity while her throat burns, "What happened?"
"The team wanted to get drinks after work. Some guy was giving Mered- sorry, Grey - a hard time. Things escalated."
"Did he attack her?"
"No, I uh... threw a drink in his face. That I had lit. He was fireproof but his eyebrows sure weren't."
"Addison-"
"I know. I - I tried not to at first. I just wanted him to go away and leave her alone. I didn't care when he was insulting *me* but when he started saying things about her I-"
"You saw red."
Addison chuckles, "Something like that."

Dr Turner leans forward, "So you felt the need to protect Grey? Why?"
Addison sighs, "I don't know, I think... I think it's just that she's better than me."
"A better hero?"
"A better person. She spends every day running into burning buildings and taking bullets for other people. She puts herself at risk constantly and as much as it annoys me I can't help but... admire it. She doesn't have to do this - by all rights she probably shouldn't; she doesn't have powers. But she does it anyway. Because she's selfless."
"Do you think *you're* a good person?"
She swallows, "...I lit a glass of whiskey on fire and threw it in a man's face, Dr Turner."

"He was fireproof. You knew that he was fireproof."
Addison looks down at her hands; she traces the scars over her fingers. She doesn't respond.

"Addison, you dedicated the last fifteen years of your life to helping others in danger. You've done a lot of good."
She's also paid the hospital bills of every villain she's ever burned because she used to lie awake at night with an agonising weight in her chest. Except that last one, anyway. She burnt herself just as much.
Dr Turner sighs, massaging her temples, "Okay - sore spot, I get it... Do you think that your feelings about Grey might be influenced by your sexual relationship?"
Addison scoffs, "What? No! I'm a professional, I am perfectly capable of separating business and pleasure."
"But you didn't at the bar?"
Addison sighs, "...It wasn't a good day."
"Why not?"
She fiddles in her seat, scratching the back of her neck, "I just - I didn't sleep well. I lit the bed on fire. Again."
"We can reevaluate your prescription, Addison but I think that we should really try to get to the root cause of your sleeping problems."
"But that's the thing, I *don't* really have sleeping problems, I sleep fine. I go to bed, I fall asleep, I wake up... well rested enough. I think? The issue is every other night I'm having nightmares about the smell of burning flesh and I wake up to my smoke alarm going off."
Too deep, make a joke, "Maybe I should get sprinklers installed."

Dr Turner nods slowly, "What was this most recent nightmare about?"
Addison shrugs, "They're... they're all the same, what do you want from me? I'm on fire, I can't breathe- wait, no. This one was different."
"How so?"
"There was someone else there. In the distance. I tried to reach for her but I was stuck and she disintegrated before I could even touch her."
"Her?"
Addison nods.
"Who was it? The woman in your nightmare?"
She thinks of hands. The manicured fingers that used to smack hers when she said something "unladylike", the palms that used to roam her body, extinguishing the fire inside her and the knuckles she's wrapped and dressed more times than she can count. She tries to picture the woman in her dream again, her imagination making her turn around.
Addison shrugs, "I'm not sure. I know that I knew her but I couldn't see her face."

Dr Turner sighs, nodding slowly, "Have you ever tried image rehearsal therapy before, Addison?"
"Can't say that I have."
Dr Turner's eyes flick upwards to the clock Addison knows hangs on the wall above her head. She sees Dr Turner begin to pout.
Dr Turner stands to grab a document off her desk, "Image rehearsal therapy is a technique we use to reduce the frequency or intensity of nightmares-" She sits back down on the chair opposite Addison, handing her the document. "You write down the nightmare you keep getting in as much detail as possible and then we work together to rewrite them."

"Rewrite them?"
"Give them a different, more anticlimactic ending. One that won't put you into such a heightened state that you use your powers."
Addison nods.
"Look, normally this first part - writing down the sensory details of the nightmare - would be done with me as well. However, we're almost out of time and I trust you to be able to do this on your own. If you want to save it for next week, though-"
"No! I'm sorry - uh - no. It's fine. I can do it. Don't worry."
Dr Turner presses her lips together in a thin line. She nods, "Alright. But if you start triggering yourself stop, okay?"
Addison hums. She looks behind her as the clock ticks to the end of the hour. She gets up and walks to the door.
"Bye, Dr Turner."
"Be kind to yourself, Addison."

Addison looks down as she walks through the offices of Bayside Wellness Group, trying her hardest to blur the names and titles painted on glass doors out of her peripheral vision. She fails, reading *Jake Reilly, M.D. F.A.C.O.G.* next to a closing door and feeling her heart tighten in a vice. She clenches scarred fists made for violence and curses herself for ever being deluded enough into thinking those hands could heal instead. She slams the door of her car shut when she enters it, hitting her forehead against the steering wheel and choking back the sobs that try to wrack her chest.

When she arrives at the office it's suspiciously quiet. She gingerly sits at her desk, shooting Teddy a questioning look. Teddy shrugs.
Heavy, rhythmic footsteps approach as a black-clad figure enters her peripheral, "Hey, Monty!"
She looks up to meet flaming orange eyes with scorched, patchy brows, Addison tenses.
Molotov laughs, "Relax, you burnt off my fuckin' eyebrows. Game recognises game, you maniac. We're all good, I'll steer clear of you and your little girlfriend."
"She's not my girl-"
"I don't care what you call each other while you're scissoring, Monty. Anyway, boss man wants to see you."
"What?"
Molotov waves a hand dismissively, sashaying away, "Good luck. You're gonna need it."

Richard is glaring at her when she opens the door, hands clasped together over his desk as his brows are furrowed. His eyes flick between Addison and a piece of paper on his desk.
"What did you do?"
She rubs at her eyes and realises her mistake when she sees the foundation that has smudged onto her fingertips - she stutters, "I-"
"Addison." Richard warns.
Shame. For a moment she feels small. Fragile. She's back to being the girl who looked over the edge and wondered what was on the other side. She looks into Richard's unblinking eyes and feels an unnatural chill work its way through her body as she finds herself overwhelmed with lethargy, sinking into the chair.
"Can I stop or are you going to set my desk on fire?" He asks - eyebrows raised in concern.
"You know how I feel when you use your powers, Richard." She wheezes.

He breaks eye contact. Supernatural heat re-enters her chest and Addison regains sensation in her extremities. Richard sighs, he turns the document for Addison to read.

*INCIDENT 249-F: Reported by Ben Warren (Human Resources).
At a third-party location (Joe's Bar) after work, I witnessed the tail end of a brawl between the B-Team (excluding Dispatcher Hahn) and the G-Team (Including Dispatcher Montgomery) before all parties were removed from the premises. Eye-witness accounts at the scene seemed to be divided in identifying the instigator. For recorded injuries related to this incident, see Report 249-F-II.

Richard clears his throat, "You and the team are all suspended with-"
"What? No!"
"Addison-"
"No, Richard - you can't do this. The team - they did nothing wrong!"
"Grey got a boxer's fracture, Phantom broke his nose, Brightburn-"
She stands - she feels her blood begin to boil before she looks into his eyes and her body goes cold again. She shakes her head in defiance.
"They were *defending me*, Richard! The only reason they were even remotely involved was because I was about to get my ass handed to me and everyone could see it!"

Richard blinks - his eyes widen as Addison's fingertips regain warmth, "You started it."
Addison is silent.
"Addison."
No response.
"What were you thinking, Addie?! You started a fight in public with multiple heroes that work for us! You could've seriously injured someone, it's a miracle you're not being charged with battery!"
"Richard, I-"
"Sit down, Addison."
She acquiesces. She thinks of cocktail shakers and the way her father's scotch would burn her throat when he wasn't looking.
Richard sighs, "What is going on with you?"
"What do you mean?"
"This! Arguing with your team over calls, setting tables on fire because you can't keep your cool, starting fights, the bitterness, the anger! It's like you've become a different person, Addison."

A gut-punch. She inhales slowly before speaking in the attempt to centre herself. It doesn't work, "Richard, you saved my life and I'll always be grateful for that but because you did I'm here. Where my life has slipped through my fingers like sand and I barely have a reason to get up in the morning because I'm thirty-seven, alone and burnt to shit with nothing to show for it! I'm a *failure*, Richard, and *you're* the reason I even tried. I get that Antibody wasn't all you had so I can't expect you to understand but without Red Rocket I am *nothing*, Richard. I stay awake at night because I don't know what my favourite colour is and I barely feel like a real person!"

Richard softens, "Okay. You've had a hard time. I get it. But you assaulted a man."
"Richard-"

"Take a week. Relax - figure out what your favourite colour is, try to feel more like a real person, take care of yourself. Teddy will lead the team while you're gone."
"What?"
"Officially, you're suspended with pay pending investigation. Unofficially, I'm making you practice self-care for once in your life."
She's too stunned to speak. Richard sighs, standing up from the desk and walking around to the other side, leaning against the edge of the desk. He reaches out a hand. Addison takes it and her body is suddenly sweeping him into a crushing embrace against her own will. She's distantly aware that her tears have fallen onto Richard's sleeve.
"You're going to be alright, Addie; It may not feel like that for a while, but eventually, you will be okay."
She nods wordlessly into his shoulder.

She buys a bottle of red wine on the way back to her apartment (the cashier raises an eyebrow as he looks between her uniform, her lip and the clock on the wall) and enters the threshold wordlessly. Milo rubs himself against her leg when she shuts the door, purring even further once she scratches behind his ear. A feeling she can only hope is comfort fills her chest, dulling the dread in the back of her mind. She stares at the ceiling sitting in a chair that she really should've gotten rid of after her third lower back injury as Red Rocket; Milo is curled up in her lap. Addison's right hand strokes his fur while her left is shoved into her breast pocket, the worksheet Dr Turner had given her that morning folded inside. She takes it out, unfolding it and reading the text at the top of the page.

In the space provided below, please describe the distressing dream in as many details as possible. Include sensory descriptions (sights, smells, sounds, tastes, etc.). Please note the feelings, images, and thoughts associated in this dream, being as specific as possible. Note when the dream begins and when it ends.

She feels her eyes unfocus as she stares at the empty lines filling the rest of the sheet. She sighs and tosses it over to the bed, only for it to circle in the air and land with a flop an arm's length away.

She waits until dark to open the bottle, filling the glass to the brim. She spills wine over her SDN shirt when she tries to take a sip. She sighs, unbuttoning the shirt in a huff and looking down at the drops of merlot stuck to her scarred chest. Addison frowns.

She hears a knock at the door and finds herself saying "Just a minute!" as she scrambles to her closet, shrugging on her Yale hoodie (she's not sure why she still has it - maybe because it reminds her of better days). When she opens the door, she's faced with Meredith, Cristina and Teddy. Meredith is holding a potted plant with her left hand, the right covered in a cast; Teddy grips a small desk lamp in the shape of a human heart while Cristina hangs onto a bottle of very expensive looking scotch.

"Wow, you look even shittier than you did last night." Meredith quips; Addison notes the casual clothes they all wear.
"Uh... What are you guys doing here? What's this?" Addison asks - the voice in the back of her head that sounds far too much like her mother screaming at her to be polite and let her guests in as she moves to the side of the doorway.

Teddy clears her throat, "We're here to save the day! Or, well, the night. Maybe just the mood, actually."

Meredith crosses the threshold first; she looks around in a mock first impression and turns to Addison, "You know bare walls are a sign of depression, right?"
Addison laughs, "You should meet my four hundred dollar an hour shrink. Psychoanalyse me together based on how I am in bed." she whispers.
Meredith laughs as Teddy and Cristina enter the threshold, "Where do you want this?" Teddy asks, gesturing with the lamp.
Addison shrugs, "Anywhere is fine... but why do you have a lamp?"
"It's a housewarming gift. For your housewarming party, Addison." Meredith supplies, gingerly placing the aloe plant onto the counter.
"But I didn't plan a housewarming party."
"It's a surprise party." Cristina says.
"I hate surprise parties." Addison insists.
Meredith shrugs, "Well it's the least we can do since you put your ass on the line to not get us suspended... Thanks, by the way."
Addison smiles, "I just told the truth."

"Well, we appreciate it. Or at least I do. And there's also a matter of like, seventy-five bucks or whatever."
Alex, Izzie and George phase through the door - George has his hands on their shoulders as Izzie holds a blanket; Alex clutches a throw pillow in one hand and a bottle of tequila in the other, "Seventy-three, Mer."
"Plus twenty-five cents."
"And the Chili's gift card!"
Addison laughs, lighting her hand with the snap of her fingers, "Is this enough proof?"
The five of them exchange glances, shrugging and nodding before sharing a collective, "Yeah."
Addison feels the inky abyss of her thoughts disappear, replaced instead by... warmth. Joy.
"Great."

As much as she's embarrassed to admit it, Addison enjoys the party. Jackson, April and Lexie arrive slightly later, depositing their gifts (A decorative vase with a bouquet of flowers already inside, a cherry-scented candle and a cactus) on the counter next to Meredith's. Milo takes a sniff of the aloe plant before hissing and jumping away. Someone starts playing music through a speaker with her phone and Addison finds her empty living room (she still hasn't unpacked fully - it's been four months) turned into a dance floor. She leans against the wall, nursing a glass of wine that, to her mild disgust, is beginning to warm in her hands. She sees Teddy and Cristina swaying to the song, hands on each other's hips and smiling; the song changes and Cristina whoops in excitement, beckoning the others over to "Dance it out!". Meredith sidles next to Addison.

"Wanna dance?" Meredith asks.
"I'm not a very good dancer." Addison lies (more of a half-truth - she hasn't since Mrs Sobel's Dance Academy - she wonders if she can still shuffle the way she used to).
Meredith shrugs, gesturing with her cast-covered hand, "Neither am I. At least you have two functioning hands."

Addison frowns, "I'm sorry about that."
"Don't be. It was totally worth it."
The *"For you."* goes unspoken.
A smile, "Alright, fine. Let's dance it out."
Meredith grins, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her over to the dance floor; she wraps her arms around the back of Addison's neck as Addison's hands move to cradle her waist, thumbs gently brushing along the fabric of her pants. Meredith laughs and Addison feels like her heart is going to explode in her chest. She's used to being burned, but instead she finds herself melting.

Chapter 8: A little light (a little less wasted)

Chapter Summary

Rocket by Forbes Montgomery: A triptych.

Columbia University, 2011
Two days after a kitchen fire - terrified, alone.

She's curled in the bathtub, knees against her chest and shivering. The water was freezing. She looked at the pile of ice at the other end of the tub, melting rapidly in the water before her very eyes. She slowly raised a shaking, pruned hand and held it in front of her face. Part of her expected it to ignite again, for her fingers to become indistinguishable from each other - bathed in a bright, hot, uncontrollable flame that made her feel like she had found the key to a part of herself she didn't even know was locked away. It didn't, her fingers numb from the cold, trembling as she stares at them. She rose out of the bathtub, the air hitting her wet skin and sending a shiver down her spine. The fire inside of her wanted to unleash itself again - fear and trepidation morphed into passion (or is it frustration? She can't tell). She buried her face in her hands, taking slow, deep breaths. She needed to stay calm. She feared what would happen if she couldn't.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, hands gripping the sink. She looked at bloodshot eyes and gangly limbs and couldn't help but feel pathetic. Awkward. Twenty-two and she still didn't feel like she'd truly grown into herself - something Bizzy never failed to remind her of when they saw each other every blue moon. She could almost hear the scathing remarks that would be made at her current appearance - lanky and disheveled as she was.

