

X

Inciting Incident

Once, the Fountain of Lead had been a simple, ordinary pigeon. Then, one night a long time ago, a great white flash overtook the skies. The little pigeon has spent every last day since outgrowing its own skin.

The Fountain is a behemoth, towering over the tree line. As it stands before its visitors, its body is unrecognizable. It bears nine shivering, patchy wings. Its exposed ribs are the breadth of a billboard, and its heart visibly beating beneath is the size of a car. It does not *just* have two eyes, either. Its beak is split like the mandibles of an insect. And from the gashes and scars across its body, it bleeds autumn leaves. The leaves which pour from its bruised and battered limbs wash through the streams and into the walls surrounding.

It has spent the last eight hundred years in extraordinary pain, and it does *not* want guests.

“What the fuck is that thing!?” Dell repeats, pointing at the Fountain.

The biped holding Phoebe hostage turns. His eyes are narrow. His head has the appearance of a fox made out of a burlap bag. He looks like a scarecrow. As he moves, he sloshes, as though his insides are soft. The crook in his snout bends into a sneer. His black, oily legs step apart, readying himself to fight, or, perhaps more likely, to run. His dim pupils glance at the Fountain

every so often, as if the enormous horrifying thing might strike at any moment.

“This is your god!” the kidnapper replies. “This little child is its tribute.”

The Fountain sits on a perch of gold, silver, fabrics, and various other stolen valuables. Phoebe attempts to squirm free from her captor upon seeing Marie enter the clearing.

“You creep, let go of my sister!!” Marie shouts. “Don’t you dare try to feed her to that demon!”

The Fountain sits eerily still, breathing with a disquieting calmness. Watching. Watching. Watching. Watching.

“Dare I!” He snickers, and only grabs Phoebe tighter. “I’m the one in control here. I am the Fountain’s chosen priest. I thought I was going to die up here. But I surrendered my mortal possessions to the Fountain, and for my devotion my life alone is spared where all others have been devoured.” He giggles. “What bigger gift is there than this? I trust her family, and you, will pay *anything* to see her returned safely? Then... pick which is more valuable~ Her life, or everything you have. We’ll give it all to the Fountain~” His voice is ragged and hoarse. He sounds more like the one held hostage than a hostage-taker.

“That’s...not right. It’s an *animal*. It’s a *demon*. They’re wild, they don’t take bribes or sacrifices or ransom, that-!” Marie sputters, shaking as she glares at the ragged figure.

“You should listen to me. I’m the executor of her will. She listens to me~ She’s the best thing to happen to me. After she spared my

life, I have been allowed passage through the mountain, alone. All for the tiny price of some stolen goods –“ He gestures to the pile of money and various other things on which the Fountain perches, bleeding leaves. Its claws crush forks and jewelry in its talons as its weight settles.

“You! You’ve been stealing from the folks in town. You’ve been stealing from my mom!” Marie hisses.

“And...from the fabric shop.” Dell doesn’t take his eyes off the great jittering monster.

“And a hundred other places in your little backwater shanty town. And from Horizon City! And Capital City. Anywhere! Look down from the heights and all of it is mine. Is hers. She *loves* me. I am her Adrian, and she is my Fountain.”

The Fountain releases a shrill wheezing breath, like a bagpipe. Each breath it takes is nails on a chalkboard.

“Why would you ever come back here-!?” Marie shouts, barely held back from bolting forward by Dell. The wolf shivers, feeling the eyes of the Fountain boring holes into him. It is as if he is being stared at from multiple places and directions at once. *Can it even see out of all of those eyes?* He can’t help but wonder.

“My tributes disappear each day. I never bring her anything small. Why would I? I have brought her more each day, and today I bring her the most valuable thing there is~.” Adrian’s ragged mitts squeeze Phoebe as he puts himself between her and her would-be rescuers. A wind whistles through the trees.

Dell stares at the Fountain, and it stares back. Seeing it twitch, as though its wet, horrible body were made of glue and paper struggling under its own weight, something in him snaps. The way it...*shudders, bleeding*. Fear quickly turns into something else.

“I want a ransom, or she dies for my goddess, my love~” Adrian cackles. Phoebe lets out a little cry, her voice lost as the Fountain screeches behind him, flapping its ghastly wings and flecking dirty sweat and leaf litter across the clearing.

“But...that’s...I didn’t...” Marie starts, but she doesn’t get to finish her sentence.

Loud as a gunshot, Dell screams. “**Get Real!** For starters, there’s a whole rescue party coming here as we speak, and you’ve got nowhere to run. Second, she’s not going to *FUCK* you, buddy-! That horrifying nightmare is *hurt*, it’s scared, it *hates you!* You’re a moron! You’re just going to plunge yourself down this path slobbering at the heels of a *monster* that doesn’t care about you and just wants you dead. You talk so self-important but nobody knows who you are or you would’ve been arrested already, isn’t that right?!”

“I only need one...” Adrian smirks, the dark surface of his face shifting with fluid beneath.

