

**Riley**  
**By LizLuvsCupcakes**

**October 19th, 1995**

The hospital is just how it always is. The smell of antiseptic lemony floor cleaner and the uncomfortable stillness, only punctuated by phones ringing or by distant screams ringing through the halls to the lobby, is accentuated by the dim hum of the fluorescent lights. Her wet boots squish against the damp, filthy doormat and squeak against the pale black and off-white tiles. Hermano's nails click rhythmically as he follows her, big, brown eyes watching the room carefully, like a faithful bodyguard. He gives a soft *whoof* when he determines it safe enough.

"Thanks, buddy," she says, unzipping her coat and revealing the black cotton and faded print of her second-hand band shirt. "Hi, Dolores," she calls over her shoulder. She doesn't even look. It seems pointless. After all, it's Thursday, Dolores always works on Thursdays. And sure enough, it's Dolores who looks up as Riley walks across the lobby to the desk nestled in the upper-lefthand corner of the room. Her black sweater and glistening necklace of pearls doesn't really give *secretary* vibes exactly, but it's what she wears on Thursdays, so who is Riley to argue with a system?

The older lady's eyes catch Riley's, and her face stretches into a smile that says *how good to see you!* as her eyes soften with *and how terrible you're here*. "Well, hello, dear," she says cheerfully, as if nothing could please her more than to see Riley there, despite the massive pile of work on her desk.

"Is Dad here today?" She asks as if there's any possibility he's not, the same way she has since she was toddling into this lobby after Uncle Henry, clinging to his fingers with one hand.

"He surely is, you just go sit on down and Dr. D. will be right out." She smiles and pets Mano, who blinks at her with smug eyes that are thinking too much.

The waiting room is pretty empty today, but there are a few patients. One watches TV, turned to static. She's fairly sure his name is Rick, but she's never heard him speak. His black pyjamas are washed, though, and might even be new. Clive, a man in his fifties who writes horror novels with a tumour in his brain he's waiting to be removed, sits with a girl a few years older than her, one of the many interns that populate the hospital. They play chess directly across from her- or, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that she's about to beat him in chess. He stares at his king, like he thinks he still has a way to win, and she watches him blankly, as if she doesn't know she's already won. Clive wears a black button-up over his white patient uniform, while the girl remains in her uncomfortably sterile, white number.

The massive, fluffy husky settling on the itchy carpet draws the girl's attention, and she stares uncomfortably at the fifty-three pounds of fur and muscle and teeth that lazes on the floor.

"Hello," says Riley mildly when the girl makes no attempt at conversation. *Tense your cheeks. No, not too much. Settle back in your chair. Not too much eye contact.*

"Uh, hi," says the girl, not looking away from the dog. "You're not supposed to have pets in here."

“He’s very well behaved,” Riley says. *Soften your features. Let your brows rise. Attempt to appear sympathetic.* “Mano, say hello.”

Mano abruptly sits up and gives a single, sharp bark that sends the girl a good foot in the air.

Riley sighs. “Come on, don’t be a dick,” she says to the dog, who makes a series of rough sniffs as he settles back down.

“Is it- did it just *laugh?*” The girl demands, midway between terrified and insulted.

“No, of course not; dogs don’t laugh, do they, Mano?” She nudges his rump meaningfully with the toe of her boot, and vaguely wonders if the girl notices him roll his eyes.

*Idiot dog* says the voice in her head.

*Don’t be mean,* she chastises it. *I’ve had years to perfect my performance. Mano has existed for nine months.*

The girl’s whole body is tense and tight as if she’s barely restraining her desire to escape. “I- you have a dog named Hand?” She giggles, more of a titter really. “So, so what, he’s, he’s like a hand running around by itself? Ha, like that one from The Addam’s Family!” Here, she laughs, but her gaze is still locked onto Mano.

*Curl your lips upward. Expose teeth. Let out a series of soft, nonthreatening vocalisations.* “It’s short for Hermano.”

