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It was dark, a little past noon, and they were all getting antsy.

"He's late." Chase's thumb hooked the strap around his chest and gave it a tug. The rifle on his back gave a hop and settled. The crude, bulky gun seemed too large for the boy's shoulders. He shifted constantly trying to redistribute the gun's weight, and while he tried to disguise it as uncomfortable shoes or damp socks, it was obvious to everyone but him. And despite Sarge's prodding, he refused to carry anything else. There was importance about a man that carried his armament out in the open, no questions about what he could do.

"He's an upper. What the hell do you expect?" Jax leaned back to stretch, both hands resting in the crook of her back. Her voice strained as she reached the full extent of the motion. She returned upright, placing her hands on her thin hips, just above the two bulky pistols at her sides. She smiled through thin auburn hair, the light from her sun visor casting wavy shadows on her honey colored eyes.

She continued, "Sarge, were you this much of a prick when you were an upper?"

"If by 'prick' you mean untimely, then yes. Time moves different up there." He didn't smile, his teeth busy grinding a thick grey-green putty. He spat a chunk into the ground and dug the tip of his boot into it. He stared at the chunk, his mouth twisting into displeasure. "Don't matter much though, if the prick wants to be late, then we got to enjoy the scenery."

"You still chewin' on grass grease, Sarge? That shit'll kill you; you know that." Chase stared at Sarge's boot, his tongue making a *tsk tsk*. Jax scowled like Sarge had stepped in shit.

"I like the buzz." He stated, spitting a larger chunk into the dust.

"The killin' not doing it anymore?" Jax piped in.

Though her tone was cold and serious, Sarge knew this was her attempt at humor. He gave a weak *hah*, then spat another chunk into the dirt. Before he had time to give the chunk its

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proper burial, the entrance to the cogway grinded to life. The entryway wailed as steel grinded against steel and stone. The hatch was hundreds of feet up from the excavated city. Thousands even. But the wails filled every inch of the cavern, continuing long after the entryway sputtered open entirely.

For a moment the shaft remained still, mouth agape. Pure white light drenched the dark world below. Chase tipped his sun visor upwards staring slack-jawed at the sky through the metal frame. Jax squinted, bringing her hand up to shield her eyes. She felt tears well up. She blinked hard but refused to look away.

"Shit. It really is blue." Chase muttered.

"You think it was going to be red?" Jax asked in the same cold, serious tone.

Chase murmured something about not needing to be an ass. Jax replied by cupping her ear with her hand, encouraging Chase to repeat himself. Chase felt his face reddened. He shifted his stance, the rifle sliding listlessly back and forth against his back. His eyes darted from the metal frame to Jax, who's gaze was still fixated on the square of sky. He puffed out his chest, holding in the words he wanted to say.

Sarge shot a sideways glance towards the two. Jax's hand snapped to her side, her mouth tightening. Chase deflated. Sarge slid his hands into his pockets, shuffling his chip in between his fingers. His jaw shifted back and forth, hoping the grease would have some flavor left to it. He spat it out, not bothering to bury it, and began to walk forward.

Before Sarge could make it to the cogway station's sorry excuse for a bench, the cog burst from the hatch. This was the not the first cog Jax or Chase had seen, but they noted it was the nicest. And certainly, the cleanest. Even from a few hundred feet away, it was clear the cog was in pristine condition. The iron sphere had no dents or scratches, and from where they were

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standing, it seemed to have all its rivets. The gear that spun around the sphere's circumference was clean and polished, gleaming from the cog's lights.

Chase remarked that normally cogs' lights were too dim to really make out the track, but with this one, you could make out every nick and rust. It really didn't make him feel too confident about public transportation. The cog's lights, emitted by two rings of lights wrapped around either side of the contraption like the threads of a baseball, shone a steady cyan. If not for the brief illumination, it would be impossible to tell the track was even there.

Jax, either ignoring Chase or too caught up in her own thoughts to notice, hissed that they had scrubbed the personality from the thing. The cog didn't look right prettied up like a doll. It was a tool to be used. Not some piece to flaunt. She continued on, her volume steadily increasing. Sarge flashed her a tired look, stopping her before she grew louder than the approaching cog. It was time to start behaving. Jax and Chase nodded, adjusting their clothes and posture.

The cog clunked to a stop, revealing its cargo in a hissing of gas. The closest side of the sphere to Sarge opened upwards; the cross section of the sphere rotated on a hinge, allowing it to swing up like a luxury car. A set of three small steps creaked politely forward from the now open interior. With a cough and a hobble, a blockish man presented himself to the three onlookers. He was shorter than expected, though he could be taller if he stood up all the way. A thick white overcoat stuck tightly to the man's broad shoulders and drooped down loosely covering the remainder of his bright attire. A crimson vest wrapped around the man's long torso, revealing a white shirt and red necktie beneath. His legs were short for a man of his height, and his cream-colored pants seemed baffled by it, hugging tightly to his thin waist and clumping at his heels

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where more leg should have been. White shoes like cracked eggshells clicked delicately against the three metal steps as he descended. He had the face of a dignitary: clean, respectable, lying.