“FUCK off! You’re a thief and a kidnapper and you’re going to add murderer onto that list in a minute just for this delusional fantasy. Shoving away all your friends, not making anything of yourself, a complete antisocial disappointment with no real family... Are you seriously going to get another innocent girl...no, are you seriously

going to stand there and *kill her?*” Dell barks, his vision blurring as he glares.

“What are you talking about... I don’t have any prospects. Or family.” Adrian stomps a black, oily foot, confused as to where this rant is even coming from.

Dell is no longer talking to Adrian, but he continues on, howling with rage. “This life is just another dead end!! Chasing the feelings of self-worth and love and accomplishment trying to smooze a murderer instead of being happy...it makes me sick-! I don’t care if I have to die again, I’m not going to stand by and let you kill her...! I’m not going to let you ruin this life and get someone else killed, you... you *worthless, rapey schizoid BASTARD-!*”

“D-Dell?” Marie glances at him, worried, but it is already too late.

Dell charges forward, heart beating out of his chest as he snarls and pounds the stone with each step. Adrian lets out a shrill yelp. Panicking, Adrian instinctively puts a black-clawed hand forward to catch the canine, but as he is about to cut into Dell, he is suddenly blinded. He is struck by a rush of wind, carrying a curtain of leaves from the surrounding trees. Marie flies in and tackles his head a moment later, crashing and tumbling away.

The flight distraction is enough, though. Without thinking, Dell flips over, hurling the pointed stick in his tail like a javelin at the peak of his somersault, stabbing Adrian in his shoulder. He emits a petulant, high-pitched wail, begins to bleed black. Just as Adrian rises to his feet to strike back, Dell’s fangs sink into his leg, and a burning pain shoots through it. A ball of hot plasma explodes in

Dell's jaw, knocking both wolf and scarecrow away. Dell collapses, panting raggedly, and Marie rushes over to him.

"Dell-! Are you okay?!" She shouts, before quickly turning her head back to Adrian.

Kneeling and dragging himself back next to Phoebe, he offers only a malicious, cruel smirk. "Idiots. Idiots! Hicks! Idiots! You forgot I have a hostage. I can just..." With a grunt, he pulls the spear from his wound. "simply pop your little precious baby like a balloon. Eheheh."

"N-no, don't-!"

"Hehehe!" Adrian turns to Phoebe with a wild glint in his eyes. As his claws reach down for the crying infant, a shadow falls over him.

As Adrian looks up, he is crushed beneath the heaving, bleeding wings of the Fountain. It stomps forward on its many limbs like a misshapen spider.

Marie shoots forward, taking this tiny moment of an opening to fly over to Phoebe, sweeping the small blob of dragon up in her current and pulling her along. She flies quickly back to Dell's side.

The Fountain looses an ear-piercing screech, and frantically bats its limbs around as though trying to rid itself of an itch. Adrian, limp, wheezes and helplessly tumbles down the stone. Strength failing, he slips past the edges of the clearing without even clawing for purchase amidst the trees, and rolls down the mountain like a ragdoll, leaving a sickly black trail all the while.

As soon as it is clear that the *Crowhawk* is dead, the Fountain turns its untamed gaze to its other two intruders. It slowly crawls forward on its many wings, dragging its talons behind. Marie shakes Dell. “Dell, get up, we have to go. Now!!”

“Ugh...I can’t. I-“ Dell groans, trying to stand, but feels a sharp pain in his side. Was it that scar...?

“No no no-!”

The towering horror creeps forward, drooling and growling. Just as it looms close enough to the two to strike, a blade whizzes past its head, cutting into the back of its neck. Instead of bleeding, it simply creates a...hole. Like a hollow shell. Nevertheless, the Fountain quickly backs away, and shrieks, rapidly crawling back on top of its pile of spoils.

“Are you two okay?”

Nehema, accompanied by a stranger, a medium with a body like a mouse, quickly enters the clearing from the east.

“Y-you’re...Nehema, right?” Marie gasps.

“I thought you left already...” Dell slowly pushes himself to his feet, trembling. *Everything hurts. It hurts to think. Or breathe.*

“I hadn’t left yet. Me and Han were about to leave for Horizon City when we heard the commotion. I’m glad we were able to catch up with you in time. Han had us take an eastern route up the mountain. It’s rather out of the way compared to the southern route you two took, but I’m glad he did. We met something interesting on the way up.”

“W-what?”

“The Fountain of Lead’s *corpse*, sprawled out in a gory heap at the foot of the mountain. *The real one.*”

The Fountain stares for a long moment. It is far more still now than it had been. It is too *distracted* to continue bleeding.

Marie’s eyes go wide. “That’s...a fake?”

“The real one is a bird, so it can *fly*, for starters. It sheds leaves like that, but it’s made of meat.” Nehema turns to face it, talking to it directly. Her tone challenges the abomination. “The real Fountain could also kill all of us dead rather effortlessly, so I find it interesting that this one seems so spooked to be *outnumbered.*”

Nehema speaks directly to it now. “And I’m guessing that if you were the one responsible for making the Fountain a *corpse*, you wouldn’t be all that worried about a couple more reinforcements. So... you’re just trying to scare us off to avoid having to get into a fight you can’t win. Why don’t you drop the Illusion and come quietly?”