“Right,” agrees the girl. “Right. Okay. Can you please keep Hermano away from me please?”

“Don’t mind him, Mary,” Clive says without looking up. “He’s a big softie.”

“It’s *thinking,*” Mary insists.

“All dogs think.”

“No, it’s, it’s not thinking dog stuff.”

“He is very smart,” Riley informs her helpfully. “He knows how to open the fridge now. He just hasn’t figured out that he *doesn’t fit in there.*” She wonders why this particular person is afraid of dogs. The ones who pick up on Mano always are, but they’re usually reassured by how clever and friendly he is. And even the odd one that isn’t reassured knows better than to speak up against the presence of such a sweet, handsome dog.

Clive snorts. “You here to see your dad, Riley?”

“Yessir.”

“Mm. More than he deserves.”

Mary's eyebrows go up. She whirls her head to glare at Clive for a second, and she finally makes eye contact with Riley. "What? Why?"

*Cast your gaze downward. Slump your shoulders. Turn down your mouth slightly.* "He's not well. And I... don't think he likes me."

"Oh," says Mary. Her brow softens. Her muscles relax. "I, um, I'm sorry to hear that."

*Shoulders. One quick rise and drop. Don't change your voice or your face.* "Old gossip."

"Riley here visits her old man every month," says Clive. He moves one of his pawns in a weak attempt to defend his king. "At least she has for the five I've been in this dump."

Has Clive really been here for five months? *Time flies when you're wasting it.*

*Well,* she tells the voice in her head, *it isn't time yet.*

*When will it be time, then?*

*Soon. Now shush.*

An elegant woman in a lab coat and black velvet blouse and grey slacks opens a door on the other end of the room. She scans around the room with clever eyes and eventually catches sight of Riley. Dr. Drearmount doesn't have to call out for her anymore. She just has to step into the room, make eye contact, and then off they go. She peels herself out of the vinyl chair and turns to the dog sitting patiently beside her. "Come on, Mano."

Mano stands and follows her dutifully to the visitor centre.

"Uh, actually Riley?" Dr. Drearmount puts a hand on Riley's shoulder to stop her. "I was thinking it might be easier if you met with your dad in his room this time."

"Oh. Uh, okay." They haven't had to forego the visitor's centre since her father's episode when she was two years old. That visit had been so tense and ended so badly that they hadn't been allowed to see Dad for two months.

"And also? Do you think it would be okay if Mano went to visit some of our patients downstairs? It's been a rough day, and I think it would be better for everyone if he just..." she trails off, unsure of herself, but Riley isn't stupid. She knows the warning that can never quite be said out loud: *if your father sees that thing today, he'll go arctic.*

"Of course." She turns to the husky, who doesn't even wait for her order before trotting back from whence he came and down the stairs to where they keep the old people.

The walk to Dad's room is quiet and familiar- up a flight of stairs, first door on the left, two more flights and then a right turn. Into a hallway with padded doors with no windows and a few dozen locks. Screams permeate the air. Someone is laughing somewhere in the distance.

Dr. Drearmount leads the way to the desk, where a scrawny man with blond hair and blue eyes is busily typing away on a Pentium. "Can you get us into Room 625, please?" she asks calmly, impassively.

The man fishes out a sheet of paper and scribbles the room number down. "Name?"

"Dr. Katherine Drearmount, for Miss Riley Macready."

"Alright, let me just- wait," he interrupts himself as he stares at the file, eyes getting to the size of dinner plates, "Macready? Your name is Macready?" he asks, turning to Riley and backing slightly away in his seat.

She nods. "Riley, if you don't mind."

"Yeah, sure, just... you mean like-?"

"Yes, Gerald, *that* Macready," Dr. Drearmount tells him, her voice coated in warning. Then to Riley, "sorry, honey, he's new."

She nods. It's not the first time she's gotten that response, and it surely won't be the last. Every teacher she's ever had has done a double take upon seeing her name, and then, if she was lucky, carefully avoided her for the rest of the year. If she isn't lucky, Mrs. Baker has her tested five different times and campaigns the board to have her expelled.