She tried to remember how she got it to stop the first time. She had turned on the stove, watching the pilot light smother itself in blue flame before she was thrown back in a blast, orange embers dancing off her skin and a crackling in her ears. She panicked, opening her mouth to scream only for fire to tickle her throat. She rolled, crying until she found herself put out - not a mark on her. After the fire department left, she saw the scorch marks on the wall and wondered how she had been so lucky. She felt something tickle her hand only to look down and see it ablaze. She could barely feel it. The days following were spent either panicking (which made her ignite), curled up into a sobbing, inconsolable ball of limbs (which made her ignite), or actively trying to extinguish herself (to varying degrees of success).

She paced in front of her bed, stopping abruptly when she smelt smoke and looked down to see her footprints scorched into the rug. She frowned. In a huff she dressed - conscious to

wear things she didn't care about. She grabbed a duffel bag in haste and ran out the door, slamming it behind her.

The court was empty - convenient for her, at least. She found the nearest machine and turned it on - a ball shooting out as she walked over to her side of the net - she watched it bounce once, twice, before hitting the chain-link fence and rolling away in the other direction. She twisted the racket in her hand and braced herself. The ball shot out of the machine, flying straight for her over the net; she let it bounce once before she swung and watched the ball soar through the air. She formed a rhythm - forehand, wait, adjust, backhand, wait, adjust, volley. Her thoughts stopped - no words, no feelings, no fire, just her and the ball.

The frustration bloomed when she missed a shot, legs aching from exhaustion and failing to catch up to the ball in time; the ball hit the edge of her racket and bounced off feebly - she huffed. Her next strokes were harder - more swing put behind them, beating the balls senseless as opposed to simply hitting them. Frustration blossomed into anger when her volley hit the net - her shoulder whining in fatigue. She hit the next ball with a backhand - a sharp crack echoing throughout the hall.

Her jaw dropped when a fireball flew through the air towards the end of the court - Rebound Ace hissing in contact as smoke rose to the ceiling; she looked down to see the racket melting in her hands. She dropped it in a panic and rushed to retrieve the fire extinguisher next to the exit. She felt her body heat up in response to her anxiety as she fumbled to unhook it from the wall, metal going soft in her hands. She pulled the pin and sprayed it experimentally in front of her, the nozzle releasing a short stream of foam; she dashed over to the burning ball and squeezed the handles together, feeling them bend underneath her fingers as foam poured onto the court.

When she let go, the extinguisher continued to spray, handles melted together with indents in the shape of her fingers. Her breathing quickened in a panic and fire consumed her vision as her skin prickled. She took the nozzle to her left hand and the pain was enough to put her out. She patted down her smoking shirt with a huff, holes scorched into the sleeves. Her hand itched - she looked down to see a pink rash forming underneath a layer of burning foam. The extinguisher was still spraying - discarded onto the ground, surrounded by a puddle of foam next to the melted racket that had begun to stick to the ground. She pulled on the supple metal once, twice, before giving up, running hands over her face and groaning. The court reeked of burnt plastic.

The walk back to her apartment was miserable - rain drenched her, the back of her hand twitching as droplets fell onto irritated skin. She shambled through the hallway, pausing in her tracks when she saw the man she'd been avoiding standing right outside her door.
"Mark." She breathed, shoving her hands into the pockets of the hoodie she had hastily thrown over her charred top.
He turned around, lighting up at the mere sight of her - she noted the box of chocolates in his hands. His hair was wet and the shoulders of his jacket looked equally soaked.
"Red, hey! I thought - I thought you were home already." He laughed, "I was about to knock, actually."
"What are you doing here?"
"I just uh - wanted to check in on you? I heard about the fire and wanted to see if everything

was okay. I brought chocolates! Your favourites." He smiled.
She felt her heart warm, terrified it was going to set ablaze. "That's... sweet of you."
"I mean, I'd be a pretty bad boyfriend if I didn't check up on you, Red. This feels like the bare minimum."
"Well, thanks anyway."
He smiled, "Of course. You're worth it."
Her heart fluttered, she smirked performatively, "You bet your ass I am." She teased (she didn't believe that - still doesn't, but he didn't need to know).

He handed her the box of chocolates - she reached to accept them and realised her mistake only once it was too late.
"Holy fuck, what happened?" He asked, gently cradling her hand.
His fingers felt frigid against her, she pulled back, "It's nothing."
"That looks really bad."
"It's just allergies."
"I know we're not doctors yet but we both know that's not a normal allergic reaction - you should get that looked at."
"It's just from the gas leak - it'll go away on its own."
He raised an eyebrow, "Is this allergies or the gas leak?"
Her throat burned, she spoke through clenched teeth for fear that fire would escape her mouth. "Just drop it, Mark. Seriously."
"You're *hurt*, Addison."
Why couldn't he leave it alone? Why does he have to care about her *so much*? Why did he have to care *at all*? An instinctual, primal anger warmed her body. She felt overwhelmed with the impulse to light the building on fire. She paled, shoving her hands back into her pockets and gripping them together to try and prevent them from igniting.
"I'm *fine*." She seethed, teeth clenched together.
His gaze softened - pity. She didn't know if she wanted to cry in his arms or set them both ablaze and it horrified her.

"Red, what's going on?"
She studied his features - kind, gentle eyes looking over her with concern. Soft, strong hands outstretched, ready to cradle her in his arms. She wondered if they'd still cradle her after conflagration.
She started speaking before she could even think it through. "Mark - you're being really sweet about all of this and I appreciate that a lot. But-"
"Addison, what are-"
"I don't think this is going to work out."
His face fell, her heart shattered, "What?"
"It's not you, seriously. It's me." She's the problem, not him. He doesn't destroy everything he touches.
"You're - are you breaking up with me?"
More so giving him a chance to escape in one piece, before she had the chance to hurt him. She almost burnt down a tennis court, she paled at the thought of what she could do to *a person*.
"...I'm sorry, Mark."
He opened his mouth, only to close it again. He nodded slowly, handing her the chocolates with a frown.

He turned the corner and she let out the breath she's been holding. She rushed to her door, scrambling with the handle and her keys. She fell through the threshold with a sob, curling up on the floor and kicking the door shut behind her. In an instant she was ablaze, clothes burning and chocolates exploding into a puddle of ash and cocoa. Smoke filled her lungs as her body charred the floorboards and she coughed, chest heaving. She shambled to the bathroom - fire filling her vision, the hiss of evaporating tears filling her ears. She turned on the shower and collapsed to her knees, weeping as she lit up and was put out just as quickly over and over again.
"What's happening to me?"

Times Square, 2018
Thirty minutes late for dinner - apology flowers in hand.

She walked as fast as she could towards the elevator before the doors close, heels clicking impatiently with every step. If it didn't ruin her outfit she'd fly to the restaurant but something told her they couldn't just crack open a window and let her in. She hopped into the empty car, doors sliding closed just after she entered and grateful her skirt hadn't gotten caught again (last time it happened she had to burn that part off). She checked her reflection as she ascended through the floors - eyes roaming around her body, searching for imperfections but finding none. Hair? Styled immaculately (with her fingers as she jumped out of her costume, hands five degrees short of igniting). Dress? Hanging perfectly off her body - displaying capable, strong muscles that had done so much good for the world with a neckline low enough to excite (and just barely covering the brand new bruises from that night's... activities). Bizzy would clutch her pearls at the sight of her. She ran her tongue over her top set of teeth for fear that her lipstick had stained them and found herself tapping her foot frenetically, lighting the fingers of her free hand and snapping them. The release helped, but the need to look composed was better and that's exactly what she got when the doors opened, revealing the restaurant. She strode over to the maître d', who looked at her expectantly.

"Reservation for Montgomery?"
He nodded, "Right this way, miss."
He led her to their usual table. Savvy sat restlessly in her chair, fiddling with a half-eaten breadstick. He left them be. Red smiled, placing the bouquet she'd been clinging onto (sunflowers - they stood out in the restaurant, but they were Savvy's favourites) into the vase and leaning over to give Savvy a kiss on the cheek before sitting.
"Hope I didn't keep you long." Red joked (34 minutes and 17 seconds to be exact, but who's counting anyway?).
Savvy smiled - small, tired, like she'd had that exact conversation a thousand times (because she had) and already knew how it was going to end (because she did). "Work again?"
The euphemism had become so familiar she sometimes pretended it referred to something else - maybe in another life Dr Montgomery would have kept her waiting instead of Red Rocket. "You know how crazy it gets."
Savvy laughed bitterly, "Don't I know it."
"Sav..."
"It's *our anniversary*, Addie. You couldn't show up on time just this once?"
Red grimaced, lips forming a small, straight line. "I got side-tracked, I'm sorry."

Savvy sighed before reaching a gloved hand across the table, stroking her palm, "I know. You always are. I just... no, forget it."
"What?"
"No, I shouldn't have brought it up, I'm sorry. Let's just have a nice dinner? Please?"
An olive branch. She took it, "Of course."

They ordered, they ate, Savvy complimented her dress, Red complimented her hair. For a moment they felt like a normal couple. They paid separately, Savvy held onto her bicep as they walked to the elevator, the doors closed with only them inside and they waited in silence.
Savvy cleared her throat, "So what was it this time?"
"What?"
"Let me guess - jewellery store robbery? A mugging?"
"Sav, it's not-"
"I know, I know, you're *a superhero*, this is your *job*, you save people but I just can't help but feel like you always choose-"
"There was a girl on a roof."
Savvy paled, "Oh God, Addie, I'm sorry..."
"She wasn't sure if she wanted to jump, she said she just... wanted to look over the edge. See the cars drive past. Think about it, but not follow through, I guess. It was all very..."
Savvy nodded.
"We just talked. For a while, actually. I walked her home and told her I'd check on her in a few days if she wanted. She did, so now I have a standing appointment for next week. I lost track of time pretty easily. But I'm here now and I'm sorry. How about we head back to mine, have some fun? The night's still young."

Savvy laughed, wrapping her arms around the back of Red's neck, "How do you always know what to say?"
"Just lucky, I guess."
Savvy kissed her - a wave of relaxation hit her in an instant, cooling off the heat in her chest to something chillier, calmer. The pervasive warmth was gone and for a moment she felt calm, not plagued by the constant passion and frustration that sat in her gut with the fire (that still does).
They broke the kiss and Red smiled, burning warmth returning to her body. "So you *want* to get me all hot and bothered?"
"Right now I do, yeah."
A chuckle (strained - she thinks she might've cracked a rib earlier - or was it later that night? She can't remember, it all blurs together these days), "Maybe I should fly us then, cut down on traffic."
Savvy pouted, shaking her head slightly, "But where's the fun in that?"
"Well, I have very strong arms and a great view of Bryant Park with your name on it. What do you say?"
Savvy's arms detangled from their position behind Red's neck, moving to stroke her shoulders, "I say... right now I want to go walk home with Addison. Not Red Rocket."
The elevator doors opened with a ding, Red shrugged, "Whatever you want."

They took the walk, strolling through bustling Manhattan streets - the night breeze tickled their necks. Savvy drew her coat closer to herself, leaning further into Red's warm, naked

arm. The sound of sirens caught up to them as two cars sped past, a gunshot ringing out in the street; Red looked to Savvy apologetically.
"Sav, I am so sorry but I-"
"No, I get it. Just - please be safe, okay? For me?"
Red pecked her on the mouth lightly, "I always am." She lied (she never was, but she figured what Savvy didn't know wouldn't hurt her. Oh, how stupid she was.).
She flagged down a cab, watching Savvy get in and the car drive away before she took off, dress disintegrating in the wind as she sped after the chasing cars.

Stopping the car wasn't hard - all it took was a carefully aimed flick of flaming fingers at a tyre. The car skidded against the road, sliding to a sudden halt. A man fell out of the driver's seat, gun in hand.
"Wow, they really just let anybody drive these days, huh?" Red quipped.
He scrambled to point his gun at her, only for him to drop it in a hiss of pain, cradling the hand Red shot a small flame at.
"Put it under the sink when you get the chance; you should be fine in a few-"
She felt it before she heard it. White hot pain shot through her side, the hiss of her skin cauterising itself filled her ears. She rubbed a hand over the fresh, wrinkled scar, surroundings almost bubbling and turned to face the man behind her pointing his gun shakily at her figure. She wasn't sure what was stronger: the fear in her gut at how terrified he seemed, or the fury in her chest at his audacity to take a shot at her. Anger won out as she slowly sank to the ground, the fire around her burning the paint off the street and pouring out of her mouth with every breath. He moved to pull the trigger and she blasted a fireball at his gun, sending him flying backwards. The flames died down to a simmer as she collected herself and the police approached the man, lifting him up and cuffing him. Red winced when she saw the way his shirt was melted to his skin.
"Take him to Presbyterian, tell them this was me, they'll uh - they know what to do."
One of the officers nodded, "Thanks for you help."
"I'm just doing my job." Red shrugged.
"Well, you're damn good at it. We're lucky to have somebody like you around."
The praise knocked her off guard - it was so refreshing, the way Red Rocket just needed to *show up*. Meanwhile, Addison always seems to be fucking up.
She's relieved the fire covered her expression beyond recognition, "Have a good night, officers." She said, taking off into the air.

She landed on her balcony with a dull thud, extinguishing her head and hands to knock on the glass sliding door. Savvy turned to see her, unlocking and opening it. Red smiled, stumbling through the threshold and putting herself out.
Savvy frowned, "You burnt the dress."
"I burnt the dress."
Savvy - hands bare now - cradled her face, pressing a kiss into cooling lips. "That's a shame, I liked the way you looked in it."
She was always so clearheaded when they were like this together: Savvy putting out the fire inside of her, bringing her back down to Earth. She felt like her old self: calmer, happier, the inferno of rage in her heart dulled into an ember. It helped to know she'd never hurt her (physically, at least).
Red smirked, "I can always get a new one - your dress, on the other hand, I'd *much prefer* to see on the floor."

Savvy laughed, guiding one of Red's hands to the zipper on the back, "Knock yourself out." Red kissed her, hands slowly dragging the zip down, guiding the fabric off of Savvy's shoulders. The dress fell to the floor in a pile of black satin. Red's hands settled on the small of Savvy's back. Savvy moaned, running her fingertips along the back of Red's neck, tracing her spine before gripping her hips. Red hissed in pain.

Savvy jolted away and the heat returned. "What's wrong? Are you okay, did I-"
Her eyes scanned Red's body, settling on the dark, dead tissue over her hip. She clenched her jaw. "Addie, what happened?"
Red stepped forward, gripping onto Savvy's fingers and squeezing reassuringly, "It's nothing, Sav. Don't worry about it."
"You're hurt."
"I'm fine."
Savvy's gaze hardened, "What happened, Addison?"
She sighed, "It's just - there were two of them and I didn't realise they both had guns-"
"You got *shot*?"
"It was barely a graze! I'm fine, I self-cauterise. I can't even feel it, it looks *way worse* than it actually is." She lied.

Savvy ripped her hands away, horrified. She took two steps back, pacing next to the coffee table. Red's eyes flicked to the crumpled costume in the corner of the room, beckoning her to put it on and leave.
"You got shot. You got shot after I explicitly asked you to *be safe*, Addie, to *be careful* and you didn't listen."
"Of course I listened, Sav! But I can't guarantee my safety when I'm dealing with-"
"You can! You can because you are *choosing* to put yourself in danger every single day, Addison! You are *choosing* this for yourself and I can't for the life of me understand why. Do you have a death wish or do you just think you're invincible?"
Red's jaw twitched - heat threatened to spill into her mouth. She swallowed, "I never asked for this, Sav. I never *wanted* any of this! But I have a responsibility to-"
"Don't you dare fucking start with that responsibility bullshit, Addison, don't even think about it! What? Should I go running into gunfights just because *I* have powers, too?"
"Don't put words in my mouth."
"Do you think I like this, Addie? Do you think I look forward to the late nights and the apology flowers and the 'Duty calls' speech before you go flying off into God knows what?"