"Yes, hello there," he spoke loudly, opening and closing his mouth suddenly like a fish that had realized it may not have gills at all, "I am Ambassador Rutheford, however Jean is fine. I've never been a fan of titles."

"Alright Jean, we will be your escorts today." Sarge motioned to the boy and the girl behind him.

They stood, attempting to look poised. Stiff backs and blank faces being the best they could muster. Jean gave a weak wave and a cheery smile but retreated back into himself when he was met with unflinching expressions.

"I'm Sarge, this is Jax, and this is Chase." The girl nodded at the sound of her name; the boy bowed slightly, gripping his sun visor as he did so.

"Ah yes. *Sarge*. I remember now. You prefer your title," Jean began tugging on his ears as he talked, trying to pop his aching eardrums. He continued, "over your real name."

Sarge reached hesitantly towards his right ear unsure if this was some new social custom. It had been a long while since his last trip to the surface, many things had surely changed.

"Sarge *is* my name. Mitchell Sargent. I doubt my father had meant his last name to be the inspiration it turned out to be."

Noticing Sarge's mocking behavior, the ambassador stopped the assault on his ears, returning his hands to his sides.

Blushing, he replied, "Yes, I had forgotten how different the pressure down here is. They try to slow the process with pressurization in the Cloud, but." The shaft shrieked as it closed,

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pleading for the ambassador not to bore his audience with details of his unfortunate sensitivity to pressure changes.

Jax and Chase's eyes darted to the closing window. Their stares gripped the sky, pleading for the shaft to close slower.

"They've never been to the surface." Jean trailed off in thought.

"Nope." Sarge stated.

He turned around and walked slowly in between Jax and Chase. He firmly placed his hands on their shoulders. It was time to head out.

"Yep." Chase muttered, his eyes lingering.

"As you say, Sarge." Jax said. Her body turned to leave, but her head stayed turned to the hatch.

They waited until the hatch snapped shut, and the last of the light had sunk into the walls of the cavern. Sarge and Jean were enough ahead they had difficulty hearing what they were saying. They jogged to assume their places next to Sarge, maintaining as much dignity as they could salvage.

"That's terrible. They've never seen the Capital or the City of Glass or Versailles or," Jean's voice wobbled with each hurried step as he struggled to keep stride with Sarge's quickened gait.

"I don't care very much about places, Mr. Jean," Jax spoke, now close enough to enter the conversation. Jean turned slightly, attempting to make eye contact. Sarge was impressed she even got his name right.

"Yes, just Jean is fine." Jean tried to interject, but Jax, if she heard, paid it no notice.

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"As long as they all got the same sky." She finished with a quick puff of air, shooing hair out of her eyes. She stole glances at Chase, eyebrows raised, mouth stretched into a wide childlike grin. Chase did what he could to stay focused but was unable to contain the tiny sprouts of a smile peeking through.

"Yes, I suppose the sky is something we rather take for granted. It's a shame to think children have grown up never seeing the sky." Jean had given up trying to keep up with Sarge by this point and had contented himself to being perfectly in the middle of the party.

"We're not- Sorry, uh, sir." Chase's face became rigid, the two scars on his left eye giving him more years than he had earned. He flashed a look to Sarge and continued after a breath. "It's best to not see us as child. Children. We were tasked with protecting you after all."

"Yes, about that. Sarge," Jean's voiced changed becoming less jovial and just the more pretentious. "I don't expect this to be a dangerous job, but these two are so *young*. What if something were to happen?"

"Well, they're adults. They've worked with me for a few years. I trust these two." Sarge spoke slow, each word deliberate. He moved his tongue inside his mouth, searching for something to chew. Not finding anything, he added, "We may not be used to moving *living* cargo, but I think we'll manage."

"Living *cargo*?" Jean gave a pause after each word. He quickened his pace to move up to Sarge's side, his dwarfed legs stressed by the increased work. Sarge smiled and sucked on his teeth, which were slimy with grease.

"A little joke, Jean. Nothing to worry about. Aside from food and girls, I'd trust these two with anything." Sarge thought it over a moment and made a mental note to add guns to the list. He glanced back behind him at Jax and Chase. They sneered. Good, they were listening.

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"Don't worry about us, Jean. Jax and me are manipulators; we can take care of ourselves."

Chase piped in, his face still stoic. His voice confident.

"You two have been *altered*," Jean's voice lowered as if he were saying something profane in a room full of children. "Sarge, I'll have you know that having your staff altered after the recent laws is incredibly unorthodox, *especially* manipulators. Some people might think that you're trying to undermine the very institution you're working for..."

He trailed on, spouting strong words and phrases about the strength of the "*pure* human body" and how meddling with nature's intent could only lead to "pain and disappointment." Sarge gave no response aside from occasionally sucking air through his teeth. Jax and Chase's eyes stayed ahead. Jax drummed her fingers along the handle of her pistol. Sarge shot her a sideways glance. She frowned.

Jean paid no mind to their changing environment and showed no sign of slowing when they stopped in front of a large armored truck.

"Alright Jean. Time to get in."