"Did you follow the trial?" she asks mildly, in the tone of asking someone about the weather.

Gerald jolts, like he wasn't expecting her to bring it up. *They never are.* "I- oh god, I, I don't think anyone alive didn't follow *that* trial, miss."

She knows. She's known since she was eight years old, and she first asked why Mrs. Baker had been mad at her. Uncle Henry had dug out the old photos of him and Dad and their friends at their research outpost, and the old newspaper clippings, and the copies of the official documents that he had taken. He'd even kept the political cartoons, even the Mad Magazine that depicted Alfred E. Newman as her father, holding a Molotov in one hand and a bloody axe in the other, shrugging and saying, "I think it was aliens" with a dead dog at his feet. And if he's telling the truth, he has the Saturday Night Live sketch on one of the many tapes in the box, among the ones that chronicle the trial from beginning to end. If the anecdotal evidence holds, Eddie Murphey plays Uncle Henry's character, and Randal Macready is played by Kurt Russel, which she will believe when she sees.

"This says she's cleared for one-on-one supervised visitation," Gerald says, jerking her back to reality and pointing to the file on her father. "That's a mistype, right?"

"No, Gerald," says Dr. Drearmount, her mouth a firm, hard line. "Miss Macready is more than capable of visiting her father without us leering over them."

"Yeah, but-!"

"I'll be right outside the door if anything happens."

“Not to question your judgement, Doc, it’s just, if it’s the same guy, then are we sure she *wants* to go in there?”

“Gerald. She’s been here every month for twelve years. She’s sure.”

“No, that’s not- that’s all fine, it’s just, Christ, kid, do you have any idea how dangerous he is?” He’s finally looking at her, brows up and hackles raised, massive eyes scanning her face for surprise or fear.

Riley stares at him. *Bite your bottom lip. Speak softly, but don’t whisper. Blink your eyes hard.* “He tried to kill me when I was two. Remember, Dr. Drearmount?” *Nice touch on the quaver in your voice; selling it.*

Dr. Drearmount looks very grim but seems to recognize that she can’t stop this story. “That’s right. Sargent Macready wasn’t on his best form that day, and we figured a trip to the visitor’s centre would calm him right down.”

“I, I didn’t mean-!” Gerald stammered, but he was ignored.

“He lunged at Riley with a spork, it took five of us to get him off of her. We had to send her and Mr. Chides home early and they couldn’t come back for months.”

Sometimes she convinces herself that she can remember tiny details. The compression of Uncle Henry’s arms, holding her tight to his hammering heart. The sound of Randall shrieking. The feeling of her skin pulsing where he had managed to get her with the tiny plastic utensil. What of it is real? What is just her mind filling in the gaps with information she was given? She will never know.

All she knows is, Gerald is staring uncomfortably at her, and she feels slightly pleased that her point has been made and no more questions will be asked.

*Deep breath in, deep breath out. Harden your eyes. Sniff once.* “Can I visit my dad now, please?”

Gerald nods and gives Dr. Drearmount the key without further question.

There are only a few steps to Dad’s room, but it feels like forever before the door unlocks and Dr. Drearmount urges her inside.

There he is, right where she left him. Pacing back and forth in front of a picture of his crew on the desk, scattered amidst countless others like it as well as page after page of his indescribable scribbling. The men in the photo were numbered, everyone but him having a 1 to 11 written on him. He seemed to have settled on an order, she notices, marking Uncle Henry pretty consistently as 11. He has papers taped up all over the walls- some are pages of his own frantic rambling scribbles, and some are newspapers covered in red sharpie, marked up with declarations like “LIES” “WRONG” and even just the word “NO” written over and over all over the page. The issue he’s fixated on is from years ago, the one in Uncle Henry’s box, the one she stammered through when she was just learning to read and learning that people looked at her differently than other children.