Red stiffened, Savvy continued.
"What's going to happen when your luck runs out, Addie? What happens when you get yourself killed?"
"Sav, I'm not-"
"No, Addie you are going to *die* in that *stupid* costume! Someone is going to *kill you*! And for what? To prove to your parents that you're worth something? That you're not a fuck up?"
"They have nothing to do with-"
"I've seen it all before, Addison! I'm a fucking *legacy*, I know what I'm talking about! *My mother* died doing this! So did my aunt! My cousin - she's thirty-seven and she lost her arm!"

Red swallowed the lump in her throat, "It's about choices, Sav. It's about playing with the cards you're dealt and like it or not, this is my hand."

"If your cards are so bad, then why are you still playing, Addie? Why can't you take your life into your own hands? Why can't you choose *yourself*? Why can't you choose *me*? Choose us?"
Red rubbed at itchy, wet eyes. "It's more complicated than that, Sav."
Savvy broke the distance again, grabbing Red's hands - the fire disappeared, leaving only devastation in its wake. "Why? Why can't you just walk away?"
Red shrugged - her mouth salty, "If I don't do it, who will? Besides, fireballs don't tend to have great job prospects." She laughed bitterly.
Savvy's gaze softened, hands reaching to hold Red's face, she can't remember if she found the forced eye contact comforting or deeply unsettling at the time.
"Addie..."
"Sav..."
"I'm sorry."
"What?"
"I'm sorry that your parents fucked you up and I'm sorry you got kicked out of med school and I'm sorry that I love you and *hate* Red Rocket because I want you to be happy and alive and for us to be together."
"Sav what do you-"
"There's so much I wanna do with you, Addie. I wanna sky dive and learn Italian and go to San Tropez to lie topless on the beach together. I want *a future* with you, *a life*! I want us to become this crazy old wrinkled couple that argues all the time; I want that future for us like I want *air*. Don't you want that too? A chance to grow old together?"
Red's vision blurred, she blinked tears out of her eyes.
Sav smiled wistfully, "I love you, Addie. But I don't think you can even stand *yourself*. Because if you did you wouldn't be spending all that time in this - this suit of fiery armour that you surround yourself with. Because it's going to *kill you*, Addison. It's not protection, it's an *iron maiden*."
Red sighed, "Sav, I love you-"
"But you love being Red Rocket more, don't you?"
"I didn't say that."
"You're not denying it."
Silence.

Sav laughed, a single tear streaming down her face. She pulled Red in for a kiss before breaking it off, walking over to the crumpled dress and shrugging it back on.
"What are you doing?"
"I can't be here right now."
"So that's it? You're walking away?"
Savvy turned back to her, arms fiddling behind her back, "I'm taking a step back, I need - I need room to breathe. We said a lot of things tonight, we *did* a lot of things and I think we need to sort ourselves out." She huffed, turning her back to Red, "Can you zip me?"
"Of course."
Red slowly dragged the zipper upwards, lightly patting Savvy on the back. Savvy turned around.
"Thanks."
"Don't mention it."
She walked to the door, twisting the handle and looking over her shoulder.
"Goodnight, Addie. Happy three years."

"Happy three years, Sav."
Savvy dumped her over brunch two days later.

Mount Sinai Hospital, 2026
One hour after waking from a coma - limbs aching from disuse, voice hoarse from intubation.

The knock on the door startled her; she assumed it was another nurse asking her if she was sure she didn't want morphine for the twenty-thousandth time while covered head to toe in fireproof PPE. She was very, very wrong. Derek stood in the doorway flabbergasted. His hair was wet and the neck of his costume peeked out of his jacket. It made Addison's blood boil to see how flippantly he wore it. She always thought he took the job for granted, but this was just salt in the wound.
"Oh my God, you're awake!" He cheered, dashing over to the side of her bed and falling to his knees.
He couldn't see her like this - it was unbecoming. She had to get him out. "What are you doing here?"
"Visiting you? I've been visiting you everyday when I'm having my lunch but oh my God you're awake!"
He leaned down to plant a gentle kiss on her bandaged knuckles. "I was so worried." He whispered, smiling. She felt sick.
"Derek..."
He looked up at her innocently, grinning from ear to ear.
"I *just* woke up."
"I know, isn't it great?"
"No, Derek I mean... I'm in a lot of pain right now and I think I just... need some space."
She was more numb than in pain and she didn't want to be alone, but she'd rather sit with her loneliness and the stench of Xeroform than be with Derek.
He frowned, nodding slowly. "I'll come back in an hour or two?"
She gritted her teeth, melancholy seeping into her bones, "How about tomorrow instead?"
"Oh."
"I just - you're being really sweet but it's just - it's a lot to process."
He nodded, "It's okay. I'll come back tomorrow. I'll take some pictures of Milo to show you, too. I think he misses you."
"You've been with Milo?"
He shrugged, "You love that cat to death, Addie. Someone has to take care of him."
"Thanks, Derek."
He smiled, "Of course." He said, opening the door and walking out, shutting it gently behind him. She sighed, relief coursing through her.

The door opened again and a man wearing a lab coat and thick fireman's gloves strutted into the room, eyes focused downward at the chart in his hands.
"Alright Red, glad to have you back. I'm Dr Sloan from Plastic Surgery. Just wanted to ask you a few questions now that-"
Addison's voice came out like a croak. "Mark?"
He looked up to meet her gaze, fingers going slack as the chart in his hands fell to the floor.
He looked older: his beard was more filled in and his hair had started to grey; there were

wrinkles on his face Addison had never seen before, a physical reminder of how long it had truly been.

"Addison. Hey." He breathed.
"Been a while."
"Yeah. Last I heard from you was med school. You dropped out."
It's the first thing she thinks about when she wakes up in the morning. "It's a long story."
"Right... Uh, look I'm real sorry to have barged in like this, I'm supposed to be going over to see Red Rocket of all people and I must've got the wrong room by mistake so I'm gonna-"
"You're in the right room."
His eyes widened, face morphing further as the seconds passed and the realisation hit him. "*You're* Red Rocket?"
Addison shrugged, wincing at the way her ribs flared up in pain and her skin pulled tight at her shoulders. "The one and only."

He bent over to pick up the chart on the floor, placing it on the overbed table before he dropped into the chair beside her. "How - how long have you..." He trailed off, gesturing wildly.
"I... got my powers a couple days before we broke up." Addison whispered.
His jaw dropped, "The fire in your kitchen."
She nodded, teary-eyed, "The very one."
"So that burn on your hand was-"
"A fire extinguisher. It cleared up after a few days. My powers kept going haywire. I couldn't control them." She still can't.
"Addie-"
"I would've hurt you, Mark. I couldn't live with myself if I did. So, I did the only thing I could think to do and I'm sorrier than you could ever imagine."
"You dumped me."
Addison smiled - although it looked more like a grimace. "I dumped you." She echoed.

He ran a hand through salt and pepper air (wow, she felt old) and sighed, "Why didn't you tell me, Addie? I could've-"
"No, you couldn't have."
"You don't know that."
"Neither do you."
Silence.
Addison cleared her throat. "So you wanted to ask me a few questions?"
He rose, reaching for the chart. "Yeah. Yeah. More of an exam, really. I just got added to your case so I haven't seen any of the burns for myself. From what I've read it seemed pretty severe, though."
"I wouldn't know." The benefits of being so hopped up on pain meds and paralytics you fade in and out of consciousness for six weeks.
He winced, "Right... do you mind if I take a look?"
"Go for it."
He nodded, removing the thick, fireproof gloves (a precaution, because of her).
"Don't tell anybody I'm doing this-" He said, reaching for the box of surgical gloves and laying out a sterile towel, "but I can't feel shit with those on."
She snorted, wincing as her ribs ached.

He snapped the gloves on and she gave him an arm and he began to unwrap the dressing. The bandage had stuck to her, tugging on where her skin met the edges of the gauze like a wax job. She swore she could feel something tear.
"Fuck!"
"Sorry, I know it hurts."
"Of course it hurts, Mark, I was burning *blue*! I never burn blue!"
"Well, try not to do that in the future, alright Red?"
Something in her stirred at the old nickname. She sighed with a nod.
He removed the dressing from her arm in relative silence, only periodically interrupted by the occasional groan, wince or curse word. Underneath the bandages was a frail, scarred arm that she only barely registered was her own. Everything about it looked wrong: too gaunt, too burnt. This wasn't the arm of a hero, this was the arm of a victim. She wanted to be sick; her flesh looked like melted wax clinging to a toothpick. She felt like she was twenty-two all over again. Mark asked her to bend her fingers and she paled when her fist failed to close all the way, scars keeping them in place. Mark looked pleased, at least, examining her arm with a clinical gaze before nodding with a small smile.

Addison cleared her throat. "So?"
"It's healing well. Benefit of superpowers, I guess. Skin grafts won't be necessary at the rate it's going."
"You say that like I have enough healthy tissue for a donor site."
Mark's gaze softened, "Addison-"
"I crashed and burned, Mark. Simple as that. I don't need you to baby me and tell me it looks fine or that I'm doing great or being so brave because none of it is fucking true. I'm tired and I'm devastated and everything hurts! I just want to get out of here and get back to doing what I'm supposed to be doing."
He raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean get back to what you're meant to be doing?"
"When can I get back to work, Mark?"
His eyes morphed into a look of horror. "Addison, you shouldn't be going back to work."
"Well obviously there's a timeline on this but like, rough estimate, all things considered."
"No, I mean going back *at all*. You need to retire, Addison. If something like this happens again you'll probably *die*."
Her ears began to ring. "What?"
"You pushed yourself, Addison. You pushed yourself way too far and there's no going back. You say it sucks now but people didn't even *recognise you* when you came into the hospital. As your doctor, I seriously discourage against you going back to hero work, you'd be endangering your life."

She couldn't speak. The lump in her throat was suffocating.
Mark nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Addison. I'll leave you to think about things, I understand you're going through a lot right now."
The "Yeah." escaped her mouth without even thinking. The door shut and she found herself sobbing into her hands the second she was alone. She had nothing left now.

Chapter 9: Everybody knows how your garden's growing tonight

Chapter Summary

Addison has the week off. It goes about as well as you expect.

The party peters out over the course of about an hour. Jackson and April are the first to leave, bidding Addison a polite goodnight as he supports her out of the doorway. Izzie, George, Alex and Lexie leave after, giggling belligerently.
"Don't do anything stupid going home." Addison warns.
"Oh come on, what's the worst that could happen to four drunk superheroes?" George stammers.
Lexie - the most sober (but still notably disoriented in Addison's opinion) cringes, "We won't, Addison. Pinky promise."
Addison laughs, nodding as they walk out the door.

Meredith and Cristina settle on Addison's couch, exchanging sips of the bottle of scotch - Teddy cleans up with Addison.
"Are they gonna be alright?" Addison asks, taking a quick glance at them before looking to Teddy.
"They'll be fine, trust me. I'll make sure of it."
"Are *you* gonna be alright? You drank more than me and *I* wouldn't drive."
Teddy laughs, feigning a melodramatic swoon. "Speedster metabolism. The cross I must bear."
Addison chuckles, "Right."
"It has its perks sometimes, at least."
"That it does."

Cristina enters her peripheral, leaning against the doorway lazily. She looks at Teddy and smiles.
"What is she doing?" Addison whispers.
Teddy shrugs, "She likes to stare at me sometimes."
Cristina pokes her tongue out.
Teddy laughs, standing up and approaching Cristina to wrap an arm around her. She turns back to Addison, flashing a smile. "Well, I think this is our cue to go. Goodnight, Addison."
"Goodnight, Teddy."
Teddy and Cristina walk over to the doorway. "You coming, Mer?" Cristina asks.
Meredith flashes a quick glance over to Addison, her eyes lingering before she turns back to Teddy & Cristina, rising off the couch. "Yeah."
"Night, Meredith."
"Bye, Addison."

The door closes behind them and Addison is suddenly hit by a wave of malaise all at once. She tries to ignore it. She turns on the hot water in the shower until steam fogs the mirror, letting the stream hit her body as she rubs her hands over her face listlessly, fingertips turning pink.
"It's nothing. You're overreacting. You're drunk. You just need to go to sleep." She mutters to herself, shutting off the water behind her and lighting briefly as she exits.

She flops onto the middle of her bed, mind unable to contain or suppress the sheer hopelessness keeping her heart in a vice. She turns her head to side, eyes settling on her nightstand. The bright red numbers of her alarm clock stare at her, framed between her phone and a bright orange pill bottle. Milo jumps onto the bed in front of her, curling up next to her chest.
"To sleep or not to sleep? What do you think?" She coos, gently stroking the fur behind his ears as Milo purrs.
"Very well spoken."

She considers. Sleeping is technically the right choice - the healthy, well-adjusted choice that people with their lives together would make. Unfortunately for Addison, the Image Rehearsal Therapy worksheet in her drawer would suggest she is none of those things. Alternatively, she could pick up her phone, turning off her brain and surrendering to the Sisyphean escapism of the internet - an internet that's begun to feel more like a minefield in recent months since her retirement, Twitter refusing to let Red Rocket fade into obscurity (flattering, yes, but also rubbing salt into too fresh of a wound).
"Sleep it is." She groans, reaching for the prescription and wrinkling her nose at the direction label.
"If you're so addictive, why the fuck do I keep forgetting to take you?" Addison grumbles, sitting up and opening the childproof cap.

"It is the intent of the Company to maintain a workplace that is free of drugs and alcohol and to discourage drug and alcohol abuse by its employees." — SDN Employee Handbook, page 25

She wakes up to a mop of ginger cat hair in front of her. Milo is curled on top of her chest, purring gently as he dozes. Addison smiles faintly, gently running a hand through his fur as he wakes up, skipping off of Addison and stretching at the end of the bed. She gets up slowly, rising from the bed and walking towards her closet; she's halfway through buttoning her work shirt (a process that is far too frustrating and time consuming for her taste - fingers scrabbling uselessly as she misses the holes again and again, knuckles heating the fabric in anger) when she remembers the previous day.
"Fuck."
She rips a button off as she tears the shirt open, the small circle clattering against the floor, Addison sighing deeply in response.

She sits at her kitchen counter, staring into the abyss of her coffee mug as Milo chews on his mouse-shaped toy. She tries to think of ways to keep herself busy - ways to be productive, things to do that are actually meaningful - only for her mind to draw a complete blank. All

she can think about is putting on that stupid costume she hasn't worn in six months and jumping out of her window. She groans, leaning back in her stool ever so slightly, the stack of unopened boxes in the corner of the room entering her peripheral.
Addison sighs, "Fine."

She's opening a box of sci-fi novels she'd bought over the years but never found the time to read (paperbacks aren't very fire-compatible - good vision isn't either) when she feels a sharp sting in her fingers, a hiss escaping her mouth as she drops the boxcutter in her opposite hand, clattering to the floor. Addison brings her hand up to her face, frowning at bleeding fingertips, a drop falling onto her leg. She considers lighting before looking down at the Yale hoodie and ironically very flammable Red Rocket shorts she's wearing and decides against it, marching to the bathroom in a huff. She turns on the faucet and holds her hand under the running water, fingers burning in pain. Turning off the sink, Addison takes a second look at the wounds - mostly superficial, just bleeding profusely. She opens a drawer and pinches a box of bandaids with a sigh, fumbling with the packaging as she tries to open it, wrapping them around her digits slowly and intentionally. She looks up into the mirror and winces slightly at the sight. The scab on her lip is thicker now, the bruising around her eye having also darkened severely; it blends into the deep, seemingly permanent dark circles underneath her eyes.
"Shit."