## **Mad Pilot Kills Ten in Artic Rampage**

*U.S. Outpost 31 devolved into horror on June 25th, 1982, when outpost pilot Randall John Macready, according to record, suffered from a fit of isolation induced psychosis and slaughtered ten of his expedition partners, believing them to be aliens. He then, for reasons unknown, destroyed the entirety of Outpost 31, and is speculated to have destroyed a Norwegian base not 50 miles away. Our sources cannot confirm whether Macready killed the occupants of the Norwegian base, but Henry Chides, a researcher from Outpost 31, has said he believes it to be very likely.*

*"He was usually such a chill guy too," says Chides, who survived Macready's rampage and was able to give testimony to his bizarre behaviour culminating in such senseless violence. "He was quiet, but he'd grab a beer with you, play a game of chess, but those last couple weeks, I dunno man, he just got so cagey. But none of us thought anything was wrong, we just figured it was cabin fever."*

*When asked about Macready's claims of extraterrestrial life, Chides had this to say:*

*"I dunno about aliens, but he was going out of his mind those last few days. Scared Norris so bad he had a heart attack, then he killed the doc while he was trying to revive the poor guy."*

*Our correspondent attempted to reach out to Macready himself but was declined any access to him. The US Department of Defense representative insisted Macready was not fit to be interviewed, citing that he was currently sedated. When our correspondent asked to return when he was conscious, they were told this was also not possible, as his behaviour was too erratic and dangerous to expose anyone but trained personnel. "He's being pretty heavily guarded, it's too dangerous to bring food and water to him even. The docs have had him in sedation."*

*Additionally, our correspondent was informed that the United States Antarctic Program is currently under threat of inquiry by Congress, who cite that the program may be using government funds for little reward and incredibly high risk.*

*"We only send the best into No Man's Land," says House Speaker Tip O'Neal, "but Macready was the best, and so were his fellows, and look what went and happened."*

Paper crinkles under her feet. She surreptitiously picks up the sheet she's stepped on and examines it. Most of his "notes" are unintelligible scribbling rambles. Words she can make out include "not human", "adapts biology", "assimilation through bodily fluids?" "heart attack" and "saliva blood mucus tears earwax?"

He's too busy muttering to himself to notice her entering. "Palmer, Bennings, Fuchs, Blair, Morris, Copper, Clark, Windows, Garry, Nauls, Chides, Palmer, Bennings, Fuchs, Blair-"

"Hi, Dad."

She hates this part. Where Dad turns to face her and it's never quite clear if he's going to lunge at her or if she's going to get to have something like a conversation with him. Wildly, stupidly, she finds herself thinking *well, I guess I can kind of see Kurt Russel*. She knows fully well how muscular he is underneath the off-white of his patient's uniform, lithe and built a bit like an

Olympic sprinter (Dr. Drearmount told Uncle Henry during the visit just before Riley's fourth birthday that Dad had been allowed athletic therapy, whatever that meant). His mane of wild hair, once as chestnut as hers, was now streaked through with grey. That, paired with the beard, makes him look about ten years older than he is. And those bright, angry eyes, haunted by what they've borne witness to, are full of rage and thoughts and fears beyond even their own comprehension. The way he stares at her makes her every instinct stand up and scream *danger danger DANGER* and her every atom yearns to bolt out of the room. But she steels her nerves and stands strong and steady.

"Oh," he says softly. "It's you."

She shrugs using only one shoulder. "Here I am."

"There you are," he agrees, more to himself than anything.

"You've been... keeping busy, then?" She asks, gesturing to the wall.

He doesn't answer. He just keeps staring as he paces slowly up and down the room. "Where's your monster?" He asks after a long moment. "Decided to eat it already?"

She groans inwardly. "Mano is saying hello to the old people. I know you don't like him."

His brow furrows. "So I didn't kill it last time."

Last time, Dad kicked Mano hard enough to have him hit a table and knock it over. It really wasn't Dad's fault, he'd been threatened. Mano should have known by now that baring his teeth and growling was considered a sign of threat by dogs, and really, Dad yells at her every time she visits, he should have been expecting it.

"No," she tells Randall. "He was a little startled, but you didn't hurt him. I don't think he even remembers what happened, you know, dogs being as forgiving as they-"

"Bitch we both know that thing isn't a dog."

She blinks.

"Blair killed all your monsters before. You made a good half dozen of those things, and he killed them. Every last one. If he was here, he'd do it again in a heartbeat, you know that?"

"But he's not," Riley reminds him. "And Blair didn't kill the dogs. You did, remember?"

It's a fantastic interview, and she'll always be glad that Uncle Henry kept the tape- What an emotional display it is. Blair's daughter, whatever her name is, giving her tearful character witness of her father, describing a man who couldn't fix a busted car, much less manufacture a spaceship under a shack. And the part where they ask if she thought he could kill the dogs was particularly helpful. Her face collapses, and she starts sobbing about how her dad loved his cats and her dog and how he would never have hurt anybody and didn't deserve to die alone in the arctic. It has provided an excellent example of "sad" to work from over the years.

Dad, she knows, will see right through even her best display of “sad”, so she decides not to bother.

“... Aaaaaanyway,” Riley says uncomfortably, “Uncle Henry says hi. He had to do a work thing today. He’d be here if he could.”

“Yeah, no shit.” He doesn’t snarl it exactly, but it’s full of enough venom to knock her off her feet.

“He got a promotion the other day. And I got accepted into a new school. A special school for kids who are like me. Gifted kids. It’s a little further out of town, so we might have to move. So maybe when you get better you can move in with us.”

He snorts. “There’s nothing like you.”

She doesn’t bother arguing. “What, uh, what are you up to these days?”

“Why the *fuck* are you here?”

She doesn’t answer. There’s never an answer good enough for him. *Because I want to see you. Because I still hold out hope against hope that you might hate me a little less one day. Because I like pretending to be a family. Because where else do I have to be? Because if I don’t then you’re locked away in a room all alone forever.* None of them ever satisfy him.

*Because he knows.*

“Everything you did in the arctic wasn’t enough for you? Huh? No, you gotta step up your game and ruin my life even more, with everything you’ve done out here. Why? How the fuck can you bring me any lower? What more can you take away from me?”

“Dad,” she says, keeping her voice calm and quiet, “I didn’t do anything. I wasn’t in the arctic. You killed all your friends, remember?”

“You’re still sticking with that damn story?” He demands. “We both know that’s bullshit. That thing we found in the ice, whatever the fuck made you, cuz I know I don’t have a kid, whatever it was took over Chides and made- made *this*,” he gestures angrily towards her, “to get everyone to turn against me so you can assimilate me like you did with the rest of my team so you can carry out your master plan.”

“Okay,” she says, patience fraying slightly, “so what is the master plan, then?”

Dad freezes.

“You’re so sure about all that, what’s my plan? Let’s say I am trying to take over your body. What then?”

“Then you’ve killed everyone who knows what you really are.”

“And then?”



“Then you can call up your flying saucer, send a signal to wherever the hell you came from, and you and your fleshy dog buddies can take over the goddamn world-!”

“Dad. We have been *over this*. I don’t *want* the world. What would I even do with it?! And you still think all this, and why- because some old computer thought it was what would happen in, how long again? Two years? Where the hell did it even get those numbers?!”

His face is hard and set. “Hey,” he says quietly, “he tell you how Morris died?” He doesn’t need to say his name for Riley to know he’s talking about Uncle Henry. All the other Him’s that mattered to Randall John Macready are now dead.

She blinks. “Uh... Uncle Henry says you scared him,” she says slowly, “you scared him, and he had a heart attack, and then you killed Copper while he was trying to revive him.”

Randall Macready gives a humourless laugh. “Amazing. Only one part of that was true. Morris *did* die of a heart attack.”

She doesn’t respond. *Flee. Leave. Now.* She backs slowly towards the door.

“Which means,” Dad goes on, approaching her, “that he could die like a human.”