The books within the box look nearly pristine - spines intact, page edges unburnt; the perfectionist in her is pleased with their condition, the human wonders what the point is if she's never read them. She dumps them onto the hardwood floor, dust jumping off the covers and permeating into the air. Something gleams in the light at the bottom of the box. Addison frowns, hoisting it up in her trembling hands. She looks down at the glass trophy in her hands, squinting in an attempt to read the engraved text, wondering where her glasses are. She doesn't reach to get them because she knows what it says and exactly what's going to happen when she reads it: *'Red Rocket, Hero of the Year'* - what year Addison isn't sure - she has eight of them, after all (closer to four, actually, coming home from a debilitating hospital stay only to be taunted with the peak you can never reach again no matter how hard you try isn't conducive to staying calm in her experience). Addison sighs, dropping the trophy onto her couch, burying it between throw pillows (it's almost *painful* to look at, especially since the last time she held it her palms didn't resemble a cheese pizza).

Her phone buzzes from its position on the coffee table; picking it up carefully, she looks at the screen - 4PM. Her stomach growls.
"Shit." She sighs, setting her phone back. She never *was* good at remembering to feed herself - as Red Rocket, she had to or she probably would have dropped dead. At SDN, Teddy was a constant reminder, coming to sit with her and talk over food. Clearly, she's still getting the hang of being (or at least trying to emulate) a normal person. She trudges over to the kitchen, Milo following her slowly. Addison isn't sure what's more depressing: the barren state of her fridge that would probably have Bizzy clutching her pearls if she saw it or the fact that the half-empty bottle of wine in the door looks ridiculously appealing at the moment.
"I shouldn't. It's early." She mutters, reaching for the only two edible looking items.

She throws the last slice of bread into the toaster, tapping her foot impatiently as she holds the egg in her palm, hand on the verge of lighting. Milo meows demandingly. Addison

laughs, opening the pantry and picking up a can of wet cat food with her free hand.
"You think I can open this one-handed?"
Milo blinks impassively.
"Me neither, but let's find out together."
She can. It takes a quantity of effort she deems to be utterly pathetic and her thumb is sore but she manages to open it without issue, the egg in her other hand beginning to steam through the slit she made in the top of the shell. Milo munches happily as the toaster finishes.

She keeps thinking about the wine as she eats - hard-boiled egg tasting like smoke and toast stale. She tries to ignore the impulse. She picks up the plate gingerly, removing a hand to turn on the faucet before her grip on the edge of the plate slips. It falls to the ground with a crash, a hair's breadth away from Addison's foot. She sweeps up the pieces in a huff and feels herself increasingly drawn to the fridge.
"Fuck it." Addison mutters, ripping open the door and taking a mouthful straight from the bottle.

She ends up in the bathtub, lukewarm water (well, lukewarm to *her*, the thermometer reads ninety-five Fahrenheit) up to her chest as she sits leaning against the wall, periodically taking long, melancholic sips from the wine bottle. Slowly, if only gradually, she begins to feel her self-control fade. The weight of the past that often sits so heavy on her shoulders seems to lift and Addison finally stops caring if only for a moment. She reaches for her phone, fingers lighting to dry her hand as she opens her contacts.

Meredith answers on the second ring. "Hello?"
"You wanna have sex with the *eight time* Hero of the Year?" Addison drawls.
She hears Meredith laugh over the line. "Are you drunk?"
"No." Addison lies (the bottle is almost empty).
"Oh, you're *definitely* drunk."
"Meredith-"
"I can't have sex with you, Addison."
"Why not?" Addison whines.
"Because it would be taking advantage of you."
"Am I hideous? Is it the burns? It's the burns, isn't it?"
"They don't faze me, no."
"So it's the fire?"
"The fire is actually... kind of sexy. The little sunburns you give me in the shape of your hands are pretty hot."
Addison laughs, "I think that might be the first time somebody's been *into* the whole 'light on fire when I orgasm' thing."
Meredith chuckles, "Tell you what - if you still want to have sex tomorrow, when you're *sober*... I'll think about it."
"You'll think about it?"
"I'll think about it."
Addison rolls her eyes, "Are you se-"
"Goodnight, Addison. Remember to sleep on your side."
Meredith hangs up.

Addison sighs, knocking the back of her head against the wall. She lifts the bottle up to her face and frowns when she finds it empty. A meow fills her ears and she turns - Milo sits in the doorway, tail swishing gently and head tilted to the side.
"Don't look at me like that."
Milo blinks.
A groan, "Fine." She grumbles, slowly rising from the bathtub and wrapping herself in the towel she had set aside for herself (she already learnt the hard way what happens when you ignite your whole body with a belly full of accelerant).
She makes the mistake of flicking her gaze over to the mirror when she passes in front of it, pausing in her tracks. Her eyes roam down her figure - she feels her stomach twist as imperfections rack up exponentially.
"Stop it." She chides herself. "Get a fucking grip, Addie."

Exiting the bathroom and flopping onto her bed moments later once she's dressed. Milo jumps precociously next to her, rubbing into her side.
Addison chuckles, gently stroking his fur. "Good boy."
Milo licks her hand.
"You know, for the first time in... a long time I think that I can finally start to... picture a life without Red Rocket. Which I'm sure you're happy about, now that you get to see me more... even if I'm... you know." She mumbles.
Milo continues to purr happily, resting his head against her forearm.
"I didn't *actually* want to die in that costume, right? So what if I didn't think I'd make it to forty - or even *thirty* for so long? I was just being realistic! It doesn't - it doesn't mean anything... right?"
Milo's breathing slows as he drifts off to sleep. Addison sighs.
"Good talk."

"The Company provides personal leave for compelling/urgent reasons. Employees having any questions regarding this policy should contact HR." - SDN Employee Handbook, page 30

She wakes up with a migraine, prompting Addison to roll back over, head smothered into her pillow in a poor attempt at alleviating the pressure in her skull. She wakes back up again with the drilling sensation downgraded into a duller thud - she'll take it. She wanders into her kitchen, the loud whirring of her coffee machine making her cringe. The clock reads 12PM.
"Jesus, what's wrong with me?" She whispers.

She cleans obsessively, unpacking box after box and tidying up every last inch of her apartment, wiping down every surface in the deluded attempt to silence (or at least satisfy) the thoughts in her head. She ends up with a spotless, immaculately decorated apartment and a brain full of dread - she picks up the phone.
Teddy answers immediately. "How's your PTO going?" She teases.
"I'm losing my mind."
"Oh come on, it can't be that bad."
"I don't know what to do with myself, Teddy! My apartment is spotless and I can't exactly go to work."
"Don't you have hobbies?"

She opens her mouth to answer before promptly shutting it again at the crushing realisation that no, she in fact *doesn't* have hobbies - or at least not any she's significantly indulged in over the last several years.
"Addison? You there?"
"Yeah, yeah I just - yeah, right, hobbies! Why didn't I think about that sooner?"
"Are you okay?"
"Fine!" She rushes out far too quickly for someone who is supposedly 'fine'. "Just great, thanks Ted!"
Addison hangs up before she can get a response.

She looks at the stack of books on her coffee table - stories never read, covers never opened, pages never turned - and can't help but feel crushing dread overtake her. She seriously can't remember the last time she's done something as simple as *read a book for pleasure*. The more she thinks about it, the more depressing she finds it, staring at this monument to her inaction.
"Maybe I should start with... something new." She mumbles, moving towards the bowl of keys next to her door.

The bookstore is quaint. Quiet and tucked away into its own little corner of Seattle, the smell of lavender wafting through the room courtesy of an employee's scented candle. Addison relaxes, rubbing her good eye underneath the lenses of her glasses and trying to ignore the voice in the back of her head that lets her imagine in vivid detail just how catastrophic it would be if she lit with this much kindling around. She strolls through the shelves, eyes flicking over thick spines and genre signs until she settles on the horror section. *Firestarter*, the spine reads. She's not sure what compels her to pick it up and walk to the register with it.

"Hi, just this, please." Addison greets.
The cashier's eyebrows furrow slightly (she had hoped the glasses would distract from the black eye - clearly she was wrong) before he nods with a smile, ringing the book up for her - behind him, a large, black box sits on the shelf, red square in the top left corner. Addison clears her throat.
"Are those... Lego sets?"
The cashier looks behind him and turns back to her, "Yeah - we started stocking them not too long ago."
Addison nods, "...Could you ring up the Millennium Falcon for me, please?"
He smiles, "Sure, no problem."
She can feel the way her neck flushes in embarrassment when she asks for a bag - the cashier either doesn't notice or ignores it.
"It's not what it looks like, you know." She blurts out, screaming internally at the momentary lapse in impulse control.
"Pardon?"
"I just - um-" She gestures to her eye. "It's not - I'm a boxer!"
The cashier blinks slowly before nodding appreciatively, "Cool."
She smiled tightly, trying to swat away the fantasy of throwing herself into the sun.

Addison walks out of the store onto the street minutes later, breeze tickling her neck and the sounds of the city filling her ears. She steadies herself, getting ready to walk to her car when the sound of hurried footsteps becomes increasingly louder. Looking to her left, she sees a man clutching a purse dashing towards her direction; following the man at a slower pace is a

woman, screaming "Help! Stop!". Addison watches as the man dashes closer towards her, stretching out her leg just as he's about to run past and sending him tumbling to the ground with a groan. She pouts, reaching to pluck the purse out of his hands and passing it to the woman who slowly catches up, breathing heavily.
"I believe this is yours?"
"Yes, thank you! Oh my god - I thought he was gonna get away. Thank you so much!"
Addison shrugs, "Don't mention it."
The woman smiles - Addison nods courteously and walks to her car.

Milo rubs himself against her lower back while she's trying to build the Lego set: pieces splayed out on her coffee table, sitting cross-legged on the floor in sweatpants far looser than they used to be and glasses perched on the edge of her nose. Her hands shake as she clicks the pieces together, fingers struggling with the small pieces of plastic. Her tongue pokes out in concentration as she carefully assembles the ship's hull, Return of the Jedi quietly playing on the TV before her phone vibrates, startling her out of her focus.

Addison doesn't bother checking caller ID, quickly accepting the call while she pauses the film and holds her phone to her ear. "Hello?"
"Hey, Addison."
She gulps, "Archer! Hi! What's um - what's going on?"
"Everybody at the practice got bonuses, so I got a reservation at Jean-Georges to blow it all. I was thinking why not take my baby sister out on the town? Get some quality bonding time in?"
"...Your date cancelled, didn't she?"
Archer sighs, "Yeah... but it'll still be fun! My treat, really, you don't have to worry about a cent!"
The mention of money hits her like a slap to the face. She bites her lip, looking between the half-assembled Lego set, the depressing row of trophies and unread medical textbooks that line a nearby shelf. "That's... that's nice Archer, but I'm okay, thanks."
Archer scoffs, "What? No, come on! It'll be fun! I'll pick you up. You still live in that cute little place in Gramercy Park, right?"
'Cute little place' is certainly one way to describe a penthouse in one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in Manhattan. Addison pouts. "Archer... I don't live in New York anymore."
"...Oh."
"Yeah I - I got a new job, actually. Seattle."
"*Seattle?* You moved coasts?"
She sighs, "What can I say... I guess I just - needed the change of scenery."
Not a total lie - although dishonesty with Archer has become second nature.
He clicks his tongue. "Well, as long as you're okay."
"I'm... I'm alright."
"Alright then. I'll uh - I should probably go..."
"Right, yeah... Enjoy your dinner."
"Thanks, uh - bye, Addie."
"Bye, Archie." She breathes just as the line goes dead.

Addison sighs, throwing her phone onto the couch behind her, leaning back and rubbing her hands over her face. A warm melancholy settles in her chest as she breathes, drawing circles into scarred hands with her thumbs. Milo nudges her knee gently with his nose and she

laughs mirthlessly, running her fingers through his fur.
"I should've told him." She whispers. Maybe then he wouldn't still think of her as his pathetic baby sister who needs her big brother to take care of her. She wonders how much things would have changed - assuming they would even change at all. If telling Archer or not telling Archer was the difference between Red Rocket still being active and Addison crashing and burning. She sighs, looking down at Milo who was leaning into her warm touch.
"I should've done a lot of things. It's just.. too late now."

She turns off the TV, getting up off the hardwood floor, leg numb with pins and needles, aching as she steps into the bedroom (it's never been same since she broke it - even *after* the rod was removed). On the nightstand sits the worksheet Dr Turner gave her. Just looking at it fills her with dread. She goes to sleep facing away from it.

"If an accident or injury should occur on the job, it is extremely important for you to notify your manager or HR promptly, no matter how minor the incident may seem." — SDN Employee Handbook, page 37

The worksheet is still there when she wakes up. Just sitting there, taunting her. A visual reminder of just how fucked up Addison truly is. She imagines the satisfaction she would feel if she held it in her hands and watched flames engulf the paper, fire so hot not even ashes would be left behind. She decides against it when she then pictures the disappointment in Dr Turner's eyes that she'd be faced with after.

She's almost out of cat food, Addison notes blankly as she opens a wet can, laying it out for Milo. She finishes the milk while pouring it into her coffee. Addison cringes, rubbing her face with her free hand. A cold fire begins to coil in her gut - she tries to ignore it.

Actually buying groceries is the easy part - she criminally overdresses, shoving on a pair of heels she hasn't worn since before she became charred steak and obsessing over her lipstick in the hope that it draws attention away from how utterly broken she is. She pays extra attention to covering up the bruising around her eye (it's begun to yellow at least - small mercies) after rigorously coating her dark circles in concealer. A man with a goatee wearing a leather jacket lingers around the fruit section - he catches Addison's eye, before she quickly stares down at the pineapples in front of her. She briefly wonders if she should flirt, make a joke about fruit ripeness in an effort to get the man's attention, only to end up distracted by the thought of long, blonde hair framing dead, blue-grey eyes (and the titillating mental image of long fingers popping a piece of tangy pineapple into soft, sensitive lips, chin dripping with juices). When she looks up the man is gone - she can't find it in herself to mind.

In the parking lot, she sees a mother and son exiting their car, walking in the direction of the store. In the boy's hand is the end of a piece of string, attached to a yellow balloon with a smiley face drawn on. Addison smiles, leaning against her trolley as she pushes it towards her car when she hears a loud sneeze followed by a small whimper. Looking around, she sees the balloon begin to fly away, the wind pushing it in her direction. Her body goes into auto-pilot, leaping into the air to just barely catch the edge of the balloon. When Addison lands, her balance falters for a moment, just long enough for her to fall onto the pavement, knees

burning in pain as they scrape against the concrete. The boy runs over to her, eyes wide. Addison laughs, gently handing him the balloon - he grips onto the middle of the rope fiercely.
"You should be more careful with that next time."
He nods fiercely, "I will - thanks, lady."
Addison smiles, her chest swelling with pride if only for a moment. "No problem."
The boy's mother runs over to the two of them, laying a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder and casting Addison an appreciative look. "Thank you so much - are you okay?"
Addison shrugs, slowly rising from the ground - knees hissing as air touches fresh scrape wounds and blood slowly trickles down her shin. "I'll be fine - at least I didn't break my shoes."
The woman nods, "Alright - take care!"
Addison smiles. When the family enter the store and leave earshot, she reaches to clutch her knee, cursing as tears prick the corner of her eyes.
"Shit." Addison whispers, "Stop it, you look *pathetic* right now." She hisses - the chastising tone of her voice conjuring vineyards and bicycle accidents into her mind.