Then, without warning, he grabs her around the throat, wheels around and shoves her down onto the padded floor. There’s barely a thud, and she can’t get the air to scream.

“Which means this is enough to kill you, isn’t it bitch?” He snarls. “Isn’t it? You need fucking air, don’t you, whatever you are? This is how I fucking kill you, isn’t it, you cheating bitch?”

“D- Da... ad... pl... plea... se...” she gasps through her closed throat. Hands scrabble uselessly at his wrists, the lack of oxygen making it hard to get a good grip to pry him off.

“I,” he snarls, “am *not* your dad. Things like you don’t have dads. Whatever the fuck you are, you, you *thing*, you’re not one of us. You’ve never been one of us. And I knew, I always knew, and that’s why you wanted to kill me, isn’t it whore? Well guess what. You may have fooled everyone else. You may have fooled yourself. But you’ll never fool me. I know what you really are.”

She’s aware of her mouth gulping like a fish. Dad must think she’s about to start screaming, as if she had the breath to do that, because he clamps his free hand over her mouth, bearing down on her.

“And you know what else?” He growls in her ear. “I did want to believe in you. Sometimes I even let myself believe in you. That what you wanna know? Huh? You happy now?”

Between the black spots in her vision, something in her mouth catches her attention. A taste. Salty, clammy, and sweaty. It’s the heel of Macready’s hand.

*I am now.*

With all her strength, she clamps her teeth down on the flesh intruding into her mouth. He lets out a scream and loosens his grip just enough to squirm her head over his hand and take a sharp gasp of air.

“HELP SOMEBODY GET IN HERE-!!” She manages before he clasps both hands tightly around her throat and slams her back against the floor so hard, she sees stars. He’s on top of her for a few seconds, screaming that she’s murdered him, and swearing that he’s always known she will, and promising that if he’s going down then she’s going down with him.

But it would seem he’s mistaken in that regard. Because in less than a few seconds, the door slams open and a cavalcade of footsteps rush into the room.

“Riley!!”

“Sergeant Macready!!”

The world inverts on its axis again and she’s standing up, and hands are on her shoulders and her neck, trying to pry his hands off her throat, urging her father to please, Randall, please stop, come on now, let go, let her go Macready.

She’s pulled from him at the same second his hands come loose and is shepherded from the room in a cacophony of voices and people touching her. People sprint past her into Dad’s room, calling out numbers and colours and words she can’t hope to spell. Dad’s screams permeate the background of the unholy soundtrack, the prominent vocalist in an apocalyptic concert without an audience.

“Riley,” says a doctor whose name she can’t think of at the moment, “are you all right?”

She shakes her head, bringing trembling hands up to grip her biceps as her shoulders hunch downward. *Let your jaw start trembling. Secrete water, amino acids, sodium chloride, glutathione and collagen fibres through your eyes. Spasm your diaphragm repeatedly. Release a series of distress vocalisations.*

The reaction to the crying child is immediate. She’s whisked away and sat in a chair as orderlies and nurses and doctors run towards the sound of Dad’s screaming. Doctor Somebody pushes a cup of cold water into her hands, which she drinks slowly and dutifully. Somewhere in the chaos, Mano comes calmly up the stairs, as if he’s been expecting exactly this to happen at any moment, and rests his head on her knees with a decisive *boof*.

“Thanks, Mano,” she says shakily, burying her hands in his soft fur.

It takes forever for the noise to die down. At the end of it all, Dr. Drearmount stumbles back from the hallway where Macready resides. She moves slowly towards Riley, her hair a mess and her lab coat missing. “Riley, sweetie,” she says, kneeling next to Mano but looking at Riley, “I think that’s gonna be it for your dad today.”

“Think?” Repeats Gerald, his nursing uniform now sporting a dangling scrap of fabric where his pocket used to be. “He’s been sedated, miss, he’ll probably sleep through tomorrow.”

Well, she can appreciate the honesty. Even if it is a bit blunter than anyone risks being, at least he's up front about the fact that Dad hates her so much he had to be sedated to stop wanting to kill her. She lets this knowledge trigger a new series of spasms and bout of fluids from her eyes.