Going home seems to become the difficult part. She gets behind the wheel of her car and begins the drive, tapping the peeling leather with her fingers while she waits at a red light. She hears the building collapse before she sees it, foundation caving in and bringing the other floors with them just a few blocks away from Addison's car. She begins to regret driving to the store as she anxiously looks at the traffic lights, waiting for it to glow green before she floors through, cursing the existence of traffic laws as she tries to get towards the scene.

She dashes out of the car the second it's turned off, seeing paramedics wheel someone into an ambulance on a stretcher and hearing a familiar roar. She whips her head around to see Meredith's bike screeching to a halt, Jackson flying in seconds later. Meredith takes off her helmet, tilting her head towards her unbroken hand, eyes widening when she sees Addison. Jackson raises an eyebrow as he lands.
Meredith clears her throat. "Addison, what the hell are you-"
"How can I help?"
"*What*?"
"I'm serious! I'm here, I can help! Let me help! People are hurt!"
"Are you crazy? It's too dangerous!"
"Your hand is *broken*!"
"I can-" Meredith's eyes flick downwards, towards the bottom of Addison's skirt, just above her knees. "Are you *bleeding*?"
"I'm fine! It's nothing!"
"You're a *civilian*, Addison. It's not safe for you to be here."
Jackson clears his throat, shifting his weight from one foot to another. "We've got it covered - don't worry. Teddy's on comms and everything."

Addison opens her mouth to respond, only for the last bit of resistance left in her to die in her throat. She nods, turning away to stalk off as she looks up into the air, desperate not to let tears fall (not while she's in public, she's wearing mascara). Why did she do that? Is she a glutton for humiliation now? Heat begins to pool into her face. She pinches the bridge of her nose and sees her hand bathed in a faint orange glow. She blinks furiously, trying desperately to return her eyes to normal as she slams the door to her car shut, resting her forehead against

the steering wheel.
"That was fucking stupid, Addison." She mutters to herself as she turns the key of the ignition. The engine thrums to life as she breathes - slowly, deeply, in the effort to not blow up the car (or worse, ruin the seats).

It takes her eight elevator trips to get all of the groceries into her apartment. Before, it usually only took two. When she's done, she closes the door behind her by leaning against it, sliding down to the floor in a puddle of limbs and gently taking off her shoes, heels aching. She laughs mirthlessly into her bloody knees only for it to quickly devolve into whimpers, followed by muted, voiceless sobs - chest heaving as hot tears streak down her face and her ears ring. She feels her cheekbones begin to burn as the tears fall, her skin hissing as each boiling drop escapes Addison's eyes and she feels like she's seven years old again. She sniffles, wiping her eyes and leaving faint pink patches and black smudges all over her hands. Her legs ache when she tries to get up, muscles resisting her very best efforts as her thighs begin to tremble. She falls back down to the floor in a heap, a bird with broken wings. She is not the phoenix, the fire took everything and there is nothing left worth rising from the ashes.

She wakes up to Milo licking her fingers, gently prodding her leg with his paw as he looks at Addison inquisitively. She laughs faintly, scratching him behind the ears and lowering her head.
"I'm sorry. I'm really bad at this, aren't I?"
Milo doesn't respond, simply pressing the tip of his nose against hers.
The ghost of a smile graces Addison's face - leaving shortly after her cheeks burn in protest. She sighs, slowly steadying herself to get off the floor, methodically carrying the bags crowded around her front door into her kitchen and emptying them. Her knees hiss when she extends them and she looks down to see a single drop of blood running down her leg. She groans, trudging to the bathroom.

She looks up at her reflection and pauses. Along with her ruined mascara, thin red lines burnt into her skin run down her face, from the corners of her eyes to her chin. She presses a finger to one of the scalds, hissing in pain at the contact.
"Not again." She grumbles, shaking her head and focusing back to her grazed knees.
The scrapes are shallow, edges already beginning to scab. The centres weep, Addison's vision blurring with pain as she wipes them clean. She purses her lips, looking between the small box of adhesive bandages next to the sink and her hands.
She sighs, "This is gonna suck."
She sits at the edge of the bathtub, precariously unwrapping the packaging and brusquely applying the small squares over her knees. Her eyes prick with tears.
"It's just a scraped knee, stop being a fucking baby." She sniffles.

Addison finds herself returning to the previous night's position: sitting in her living room between the couch and coffee table, meticulously and carefully assembling the Millennium Falcon. An old pair of shorts leaves her still-bandaged knees painfully exposed and an even older hoodie riddled with scorch marks at the sleeve ends drowns the rest of her. It doesn't feel the same as it did the previous night; suddenly it feels so much more childish. She picks up the TV remote in the attempt to drown out the shame.
"-We asked resident New York superhero Ferryman his opinion on these events-" The news anchor says as an all too familiar talking head filling her screen.

"Are you fucking serious?!" Addison shouts.
Despite her protests, she can't seem to find it in herself to turn it off.
Derek clears his throat on the screen, a drop of water falling from the tip of his nose. "I think that-"
Addison presses the off button before he can finish his sentence.

A few minutes pass, Addison leaning back against the couch with a leg drawn close to her chest, smoke escaping her lips with every exhale through gritted teeth, throat burning. Then, a knock at the door; she startles, looking down and cringing at her current state of dress.
"Addison?" Teddy calls through the door.
She sighs in relief, lifting herself off the floor and trudging over to the entrance.
Teddy holds a full paper bag in her hands. "I didn't know you were a Yankees fan."
Addison scrunches her nose. "I'm not, they suck."
"Then why are you wearing that?" Teddy asks, gesturing to Addison's chest.
She looks down at the grey fabric, realising that the dark blue lettering didn't read "Yale" like she had originally thought.
"Oh! Um - this was an ex's."
"Derek's a Yankees fan?"
Addison rolls her eyes, opening the door and moving to the side for Teddy to enter. She shuts the door after Teddy enters the threshold, leaning against it. "No, he's not. Different ex... What's in the bag?"

Teddy smiles, reaching a hand in and pulling out a small cardboard box. "I heard you had a rough day."
"You better have gotten fries, too."
"Of course I got fries, what kind of animal do you take me for?"
Addison laughs, "Is the fire escape okay? My kitchen's kind of a mess right now."
"Aw, is somebody getting nostalgic?"
She can't seem to get the smile that forms off her face. "Yeah, whatever."
"Who knew you were such a big softie?"
Addison points playfully. "Hey! Careful, I have a reputation to uphold."
Teddy chuckles as she makes her way over.

The sit on the fire escape in silence, cold metal tickling the back of Addison's thighs as they watch the streets below, the sounds of the city filling their ears.
"Are you sure you're not cold?" Addison asks.
Teddy swallows the bite she had just taken. "I'm fine, really - you're like a human space heater."
Addison smiles, shaking her head playfully. "Forget I asked."

A moment passes, the wind passing through their ears; Teddy turns to face her again.
"Seriously though: are you okay?"
She swallows, feigning a laugh as she tilts her head down - hair obscuring her vision (Good, she thinks, A shield). "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"
Silence. Addison turns to see Teddy staring at her, heartbroken.
"What?"
Teddy sets her cheeseburger down in the box, taking a deep breath. "Addison - people are *worried* about you, *I'm* worried abut you."

The shame of being seen so clearly - of the cracks in her mask being large enough to see through - hits her like a gunshot in the chest. Defensiveness flares in her gut. "*Why?* I'm *fine*!"
"People who get put into comas after breaking *twenty-five bones* aren't just *fine*, Addison!"
She can smell smoke. "Oh, because suddenly you're an expert?"
"I'd like to think I know a thing or two about extended hospital stays, yes!"
Sparks fly out of her mouth, edges of her lips burning. "*Really*? Do you now?"
Teddy's gaze softens, shifting from anger to pity; she sighs, running hands through her hair. "Addison... I had a heart attack."
The heat leaves her body like an bucket full of ice-cold water was thrown over over her head. Shame floods her chest like an old friend.

Silence. Teddy shrugs, leaning against the wall. "You're not the only one with shitty powers."
Addison clutches her hands together, gently stroking her knuckles with a thumb. "Teddy, I'm so sorry. I had no idea that you-"
"I know, and you're forgiven. I don't talk about it and it's not like you're a psychic."
Addison pokes her tongue against a sore spot in her inner cheek. "Right."
"I just - I know what you're going through because that was *me* two years ago. I get it."
Addison digs her tongue into the points of her front teeth (it still feels like yesterday that there was wiring there). "Right."
"Addison-"
"No, I - you're right, Ted. I'm sorry. Let's just change the subject? Please?"
Teddy sighs, giving her a small, tired smile (a smile she's all to familiar with - she wonders when Teddy will finally get sick of her, too) and plucking her cheeseburger out of the box, taking a large bite.
"It's just..." Addison mutters, "It's just that this *sucks*! I hate the rain and I hate the traffic - and yeah New York had *terrible* traffic but at least it was *New York* and I just hate feeling so - so *weak* and *useless* all the time! I feel like I can't do *anything* right anymore! I'm just some - some washed-up dumpster fire..."
Teddy nods sympathetically, shifting slightly to the side for their shoulders to touch. Addison swallows, resting her head on Teddy's shoulder.
"I'm just so fucking *tired*." Addison sobs.
"I know."
"Does it ever stop?"
"Eventually - at least, I hope it does, or we're both screwed."
They laugh - stiltedly, brokenly, but they laugh nonetheless.

Teddy leaves less than an hour later, smiling gently and bidding Addison good night. The door shuts and her heart is put in a vice, tears threatening to fall again.
She rubs her fingers into her eyes. "Stop fucking crying!" She begs, stalking into the bathroom.
The turns the faucet on, running her hands under the cold water until she's gathered enough to splash onto her face. She huffs, grabbing her toothbrush and applying a neurotic amount of toothpaste, allowing the taste of mint to overpower the rest of her senses, flicking the bristles across her teeth as she brushes the edges in small, obsessive, concentric circles, knuckles turning white in the hand gripping it. Her gaze end up fixed on the angry, pink lines under her eyes as she continues to brush, focus going elsewhere as she scrubs into the same spot over and over. She spits into the sink only to see blood mixed with the toothpaste.

"Fuck!"

"SDN understands that channels of communication should always be kept open and flexible. The Open Door Policy provides a means by which employees can raise concerns and make suggestions." — SDN Employee Handbook, page 21

Fire surrounds her in her dream, peeking into the corners of her vision and tinting everything in sight red. She walks, burning away at the floor beneath her as the air is slowly sucked out of her very lungs and her extremities burn away into ashes. In the distance stands a woman - blonde, back turned to Red. Red dashes towards the woman, stretching out a burning, smoking arm to try and reach her before-

Addison wakes up to a loud chirping in her ears - opening her eyes to see smoke gathering around her. She rolls out of bed frantically, swatting desperately at the quickly widening scorch marks in the mattress, sighing with relief when they've been extinguished and promptly falling back into bed face first.
She groans, "I need to get my shit together."

She sits down at the dining table, the worksheet and a pen laid in front of her. She takes a long, slow slip out of the mug in her hand, scrunching her nose as her glasses fog up. Hot coffee coats her tongue as the sound of Milo happily munching fills her ears. Ceramic touches down on the thick wooden coaster as she picks up the pen, clutching it tightly between stiff, trembling fingers.
"Just have to write it down." She mutters, blank page taunting her as dread and frustration pool in her gut. The dream plays in her head on a loop even as the words fail her, she sighs.
"Just write it down - it's not that hard."
She scrawls five words across the page before stopping, scrutinising her work and promptly crossing it all out.
"It's not that hard." Addison repeats, frantically tapping her fingertips against her forehead in the hope that words will break through.
"Bigger fuck-ups than you have done it, it's *not hard*."
Why can't she figure out what to say, then?
She spends far too long staring down at the blank page, neck beginning to ache and eyes blurring at the lined white void in front of her. Anger stokes her chest as the pen begins to melt, moulding itself under her fingers.
"Fuck!" She curses, throwing the pen at the wall and rising from her chair, pacing behind it as she runs her hands along her face. "Why is this so hard?!"

She grabs a new pen, sitting back down and staring yet again at the blank sheet.
"You can do this - you're fine. You've done way harder things than this." Addison whispers, tapping the tip of the pen against the top right corner of the page frantically.
The more she tries to concentrate on what to write, the more her mind begins to wander: has she drank water today? Is Milo alright? He's been awfully quiet. Has anyone tried to call her? She should check her phone-
"Stop it!" She berates, knocking on her forehead with the tips of her fingers, "Focus, damn it!"

She stares at the page again, leg beginning to bounce slightly as her brain slowly churns, desperately trying to force the words to come out. Her eyes unfocus, flitting to the corner of her frames where a small smudge sits. Addison sighs, pulling her glasses off and brusquely cleaning the lenses with the end of her shirt, only for the smudging to spread.
"Oh, come on!" She huffs, rising from her chair yet again and retreating to the bedroom to find the cleaning spray.

She sits back down again at the table, massaging her temples as the page taunts her once again.
She clicks her tongue, picking up the pen and clicking it. Then she clicks it again - and again, and again. The pace of her clicking slowly increases, becoming a deafening chorus of impatience and inaction until she feels her thumb begin to cramp. She drops the pen back onto the sheet, rising from her chair and stalking off.

Her calves begin to ache as she walks down the street - neon signs quickly entering and exiting her vision. The clicking of her heels fills her ears as Addison basks in the cool night air, trying desperately to ignore the feeling of her skin being ripped off as she delicately balances on the thin, long points. She ends up in front of a small coffee shop, ambience leaking out into the city; she enters slowly, bell softly ringing when she opens the door.
The barista smiles at her tightly, looking up from the textbook resting behind the counter.
"Hey, what can I get for you?"
"Long black, two sugars, please?"
"Sure, no problem! You can have a seat while you wait."
Addison nods, turning around to face the small collection of tables before her, empty except for a single head of blonde hair and dark brown eyes focused on her.

"Hey." Izzie greets, small smile creeping into her features. She takes a long, slow sip from the disposable cup in her hands, gesturing for Addison to sit.
Addison chuckles, sitting in the chair across from her. "Hey."
"Fancy seeing you here. I thought this was *my* spot." Izzie jokes.
"Yeah, I uh - I thought I'd... explore a little."
Not an outright lie.
Izzie grins, leaning back in her chair and spreading her arms out. "Well, welcome to the third best coffee in Seattle."
A snort, "Only *third* best?"
"Hey, that's high praise; there are plenty of coffee shops in Seattle... Besides, the other two aren't open right now."
Addison snaps her fingers (or she *tries* to, anyway - no sound comes out). "*There's* the caveat."

Izzie raises her hands in mock surrender, the smile never leaving her face. Addison's gaze flits to the thick burns on Izzie's palms, silicone tape wrapped around her fingertips.
Izzie clicks her tongue awkwardly, drumming her fingers against the table. "So... how's your forced vacation going?"
Addison gives a dramatic grimace, inhaling sharply through clenched teeth. "It's... it's going, alright."
Izzie nods, "You didn't miss too much, if it's anything: Alex had to go to the hospital after

stopping a bullet and Meredith got benched from any *real* action but other than that? Surprisingly pedestrian."

Addison nods, "Well that's-"
The bell rings and the sound of heavy footsteps fill the shop; Addison turns to see a hooded man standing in front of the counter, gun in hand.
The sound of a lighter flipping open turns her attention back around.
"Izzie, no!" Addison whispers.
"But-"
"Trust me: gunpowder and fire *don't mix*."
"Shut up!" The man yells, pivoting to point his gun at Addison and Izzie.

Addison swallows, raising her hands in the air - palms next to her face. "Hey, relax-"
"Relax? Relax?! Don't you tell me to *relax*, lady!" He shouts, a tiny tremor in his hand beginning to shake the gun.
Addison smiles - tight, small. "Okay, I'm sorry... Nice gun, by the way. Glock 17?"
His eyes widen ever so slightly. He swallows, "Uh... G19. I think."
Her heart is in her throat. "Nine millimetre. Through-and-through."
The memory still feels fresh.
"You a gun nut?" He asks.
She doesn't dare check to see if her hands are shaking. "No, I just used to date one."
"You know your stuff... Better than me." He mutters.
She titters, "Well, it's - it's a scary world we live in."
He gulps, "It is."
"My name's Addison, by the way."
He furrows his brows, taken aback before he blinks. "Rodney."
Addison smiles, "Hi, Rodney."
His steely expression falters, lip quivering. She realises that he is not a man - only a boy.

A tear runs down his eye. "This was a mistake. I shouldn't have come here." He whispers.
"Hey, it's okay. We all make mistakes. Nothing you can't come back from."
"No, I - I - fuck! Why did I do this? This was so *stupid*!" He sobs, using his free hand to tap his forehead with the butt of his palm. He looks at the gun with a rueful gaze, sniffling. "I should've just-"
"Rodney, Rodney, hey. I know you're scared, and you feel alone, and that everything seems hopeless. I do, okay? I've been there, trust me. Life *sucks* sometimes, it really does - a lot of the time, actually! One minute you're on top of the world and the next... the next you're back to square one. But it's *temporary* and it's better to realise that nothing lasts forever *now*, then when it's too late. Nothing lasts forever. Not even this."

Rodney nods, tears filling his eyes.
"Rodney, I need you to put the gun down now."
"I - I can't." He sobs, finger moving away from the trigger.
Addison stands from her chair - slowly, intentionally, her movements painstakingly telegraphed. "Can I walk over?"
He nods, "Yeah." He whimpers.
Addison swallows, slowly stepping towards him - the barrel of the pistol staring her in the face.

"Rodney, please give me the gun."
He lowers the pistol, tilting his wrist towards the side and loosening his grip; Addison wraps her hands around his, gently prying it out of his palm. She holds it by the barrel, turning the safety on and pulling out the magazine, tossing it to Izzie. She places the gun on the table beside her.
"You did the right thing. It's okay." Addison whispers, outstretching her arms slightly.
He leaps into her embrace, chin resting on the crook of her neck as his chest is wracked with sobs.
"I'm sorry, I'm sorry - fuck, I'm so sorry."
She strokes his back with her hand. "It's gonna be okay. Everything is going to be okay. *You* will be okay." She says, a lump beginning to form in her throat. She makes eye contact with the barista, using a hand to make a phoning gesture - the barista nods.

She stands outside the shop, leaning against the window as she watches Rodney be escorted into a patrol car - the lights of the sirens reflecting on a puddle in the street. The bell chimes behind her, the barista shuffling out holding a steaming paper cup.
Addison accepts the coffee. "Thank you. How much?"
"*How much?* Are you kidding? As far as I'm concerned, you get free coffee for life."
Addison's eyes widen - she shakes her head, reaching for her wallet. "Oh! Are you sure? Because I can totally-"
"Woah, hey! Seriously, don't worry about it. Heroes get free coffee, end of story."
Addison laughs, "I - I'm not a *hero*, really, I just-"
The barista walks back into the shop, "End of story!"

The door closes shut in front of her and she's left with the cold night air and the steaming paper cup warming her fingers. She sighs, watching the way her breath condensates in front of her before taking a small sip, humming in approval. Addison watches as Izzie finishes speaking with another uniformed officer, nodding anxiously when dismissed and walking over to Addison.
"That was insane." She breathes.
Addison laughs, "Tell me about it."
Izzie sighs, leaning against a light post. "God, I - I don't wanna know how much worse that would've gone if you weren't here."
"What do you mean?"
"The way you just - talked him down like that, that was incredible!"
Addison scoffs, "What, *that*? That was nothing - basic de-escalation, anyone could've done it."
"I wouldn't have. Didn't even cross my mind - if it was me the windows would probably be busted and I would've sent us all to the hospital."
A stilted chuckle escapes Addison's lips. "You're selling yourself short."
"Maybe. But you are, too."

A beat. Addison clenches her jaw, taking a deep breath. "It's really not that impressive, I swear. You just - you just have to care, I guess. Enough to notice that he's holding the gun wrong and his hand is shaking and that nobody else in the building with you looks old enough to have seen 9/11-"
"I'm twenty-seven."
"-and *remember it*. You just - I don't know. I guess when you do this for long enough you

start to notice the little things a lot more. The world bleeds and you bleed with it."
Izzie nods, eyes widened slightly in awe; she gulps, "Okay... how do you know if you care *too much*, though?"
Addison laughs mirthlessly, tilting her head back into the wall behind her and looking up into the sky. "That's the funny part - you don't. It's... a process - trying to care enough to motivate yourself to actually *do good* but not so much that you want to stay in bed all day because it feels like the world is ending around you."
"Right."

She looks back at Izzie, seeing the small notes of sadness in her eyes; Addison takes another long sip. "Look, I'm sorry. I know that I was kind of a role model for you and I'm probably just letting you down and-"
"You're not."
A small smile, a raised brow. "I'm not?"
Izzie shrugs, "Don't get me wrong, Red Rocket is, you know, *my hero*, my idol, my gold standard for how we should be doing our jobs but... you're not Red Rocket anymore - she's a symbol. But *Addison*? She's pretty real. And she's my friend."
She really hopes she's not crying right now. Addison grins, "Well, if you ever want to take a few pages from the Red Rocket school of superheroics... I have a lot to teach - assuming you want to learn, anyway."
Izzie beams, "I'd like that."

"Employees are expected to use good judgement and avoid situations that create an actual or potential conflict between their personal interests and the interests of SDN." — SDN Employee Handbook, page 12.

Her knee aches. A sharp, deep throbbing embedded into the joint as she watches her coffee machine pour into the mug. Milo munches loudly from his bowl, the morning sun lighting up her kitchen. Addison balances herself against the wall, shifting her weight to her good leg and experimentally moving her bad knee. The pain flares with a vengeance.
She sighs, "Great." Addison grumbles.
The pain stubbornly persists. It's there when she makes breakfast, it's there when she showers. Its presence continues well into the afternoon.

Addison groans from her position on the couch, good leg tucked into her chest while her bad leg lays extended in front of her. She bends her knee, hissing slightly at the way the ache flares up before watching as her knee - and only her knee - bursts into flame. The relief is short-lived, quickly disappearing once her bones have acclimated to the temperature.
Addison's tongue pokes slightly out of the corner of her mouth, eyebrows furrowed in concentration as the fire brightens. Once again, relief fades quickly and once again, she stokes the flames hotter and hotter until her skin starts to burn.
She hisses, quickly extinguishing herself and tapping her reddened knee, a burning pain overwhelming her. "Shit!"
She leans back into the couch, head sinking into the armrest. She sighs, rolling off the couch and stumbling towards the kitchen.

The frozen peas against her kneecap start to sting rather quickly. She rolls her eyes, gently removing them and wincing at the image of her scarred, pink knee covered in condensation. The original knee pain perseveres. Addison tilts her head as far back as her neck allows and whines. A memory comes to her after - recent, painful. A meeting in a physiotherapist's office, a shiny, untouched box; the words "pain management" accompanied with a kind, irritatingly pitying smile.

Addison stands slowly, meandering over to the bedroom and sitting on the edge of her bed, opening the nightstand drawer. The box is coated in a layer of dust when she pulls it out; Addison smears it off with her other hand gingerly. Carefully, she opens the box, prying out the small device and the assortment of wires and electrodes accompanying it. She squints, reaching for her glasses as she turns the box upside down, a small paper pamphlet falling onto the bed.
"Okay. Just have to figure out how to use this now." Addison mutters.

She reads the instructions carefully, slowly and consciously attaching the electrodes of the TENS machine around her kneecap. She turns it on, wincing in preparation - only for nothing to seemingly happen. She blinks, fiddling with the settings until a steady, gentle pulse reverberates through her leg.
"Oh, *fuck*." Addison sobs, giggling hysterically at the respite.
Milo pads hesitantly into the room, staring at the electrodes. Addison laughs, patting the spot next to her on the bed. He jumps onto the sheets, nuzzling himself into a corner with a huff. Addison chuckles, adjusting her position on the bed to stare at her ceiling, the pulsing of the TENS machine lulling her to sleep.

She wakes up with a chill in her spine, her bedroom dark as the night breeze flows through her open window. Addison sighs, slowly peeling off the electrode of the now turned off TENS machine and carefully climbing out of bed; the pain in her knee is finally gone. She stretches, back clicking as she lets out a groan. She closes the window, wind tickling her nose. Addison exits the bedroom, looking to see the blank worksheet still laying on her dining table. She cringes, looking down to appraise her clothes before shrugging, grabbing her keys and walking out the door.

The wind whips her hair behind her as she sits on the roof, legs dangling precariously over the edge. She looks down at the cold, hard pavement below. She squints, trying to make out the shapes on the ground to little success outside of being able to identify the people-sized blobs illuminated by the streetlight. Addison tsks, shaking her head as she looks to the sky, dark clouds and light pollution blocking out the stars.
"Whatever." She mumbles, pushing herself off the building.
The free fall is glorious; the wind rushing past her ears as her heart rises to her throat and her stomach drops. Her body feels electric, bursting at the seams with adrenaline as a smile creeps onto Addison's face. She ignites at the last second, taking off into the air with glee; she looks down to see a large scorch mark on the sidewalk.
She giggles, "Oops."
She's made worse. Nothing is yet to top the one Addison made when she *learnt* she could fly.

She can't remember the last time she's done this: flying through the air, far above the city skyline, not a care in the world. She beams, closing her eyes in bliss as she loops through the

air, leaving a trail of smoke behind her. She plays with her speed first - trying to match the pace of a car on the ground below her, then with altitude - rising higher and higher into the sky until the air becomes thin and the chill becomes too much, her flames dimming until she's fallen far down enough to breathe again, burning brighter once more.

In the distance, the Space Needle stands tall and proud - a beacon for its city. Addison flies towards it, drawn to it like a moth is with flame. She looks down at the streets below, taking notice of the small gathering of people near several food trucks close to the Needle. She lands far enough away to not be seen, quickly extinguishing herself and stomping out a small patch of fire that had spread to the grass beneath her feet. She smooths out her blouse - fireproof, she made sure most of her clothes were years ago - and turns around to look at the tower behind her one last time before walking over to the congregation she saw earlier.

Addison sees a half dozen food trucks gathered around the area, small crowds standing in front of each of them. She looks around, spotting a familiar head of short brown hair sitting at a bench.
Alex nods at her when she walks over. "Heard you talked down a shooter. Impressive stuff - think you could teach me?" He asks, quickly taking a bite out of his taco.
Addison laughs, sitting down next to him. "What do you need de-escalation for? You're bulletproof."
Alex shrugs, "Getting shot still hurts."
She nods.
He clears his throat. "Was that you up there a second ago?"
"You saw that?"
"Uh, yeah."
"Huh. Usually, nobody looks up."
Alex smirks, "Well, Toto, I guess we're not in Kansas anymore."
She rolls her eyes, smacking him playfully. "Can it."

He hums, taking another bite of the taco, silently offering her the untouched one in his other hand.
She waves her hands in front of her in polite refusal. "Oh no, I couldn't possibly-"
He swallows, "Relax. It's just a taco, dude."
She chuckles, "Okay, *dude*." She says, snatching it from his hand and taking a bite.
Humiliatingly, Addison realises this is the first thing she's eaten in hours - the flavour hitting her tongue with the intensity of a freight train as a horrifying moan escapes her lips.
Alex beams, "Right? I love these guys. Cristina tipped me off to them."
She swallows, shyly nodding. "It's a really good taco."

They sit in silence for a moment, watching the food trucks and the people huddled up in front of them.
"This is my favourite part of the day." He mutters.
Addison raises an eyebrow, turning her head again to look at him. "This? People watching near food trucks with your coworkers?"
"No, no I mean - *this*-" He gestures vaguely to their surroundings. "Watching people - normal people just living out their lives in peace. The small, mundane crap you don't think about half the time until you start taking a few too many knocks to the head. The simple stuff makes it all worth it, you know?"

Addison looks back at the trucks, watching the people walking down the street, the food truck employees yelling at each other over sandwiches, the small groups of friends smiling giddily at each other after taking bites of their meals. She can't help but think of the little girl who scraped her face cycling down a hill and the redheaded teenager that couldn't pronounce her own name because of her braces.

She swallows, salt coating her tongue as she blinks back tears. "Yeah, I get what you mean."
He either doesn't notice or doesn't acknowledge her state. "It's why I do it, anyway. It just feels like the right thing to do, you know? And even if I didn't have powers I would've just found a different way to do stuff like this."
"Helping people?"
He nods, "Helping people."
She smiles - it doesn't reach her eyes. "You're a good guy, Alex. Don't let it get beaten out of you."
"Did it get beaten out of you?"
She doesn't answer.

"Employees should be aware that if they enter into a personal relationship with a subordinate employee, a conflict of interest may exist, which requires full disclosure to the Company." — SDN Employee Handbook, page 8

She gets back in through the fire escape, hands trembling as she opens the window and tumbles inside. Milo looks up from his position on the floor, seeing her and quickly returning to playing with his toy. Addison pushes herself off the floor, closing the window behind her and massaging her neck. She pads over to the kitchen, looking back and forth between the fridge and the worksheet. Sighing, she sits at the table and picks up the pen. The words are finally beginning to flow - within five minutes, she's done. Addison laughs, picking up the piece of paper and reading over her work, beaming. She tucks it away in her purse with pride filling her chest.

A knock at the door pulls her attention. She frowns, pulling on an old Pixies T-Shirt (Derek's, accidentally stolen) and padding to the door.
Meredith stands at the other side, phone held in her non-casted hand, showing her an image of a flaming figure flying in mid-air. "Look who's famous."
Addison groans, "Seriously? Fuck."
Meredith shrugs, tucking the phone into her pocket and crouching down, picking up a bottle of wine from off the floor. "I wouldn't worry about it too much - plenty of people with fire powers in Seattle."
Addison steps to the side, taking the bottle from Meredith and closing the door behind them. "Please don't tell me Molotov can fly."
Meredith looks over her shoulder to see Addison. "Honestly? I have no idea."
Addison nods, walking over to the kitchen and grabbing wine glasses.

She comes back to see Meredith sitting on the couch, leaning forward to scrutinise the still unfinished Lego set.
Addison cringes, "Look, it's not-"

"Relax, it's cute. Nice to see you have hobbies outside of fucking your coworkers and talking about how you don't want to live anymore."
Addison snorts, "Jesus, Meredith!"
"Okay, that last part was hyperbolic but it *did* make you laugh."
Addison rolls her eyes, sitting next to Meredith on the couch and handing her a glass. She opens the bottle and pours into both their glasses.
Meredith takes a sip. "What is this, the Death Star?"
"Millennium Falcon."
"Yeah, that means nothing to me. I've never actually *seen* Star Wars."
"*What?*"
"I haven't seen them!"
"Never? Not even a little bit?"
"Nope."
Addison gasps, melodramatically placing a hand over her chest before reaching for the remote.
"What are you doing?" Meredith asks.
"Uh - *fixing* that."
"You can't be serious."
"Well, I can't exactly let you drive home now. So yes, I am serious."
Meredith laughs, "Okay, then."
Addison grins, "Great!"