"Has he ever done this?" Gerald asks, more curious than afraid now.

"No," says Dr. Drearmount, handing Riley a Kleenex and rubbing her shoulder as the child tries to get control of herself back. "This is new."

*This is new.*

Those three little words get gears turning in Riley's head, thoughts to collect into a cloud that might become the shape of an idea. Yes, this is the worst meltdown Dad ever had with her in the room. Even worse than that time he got into a fistfight with Uncle Henry. Even worse than the time he tried to stab Mano. Never in twelve years of visiting him has he had an episode so bad he had to be sedated and brought a premature end to the visit. And he already thinks he's been infected. He didn't even realise she didn't break the skin. So now, if he's unconscious, and he already thinks he's infected anyway...

*Now?* Asks the voice in her head.

*Now*, she tells it. Keeping the quiver firmly in her voice (not hard, considering), she asks, "Can I say goodbye to him?"

"What?" Gerald blinks, his brows tilted, one higher than the other, in confusion. "Why?"

"I, I just..." *sniffle. Wipe your face, but not too much.* "I just thought, you know, I'm not supposed to get to see him next month, and I thought, I thought I'd just tell him I'm not mad at him, and, you know, not to worry..."

Gerald and Dr. Drearmount look at each other, and she can tell they're thinking the same thing: he's unconscious. She might as well tell the chair she's sitting on she isn't angry, for all he'll notice. But in that same vein, what's the harm, truly?

"Honey, of course you can," Dr. Drearmount squeezes her hand. She's cold, just like Riley. "Come on, let's go say goodbye together while Gerald calls your uncle."

Gerald takes his cue beautifully, immediately grabbing the phone and looking up Emergency Contacts, Macready, on his computer.

The room has been trashed, but now at last, Macready lies on the bed, peacefully sleeping. They've even covered him with the blanket, but that might just be so Riley doesn't see the restraints lashing his ankles and wrists to the bed.

She kneels beside him and brushes his hair back from his face. Then, carefully, she kisses his cheek and leans down to whisper in his ear: "goodbye, Daddy." The unheard words bring with them the tiny flecks of saliva on her breath, and with that done, she finally stands up and leaves the room.

Uncle Henry pulls up just as she and Dr. Drearmount step back into the lobby. He sprints up to her, still in his work clothes, his black dress shirt untucked and misbuttoned. The hurry he was in to leave must have messed it up, she can't imagine him letting himself be seen in such a state otherwise.

"Why the hell wasn't someone in there with her?" He asks, not sounding as angry as he could be.

Dr. Drearmount responds sardonically, "We had no way of predicting he would act violently. He hasn't lunged at her in just under a decade. But that does remind me, have you given any more thought to the procedure we discussed?"

"You mean the one where you knock him out and zap him?"

"Electroconvulsive therapy has been proven extremely effective as a last-resort treatment in several clinical studies- it's a painless procedure with a low rate of failure, and frankly after today I feel we can't make the situation much worse."

The voice in Riley's head speaks up as Dr. Drearmount's eyebrows go up. *We're going to need an alibi. He's going to be completely different, and we're going to need an explanation as to why.*

Uncle Henry's tone doesn't change, but his eyes are full of triumph. "What do I sign?"

The actual signature don't take long, and before long, they climb into Uncle Henry's beat-up Oldsmobile, where The Platters play on the radio and Mano curls up on a crusty old towel in the back seat. Riley isn't required to speak much, nobody expects her to, but she does give a polite goodbye as she slides into the passenger seat. Keeping her mouth turned down and her eyes moist and welling takes all her self-control and concentration, but she does it just barely, and off they go.

"Did you do it?" Henry asks after a long pause.

"Yes." Her features are back into their restful, normal state, the way it is always most comfortable to keep them. But now, she feels, is when a human would smile.

Mano gives a series of non-aggressive, amused snorts. Neither of them bother to correct him; they've already won.