She puts on A New Hope ("But isn't that the fourth one?" "Watching them in chronological order is the worst possible decision you could make."), gleefully watching the familiar scenes play out on the TV, occasionally leaning into Meredith to provide trivia.
Halfway through the movie Meredith speaks up. "Okay, I think I get it now."
"Get what? Star Wars?"
"The appeal. Luke spends his whole life on a boring little water farm until Ben shows up and whisks him away into something new and exciting. It's the perfect power fantasy for nerdy kids who want some crazy, external factors to take them out of their situations."
Addison nods, "What do you mean by that, exactly?"
Meredith sighs, finishing her glass (the bottle is empty, Addison's glass is half-full) and grabbing the remote to pause the movie. "I don't know, I guess I just - I'm too dark and twisty to appreciate it right. I just don't think you can wait for someone to fly underneath you and save your life like that. I think you have to save yourself."
Addison nods.
"I'm sorry, I know you really love this movie and I'm drunk and-"
"No, I get it."
Meredith blinks, raising an eyebrow. "You do?"
"Yeah. I do. We have to save ourselves."
Meredith swallows, "Okay."
"But maybe - just maybe - people can save themselves... *together*."
A small smile lights up Meredith's face - Addison's heart races. "I think you might be onto something there."
Addison giggles, lifting the wine glass to her lips. "I have good ideas sometimes."
They fall asleep on the couch before the credits roll.

Chapter 10: Tomorrow I will change (and today won't mean a thing)

Chapter Summary

Addison goes back to work. Among other things.

Addison wakes to a sound she would best liken to a chainsaw. Or maybe a gunshot. She startles, scrambling into a defensive position on the other side of the couch, scorching fists raised in front of her. On the other side of the couch, head tilted back, freely snoring, sits Meredith. Addison chuckles, extinguishing her hands and relaxing momentarily, only to realise that sunlight is peeking through her windows. She looks to the clock on the wall, sighing in relief at the realisation that she actually woke up before her alarm.

She reaches out a hand, gently shaking Meredith's shoulder.
"Meredith."
She continues to snore.
"Meredith, wake up."
More snoring.
"Meredith!"
The snoring ceases, suddenly cut off.
Slowly, Meredith blinks awake. She smirks, "Hey."
"Hey."
"Did we fall asleep?"
"Yeah - it's tomorrow. Come on, we have work."
Meredith picks up her phone, tapping the screen and squinting at the displayed time. "Yeah... in *two hours*."
Addison rolls her eyes. "Well, I have a doctor's appointment in one, so come on." She says, standing up and reaching down a hand.

Meredith takes it, rising off the couch. "So what I'm hearing is we have time-"
"I would burn off that cast."
"I'd let you."
A beat. They stare at each other. Meredith swallows - Addison watches the way her throat bobs.
"Fifteen minutes. No hands."
"Deal."

Meredith pushes her back onto the couch. Addison runs her tongue over her bottom lip as Meredith climbs on top of her, straddling Addison's lap. Meredith's left arm loops around her shoulders, fingertips tickling the back of her neck before Meredith pulls her in for a kiss. Addison moans, hands moving to cup her face as she grins against Meredith's (admittedly a

bit chapped) lips. Addison cracks an eye open. Pale, wintery irises stare back at her; a blue that burns with the sharpness of ice cracking under Addison's feet. Meredith winks - for that split second, Addison feels that she is dying of thirst.

Addison pulls them apart, a wet smacking of lips echoing in her ears. Spit drips from Meredith's bottom lip.
Meredith grins, a playful glint in her eyes. "Was was that for?"
"No hands, remember?"
Meredith scoffs, "Seriously?"
"Oh, I am *dead* serious."
"Really? Prove it, then."
Addison laughs, gently shoving Meredith off of her lap. Meredith stands with a petulant sigh. Addison hooks her fingers around the collar of her shirt, slowly pulling it upwards over her head. Meredith gives a low whistle.
"I'm not a pornstar or anything, relax." Addison mutters.
"You fuck like one."
Addison lifts the rest of her shirt over her head, folding it into a long strip. "Do I need to put a gag on you?"
"Don't threaten me with a good time."

Addison rolls her eyes, standing to face Meredith. A small part of her revels in the fact Meredith has to look up at her now.
"Turn around." Addison commands.
"Why?"
"Because otherwise I'm not gonna have sex with you."
Meredith rolls her eyes, turning so her back faces Addison.
"Hands behind your back."
"What, are you planning to tie me up? Kinky." Meredith teases (she obeys).
Addison wraps the shirt around Meredith's wrists. "Says the masochist."
"At least I don't like being spanked."
Addison ties the shirt into a knot, keeping Meredith's wrists bound together. "How's that?"
Meredith tests it, nodding, "I can get out if I want to." She says, turning to face Addison (or more accurately, Addison's breasts).
"Eyes are up here."
"I'd rather look at your nipples."
Addison laughs, "Pervert." She ribs, pulling Meredith back on top of her as she falls back onto the couch.

The agreed-upon fifteen minutes quickly morph into twenty, then twenty-five. Addison nearly combusts after thirty minutes, prompting Meredith to lean back from her kneeling position on the floor (which she has been in since minute six), smirking with bright red lips as a shining layer of... *Addison* drips down her chin.
Meredith grins, "How are we feeling?"
Addison pants, eyes flicking up at the wall clock with a groan. "Like I need to go see my therapist in half an hour." She breathes, still trying to catch her breath as she slowly rises from the couch with trembling legs, stepping over her discarded panties and bending over to undo the knot binding Meredith's wrists together.

"I'm sorry about this - I would do you but I need to-"
Meredith shrugs, "Don't worry about it. I had my fun watching you squirm."

Addison laughs, "Okay, well... I'm going to rinse all of..." She gestures between her legs. "*That* off and then I need to go - would you mind feeding Milo while I'm in the bathroom? There's wet food in the pantry."
Meredith's gaze - previously playful - softens into something more tender. She smiles, "Yeah, sure."
Addison nods graciously before walking into the bathroom. "Thank you!" She exclaims over her shoulder.

Addison gets out of the shower five minutes later, quickly lighting and extinguishing herself as she moves to exit the bathroom; Meredith stands outside the door, Addison's work clothes bundled in her arms.
"I took a guess." Meredith says, handing Addison a fresh pair of panties.
Addison chuckles, jumping into them. "Thanks."
Addison dresses herself in silence, Meredith buttoning her shirt for her before Addison is running out the door, her purse in one hand and a piece of toast in the other.
"The spare key's under the mat. Lock the door with it when you leave and give it back to me at work?"
"No problem."

Addison would generally compare sitting in the waiting room of the Bayside Wellness Group office to pulling teeth. She sits on a deceptively uncomfortable leather couch, one pantyhose-clad leg crossed over another as she stares impassively at the coffee table covered in magazines in front of her (her first appointment she was on one of the covers - well, Red Rocket was). Her left hand loosely plays with part of her hair, clumsily twirling the red strand over and over again until it tangles around her finger. Her right hand brushes against her breast pocket, where the folded worksheet rests inside. Her purse lays at her feet. The waiting is always the worst part. Sitting still, sitting in silence, hoping something happens. Her foot taps in the air incessantly, ceiling light reflecting off the black leather of her shoe, the thin red heel stabbing into the empty space next to her.

She sees one of the other doctors - the pediatrician, presumably - walk through the glass doors with a child in his arms. The receptionist trails behind them.
He looks to the waiting mother. "Here he is, all good!" He announces, adjusting his hold on the boy to whisper in his ear (she can *just barely* hear what he says - has her hearing gotten worse?).
"Next time you want to hide your vegetables, feed them to the dog. But you can't shove them up your nose - your nose is off limits as a hiding place. Okay?"
The boy nods, the doctor nods with him. Addison laughs. The receptionist looks to her with a raised eyebrow - Addison gives him a shy, tight smile before looking down, playing with the end of the compression sleeve under her shirt ("Normal people can't hear whispering from across the waiting room, Addison." She breathes, kicking herself internally).

She hears Dr Turner's footsteps quickly approaching the waiting room, the slapping of sandals against the hardwood floors pulling her attention (Addison had become familiar with

the way she walked after their third appointment: the way Dr Turner traipsed through the room, seemingly relaxed and casual but in actuality very tightly wound - her brother walks the same way).
"Addison? You can come on back, now."
Addison smiled - tight, artificial - before picking up her purse and rising out of her chair. She takes a step forward, anxious to get away from the receptionist with his blonde bowl cut and scrutinising gaze.

She doesn't realise that she's walked into the coffee table until she's on the floor.

Her ears are ringing. Addison groans, pushing herself off the ground shakily (tears are pricking in the corners of her eyes, she blinks furiously, desperate not to show weakness).
"Sorry! I'm okay!"
Dr Turner nods, pressing her lips together. She says something.

Addison cannot hear what Dr Turner says over the ringing in her ears.

"I'm fine! Really. Let's just-" Addison gestures towards Dr Turner's office with her head (her own voice is muffled too, like she's underwater).
Dr Turner nods, leading Addison into her office. Dr Turner opens the door, gesturing for Addison to enter - she does, the sound of the ceiling fan dulling her tinnitus. With a sigh escaping smiling lips, Addison sits on the couch.
Dr Turner shuts the door behind her. "So how did you go with that homework I gave you last week?"
Addison reaches into her pocket, fishing out the folded worksheet "I did it." She announces proudly, handing it to Dr Turner.
Dr Turner begins to unfold the paper.
"It helps that I had the dream again. Made it easier." Addison jokes.
Dr Turner looks from the worksheet unfolded in her hands to Addison, concern etched into her eyes. Addison looks down at her shoes, fingers moving to twirl her hair again.
"This is really good work, Addison. We could start talking about possible changes to the nightmare today if you like - unless there's something else you want to talk about?"

Her hair gets tangled between her fingers. Addison sighs, extracting her hand and running her fingers through her scalp to undo the knot. "I, um... I got suspended. Because of the bar fight. Today's my first day back."
Dr Turner remains silent.
"We were *all* going to get suspended initially but I told Richard that - um - that they were just defending me? Which they were. Because *I* started it."
"Did you feel guilty about the idea of them taking the fall for you? Is that why you told him?"
Addison shrugs, defeated. "I just... didn't want to lie."
She's so sick of lying.
Dr Turner sighs, "Addison, are you sure that was the right course of action? You're not worried about your job security?"
Addison swallows, "I... hadn't thought about it like that."
In her defence, this is technically her first "real" job.

Dr Turner nods, lips pressed together into a thin line. "Okay... What did you do while you were suspended?"
"Well, my boss said it was his way of making me practice self-care."
"And did you? Practice self-care?"
Addison shrugs, "I took a bath,"
While drinking directly from a bottle of wine and making a drunken booty call.
"Talked to my brother,"
Lying throughout the entire phone call.
"Had dinner with a friend,"
After getting into a fight and then proceeding to cry into Teddy's arms.
"Found a new coffee place,"
Moments before being held at gunpoint.
"And a food truck I like."
After jumping off a twelve-storey building.
Dr Turner softens, "It sounds like you had a good week, then." She says.
Baby blue eyes flash into her mind. Addison smiles, "I guess so, yeah."

Two bright orange dots on the fogged glass of Richard's door greet her. Addison squints, closing one eye only to see a dot disappear.
"Damn it." She whispers, pushing her glasses up to the top of her hand, gently massaging her temples with her fingers.
She takes a deep breath, holding it until her lungs feel like they're liable to burst, letting the breath go. She takes her compact mirror out of her skirt (*Cotton: Extremely flammable!* her brain reminds her), opening it in front of her face, brows furrowing when she sees her eyes. An unmistakable orange glow dances around the edges of her irises, threatening to engulf (and seriously clashing with) the usual green of her eyes. Her pupils are clear - blown and surrounded by familiar hazel.
She blinks furiously. "Come on, Addie - you're *fine.*" Addison breathes.

She knocks twice, gingerly turning the knob and sticking her head in the doorway. Richard sits alone at his desk. He looks up at her smiles.
"Addison."
"Hey... First day back so I just - um - wanted to say hi."
He smiles, "Come in, have a seat."
She gulps, crossing the threshold. "Sure." She titters, anxiously pushing the door closed behind her.
She uses too much force. A loud crash shoots through Addison's eardrums; she cranes her neck behind her and cringes. The wooden frame has been cracked in half, the glass has shattered into small squares resting in a pile on the floor.
"Oh my God, Richard, I'm so sorry I'll pa-"
"Addison, breathe. Do you realise how many doors we've broken in this office this year alone? It's nearly a rite of passage."
Addison chuckles - breathy, nervous. "Right." She squeaks, carefully walking over to the chair in front of Richard's desk and sitting in it.

Her eyes wander around him, not daring to look at the man himself. Instead, her gaze settles on a picture frame on the desk, tilted to face the corner. She squints at the blurry image,

lowering her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose and blinking when the photo comes into focus. In the foreground stand two people: Richard - with pride in his eyes, a fuller head of hair and less grey in his beard - and a girl in a long, green and black gown. Her dirty blonde hair is matted, blue eyes still wet with tears and bloodshot. She's smiling in the photo, Richard's arm held protectively around her shoulders. Despite the joy, Addison can't help but notice the pain in the girl's eyes - *Meredith's* eyes.

Richard clears his throat. "My goddaughter - she graduated from Dartmouth."
Addison looks back at him, smiling politely. "You must be proud of her."
He blinks, gaze softening. "I am. She's like a daughter to me..."
A loaded, long, uncomfortable pause.
"You are, too, you know."
Addison sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Richard..."
"It's true! It feels like just yesterday I met you: angry and scared and-"
"Well in case you haven't noticed, Richard, I'm not exactly twenty-four anymore! Or blonde!"
She's still angry, though - and she still has a bit of a deathwish.
He frowns, leaning back in his chair as his demeanour deflates.
"How was your time off?"
She shrugs, "Okay - managed to actually clean up my apartment."
He nods, "Whats your favourite colour?"
"Excuse me?"
"You said that you lie awake at night because you don't know what your favourite colour is and you don't feel like a real person; so, what's your favourite colour?"
"..."
"Addie?"
"...Blue."
He nods, "Huh."
"What?"
"I just..." He shrugs, "I thought it would be red."
"...Me too."

Teddy's head peeks out of the cubicle walls as Addison approaches her desk. Teddy leans back in her chair as Addison rounds the corner, setting her purse down in the corner of the desk and pulling out her own chair.
"You're back!" Teddy beams.
Addison smiles sheepishly. "That I am." She says, sinking into her chair with a gentle sigh.
Teddy points to the corner of Addison's desk opposite to her purse. "You have a gift?"
Addison turns her head. "I do?"
In the corner of the cubicle, glinting faintly in the overhead lights, sits a bottle of whiskey, a folded note next to it. A grin creeps onto Addison's lips as she takes the note, unfolding it carefully with both hands. A key falls out onto Addison's lap - her spare apartment key. She laughs, hastily depositing it in her purse before looking back to read the note.

Welcome back!
Congrats on not getting fired (and thanks for making sure none of us did :))
-G Team

She rolls her eyes, lips in a face-splitting grin as she tucks the note into her breast pocket. Addison hears footsteps begin to approach her - an irregular rhythm of weighted, assertive strides - Jackson's. She turns in her chair. He stands before her, cape draped behind his shoulders, nervously tapping a small card in one hand with a pen in another.
Addison raises an eyebrow, giving him a simper. "Morning."
Jackson smiles, a slight anxiety in his eyes. "Hey, welcome back."
"Thanks."
"I see you saw the whiskey." He gestures to the bottle.
"I did - thank you, by the way."
"Oh, it was Phantom's idea - Glacier wrote the card. We all chipped in to buy it."
Addison nods, "Well, thank you."
"Yeah, sure."
A beat. Jackson keeps tapping the pen against the card.
Addison smirks, "Do you think I'm going to bite your head off or something?"
"Oh, no! I'm sorry it's just..." He looks around quickly before crouching slightly, lowering his voice to a whisper as he speaks, "It's Virtue's birthday today. We're gonna surprise her in the break room at lunch with cake and stuff, it's just... really hard to surprise her, is all. Would you mind writing something in the card?"
Addison smiles, "Of course not, give it here."
He hands the card over, she swivels in her chair to place it on the desk. She clicks a pen, carefully writing in the corner of the card with a steady concentration and unsteady hands. She hands the card back to Jackson after taking far too long to write.
He nods graciously. "Thanks, Addison."
"No problem."

Jackson begins to walk away, before Richard's voice stops him in his tracks.
"Golden Guy, great! I was just looking for you!"
Jackson stills straightening his posture to face Richard.
"You needed me, Chief?"
"Could you get the others into the conference room? We need to talk before shift starts."
Jackson nods, hiding the card for April behind his back. "No problem."
"Great."
Jackson strides away. Richard turns the corner to where Addison and Teddy are seated.
"Are you two coming?" Richard asks, tapping his fingers against the cubicle walls expectantly.
Addison and Teddy exchange a glance.
"Yeah."
"Just give us a sec?"
Richard nods, "We'll be waiting." He asserts, turning around and walking away.

Teddy clicks her tongue. "It's coming up, right? You excited?"
"What's coming up?"
"Your birthday? You're gonna be what, thirty-eight?"
Addison raises an eyebrow. "Teddy, my birthday's in *October*."
Teddy's brows furrow. "Addie - it's *October first.*"
Humiliation settles itself into her spine. Surely it can't be, right? She taps the screen of her phone, shame coiling in her gut when she sees the date: October first. "Oh! I - um... right..."
Teddy's gaze softens. "Do you wanna-"

"Ted, *please*. No, okay? *I'm fine*."
Teddy sighs, "Let's see what Richard wants."
"Yeah."

The others are seated around the conference table when they arrive, Richard standing expectantly at the head of the table. He nods towards the two empty chairs on opposite sides of the table: one next to Meredith, the other next to Cristina. Teddy sits in the one next to Cristina. Addison sighs, pressing her lips together as she pulls out the chair next to Meredith (trying very hard to ignore the way Meredith is currently staring at her neck).

Richard clears his throat. "Thank you all for coming. I'm sure you're wondering why you're here. As I'm sure all of you know by know-" He shoots a glance over to Addison, "A few days ago, a residential building collapsed. A lot of people were injured. Even more were killed. Families have been displaced and torn apart. Two of our very own were on the scene-" He gestures towards the table. Meredith sinks back into her seat, Jackson straightens at the attention.
"Grey Ghost has made a fantastic suggestion that I agree with: that we should work to aid the people who have been affected by this tragedy."
Jackson raises a brow. "Saving their lives wasn't enough?"
"We didn't save enough." Meredith snaps.
A beat. All eyes are on Meredith.
"What?"

Richard clears his throat. "As I was saying, I've been thinking about it and I think the best course of action would be a fundraiser. I propose-"
"What if we did a firefighter calendar?" Izzie blurts.
Everyone turns in their chairs to look at her. Izzie shrinks.
"I'm sorry! I just totally interrupted you! It was a stupid idea anyway let's just-"
Richard holds up a hand. "No, Brightburn, I wasn't going to say that. I'm actually a little curious on what you meant by that, exactly."
Izzie gulps, "Oh! Uh - well, the fire department had one last year to raise money for a line-of-duty funeral and those things aren't exactly cheap so I just thought... that it'd be a good way to fundraise? Everybody loves superheroes, right?"
"Sex sells." Alex chimes.
Richard nods, "...Well, we certainly do have a... good-looking collection of young people in this room-"
"Please never say those words again, I think I just vomited in my own mouth a little." Addison mutters.
Nods and sounds of agreement all around the room.

Richard sighs, "Well, I don't see why we can't have a..." He gesticulates in Izzie's direction, "Pinup calendar featuring the men and women of SDN."
Lexie raises her hand. "Not that I'm against the idea of this but... why are you asking *us* about this? I know Grey suggested the fundraiser but isn't this more of a 'whole office' conversation? Or a 'best team in the branch' conversation?"
Richard blinks, "But... you *are* the best team in the branch."
"What?"

"Huh?"
"Come again?"
"I'm sorry?"
"You're kidding, right?"
"Have none of you people even so much as *glanced* at the leaderboards the last two months?"
Everyone pauses, looks to each other, and shakes their head, general sounds of agreement echoing through the room.
Richard rolls his eyes. "Well, like it or not, you're more or less the faces of the branch right now. With that comes conversations like these."

A beat. Addison drums her fingers against the table. "So, would *we* be doing the calendar, then? And *civilians* would see it?"
Richard shrugs, "It would be a fundraising event, so no use restricting purchases. Who's *in* the calendar seems like something you can all work out amongst yourselves... Assuming you would all be *willing* to do it?"
"Yeah."
"Sure."
"It's for a good cause."
"I'm okay with it."
"Been meaning to show off my abs, anyway."
General sounds of agreement are made amongst the rest of the group. Addison bites her lip. Meredith notices.
"You don't have to do it if you don't want to, you know. It's okay." Meredith whispers over the others' chatter.
"No, it's fine, I just... I doubt burnt toast is gonna really sell well."
"...Addison, are you fucking blind? Like, genuinely - have you looked in a mirror like, ever?"
Addison chuckles, "Flattery will get you nowhere."
"Flattery implies I'm being insincere. I'm not."
Addison gives her a small smile. She reaches under the table to squeeze Meredith's thigh gently.
Richard clears his throat. "Well, with that, I will leave you all to start your shift. Think about it, will you?"
Everyone nods, getting up to leave the conference room.

Addison and the team have developed a rhythm. She's sure of it. She feels it in the way confidence has settled in her bones when she sends them out on calls. She hears it in the banter they exchange when things get slow. Trust. New, but strong. They have her back, she has theirs.

She has to remind herself of this when she walks into the bathroom after their first shift, only to see Izzie and Lexie bickering as Izzie has their arms held under the sink.
"It hurts!"
"I'm sorry, I'm sorry - but that's how you know it's working!"
Addison blinks, rubbing her eyes before taking in the scene before her: Lexie's right sleeve has been rolled up to her bicep, revealing a bright pink, angry looking patch of skin on the back of her forearm. Izzie's jacket has been discarded to the side of the sink, revealing an eclectic collection of small scars (mostly burns - far less severe than Addison's) all over her

bare arms. Izzie's left fingers and palm are a similar - albeit lighter - shade of pink.
Addison clears her throat, Izzie and Lexie's heads snap over to her.
"It's not what it looks like!" Lexie sputters.
Addison raises an eyebrow.
"Okay, it's exactly what it looks like." Izzie laments.

Addison nods, "How long have you been holding it under the water?"
Lexie shrugs, Izzie checks her phone.
"Fifteen minutes?"
Addison sighs, "Stay here, keep doing that - I'll get the burn kit."

Lexie stares at her with a slight pout as Addison finishes her dressing.
"It's rude to stare."
Lexie pales, "Oh, no! I'm sorry, I just... you look tired, is all."
Addison scoffs, a playful smirk on her lips. "Wow, thanks."
Izzie shrugs, "She's right - no offence but you kinda look like shit right now."
Addison turns her head to face the mirror, cataloguing the loose, frantic bun she pulled her hair into mid-shift without thinking (In her defence, Meredith was in the middle of a car chase - Addison had better things to worry about at that moment), the small coffee stain on her shirt collar (she missed her mouth while sending George out on a safety patrol - it was humiliating) and the smudged, caked concealer that has been slightly wiped away under her eyes, purple shining underneath.
Addison purses her lips. "Well, I had a week off of your insanity and I've been thrown back into the deep end - it's like herding stray cats with you people."
Izzie cackles, Lexie nods sheepishly.

Lexie thanks her in earnest before scurrying out of the bathroom ("I'm supposed to get April's cake!"). Izzie gathers her jacket in her good hand.
"Are you gonna be okay with your hand like that?" Addison asks.
Izzie shrugs, "I should be alright - never stopped me before."
Addison grimaces, "That's... almost exactly what I used to say. And then it *did* stop me."
Izzie nods intently, leaning against the sink. "What do you suggest, then? It's not too deep, you took care of it - thanks, by the way, this is a way better topical than what I've been using."
Addison sighs, "How did you manage that, anyway? I sent you two to deal with *a building fire*."
Izzie looks down at her shoes. "I might have maybe been... trying to show off? Just a little!"
"Brightburn." Addison scolds.
"Izzie's fine."
"We're at work - codenames at work."
"I - yeah, fair."
Addison fiddles with her glasses before finally taking her hair out of the bun, smoothing it down with heated fingers. "Okay, crash course in the Red Rocket school of superheroics: don't show off - and if you're going to, *be careful*. You can control fire at a distance - *keep it at a distance*. Trust me, you burn yourself so much less when you stop opening yourself up to stupid mistakes."
Izzie nods emphatically. "Right."
"And don't skimp out on burn care, seriously. I learnt that the hard way. The goal is for you to

keep your fine motor function even *after* you retire."
"I mean - you can't really compare that with your circumstances, can you? You got injured."
Addison clenches her jaw, desperately trying to steel her expression. The masks slips - if only for a split second. "Well, it still helps to be careful. Burn for longer, not brighter... which I realise sounds ironic given, well, you know."
Izzie laughs, "No, you're right - it's good advice. Thanks, Addison."
Addison simply nods, giving Izzie a tight-lipped smile.

Izzie leaves the bathroom and Addison lets out a groan, quickly turning back to the mirror and hastily trying to fix up her appearance. She's thankful she had the sense to keep her concealer on her person today (she should've known better than to think the botch job she did at a red light on the way to Dr Turner's office would cut it), frantically fishing it out of her pocket and unscrewing the cap. She's dabbing it under her right eye when the door to the bathroom opens again - she startles, only to realise it's just Meredith, then she relaxes.

"Where was the boxing match?" She quips.
"Right here." Addison points to her forehead, "I swear you guys are gonna give me grey hairs."
Meredith chuckles. She leans against the sink at Addison's left, inching her eyes closer to the side of Addison's face, breath tickling your neck.
"You know you *are* greying, right?"
Addison caps the concealer, setting it down next to the sink with a scoff. She makes eye contact with Meredith in the mirror. "What? I am *not*!"
Meredith sweeps some of Addison's hair behind her ear, gently wrapping a loose strand around her finger and holding it up to the mirror.

A strand of *grey* hair, originating from her temple.

Meredith smirks in the mirror. "See? You're greying."
Addison groans, "Are you fucking kidding me?"
Meredith shrugs, "Just face it, you're getting old."
"I'm *thirty-seven*."
Meredith tuts, a cheeky grin etched into her face. "So, so old. You're basically a cougar, you know."
Addison scoffs, "What, I'm preying on you?"
"It's okay, I like older women."
Addison rolls her eyes. "This is your fault. I have to deal with you almost getting stabbed every two weeks. It's stressful."
The sound of a toilet flushing pulls them out of their conversation. The two of them exchange nervous glances.

Cristina leaves the stall, approaching the sink to Addison's right and washing her hands in silence. She shakes her hands when she finishes, looking briefly to Addison and Meredith.
"Cristina-" Meredith starts.
Cristina raises a finger to shush her. "I saw nothing. I heard nothing. I am Helen Keller. I was never here." She declares, reaching for the paper towels, drying her hands in more silence and promptly leaving the bathroom.

A blush sprouts slightly, breaking up Meredith's usual deathly pale complexion. She pulls her hood down, running her hands through her hair as she checks the remaining stalls. Addison finally finishes re-applying her concealer.
Meredith finishes checking the furthest stall, only to find it empty. "Oh, thank God."
Addison rolls her eyes. "Bathrooms are for shitting in after your first coffee, amateur wound care and re-doing your concealer. Not for..." She gestures vaguely between the two of them, "Whatever this is."
Meredith tilts her head from side to side. "True - we haven't done it in here."
"That's because it's impractical. And disgusting."
"I mean - a lot of what we do could be classified as those."
Addison laughs, "Okay, I'm leaving now - isn't there a surprise party we need to be at?"
Meredith smacks her forehead lightly. "Oh! Right! I'm supposed to get balloons!"
"Then go get the balloons?"
Meredith cringes, "I need to pee first."
Addison snorts, "Okay, *now* I'm leaving. Don't fall in or anything." She jokes, opening the door and walking out.

The break room is crowded when Addison finally walks in. George and Izzie are at the back, George standing on a chair in the effort to hang up a "Happy Birthday!" Sign being held up by Izzie. Meredith and Cristina are across from the vending machine, Cristina handling the helium tank ("Don't go anywhere near this Addison, I don't wanna explode." "Wow, thank you for the vote of confidence.") and handing the balloons off to Meredith and Teddy, who tie them together in bundles. Lexie sits in the centre table with the cake, head in her hands as Alex delicately tries to fix smudged icing with a spoon.
"I don't know what's worse, you dropping the cake or that time Bambi fell down the stairs." Alex ribs.
George huffs, "That was *one time*!"
"Yeah, one *hilarious* time." Meredith quips, tying off a bright pink balloon.
George groans.

Then, silence. Everyone in the room (sans Addison) freezes, whipping their heads to look at the closed door.
Addison raises an eyebrow. "What's going on?"
Alex shushes her. "They're coming - can't you hear them?" He whispers softly.
Addison shakes her head.
The door opens, Addison turns her head. April stands frozen, hand on the doorknob, eyes wide. Jackson stands behind her, grimacing and rubbing the back of his neck.

Lexie is the first to speak. "Surprise! Well, you're kind of early for the surprise but - you know - surprise!"
An eclectic murmuring of "Surprise!" Rings out through the break room.
April beams, "You guys really went through all this trouble?"
Izzie shrugs, "Of course we did. You're our friend."
Alex holds up his spoon. "The cake is... a little wonky, sorry. I dropped it."
"No you didn't, I dropped it." Lexie says.
"Dude, I was covering for you."
April laughs, "Thanks, guys."

Jackson cuts the cake, carefully handing a corner piece to April, who accepts it graciously. Their fingers brush during the handoff, Jackson smiling sheepishly. Everyone else takes a piece one by one, Addison taking the last piece at April's insistence ("Are you sure? It's *your* birthday cake, you're entitled to a second piece." "Don't be silly! Take it!"). Addison nibbles on the cake shyly, careful not to smudge icing on her upper lip. Meredith sits at the table across from her, Izzie and Teddy between them. She tunes out the conversation the others are having, eyes focused on stormy, mask-framed eyes across from her. Meredith gives a small smile. Addison smiles back.

A rapid change in colour on the TV in the corner of the room (and Addison's peripheral vision) drew her attention - she tilts her head only to see herself on the screen.
"Hey, can somebody unmute that, please?"
Alex clicks a button on the remote. The news achor's voice fills the room.
"-And just last night, there were reports of an unidentified super flying through Uptown Seattle - whole body *on fire*. Are they friend, or foe? Because at the moment, all they are is an unknown."
Addison watches the footage of herself taken from the ground - she looks erratic, manic even. She flies through the air in loops, jets through the air in sudden bursts of speed and soars off into the clouds nowhere to be seen. She sighs, head falling into her hands.
"Fuck." She breathes.

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