There is a long pause. A voice echoes out from the hole in the beast’s neck.

“Typical. Ugh. All I wanted was some easy money that wasn’t going to be useful to anyone to begin with. Then that braindead sycophant ruins my little tollbooth grift by bringing me a *child*. This is what I get for relying on a...how did he put it? ‘a rapey schizoid bastard’? I feel the same way.”

The color drains from the Fountain. It resembles a paper-mâché shell made of leaves, which, in a flash, burst into a confetti

shower, swirling in a blinding cascade before slowly fluttering to the ground.

Within, small enough to easily be mistakable for something the Fountain had *eaten*, there is now a *nekomata*. A black cat, wet from the leaves, with a tail that forks into two red-streaked tips. Her tail bats back and forth with frustration. She hunches over, her eyelids drooped, a look of pure, bored, frustrated *contempt* etched into her face. Dell recognizes it immediately.

“A-Anjean?”

“Oh? That’s her, is it?” Nehema chirps.

Anjean’s expression of contempt pops like a bubble, replaced by curiosity. “Hahhh... How do *you* know who I am, Marswolf?”

“I-It is you!! Anjean! You’re alive!!”

The look of curiosity widens into shock for a second, but it disappears just as quickly. “*Alive*’...” she murmurs.

“I-it’s me, Dell-! I...I-I thought you died when I s-saw you get stabbed. I-I thought *I* died. I thought I’d never see you again.”

The expression twists into something else, unrecognizable, scandalized. “What the *fuck*? Who are you?”

“I’m Dell-! W-we’ve been family for our whole lives...! You were my...familiar, but you were family. After we got stabbed, I woke up and I was in this body...but...”

Anjean stares through Dell. Her hunched stance straightens, and she looks down her nose at him. “*I don’t know a Dell.*”

“W-what are you saying?” Dell whimpers. A feeling of dread crawls down his spine.

Anjean’s face is...strained. Despite this, she speaks slowly, clearly, as if she’s carefully picking out each word one at a time and lining it up in a row. “*I don’t know a Dell*. I have never been the familiar of anyone named Dell. I have only ever had *one* lord, a lord who is very much *alive*, and one I am *certain* has not turned into a medium. You must have me mistaken for someone else.”

“W-what?! Y-you have a...different master?” Dell says. “W-who!?”

Anjean’s expression of uncertainty resolves at last into a smile through gritted teeth. “You don’t know? Of course. You don’t know. That makes sense. You have me mistaken for someone else, it makes sense that you wouldn’t know. I believe that’s all the evidence you need. Goodbye, Dell. I must be going. I have to deliver these to my lord. You can *keep* the kid. I’m *not* coming back here to this tiny, rotten nowheresville.”

“W-wait!”

“Cut her off!” Nehema shouts.

The mouse Han moves, but just as suddenly, another tornado of leaves erupts around Anjean, brown foliage scattering in the air like smoke. When it settles, the spot where Anjean stood is empty, both cat and the pile of goods gone.

“...Damn it.” Nehema and Dell say it in unison, for different reasons.

“Phoebe...! Are you okay?” Marie, who had been wrapped around her baby sister in a protective hug, unfurls and looks into the little baby’s eyes.

“Beeh!” Phoebe mewls. She’s rattled, but mostly unhurt, thankfully.

“We should...get out of here. That...was a lot, but we can talk things over later. You’ve all had a long day. Han...could you...cast Rescue and get all of us out of here?” Nehema asks.

“Ah! Right. Of course. Yes, ma’am. Definitely. It’ll be much easier for us all to regroup and talk things over when we’re all not practically drowning in a mountainous *soup* of magic. Stay still for a moment, everybody. Rescue is a Trick that’ll get all of you back to town in a second. Don’t move, okay? Here we go.”

Dell remains, and as Han closes his eyes, a beacon of golden light surrounds each of the five on the mountain like a spotlight. His surroundings blur, and he feels himself rise off the ground for the slightest moment. Just as quickly as it starts, it stops, and when Dell blinks, he finds himself back on the beach at Port Saens, having missed what happened. Did he fly here? Teleport? What just...?

But when he looks around, there everybody else is, just as quickly. Han, Nehema, Marie, Phoebe.

The sun has set.

“Ok. Now hurry back home, you two. We’ll talk in the morning. Don’t keep that mom of yours waiting.” Nehema waves them off with the wrist of her mantis’ claw.

Marie gestures, nodding at Dell. Keeping his head pointed down at the sand, Dell slowly follows after Marie as she walks tiny little Phoebe home.

Why...? He thinks. *Why did she say she didn't know me?*

XI

You Ought to Know What a Face is Before You Can Identify Your Own in the Mirror

The second Marie opens the door, the dragons and Dell are practically tackled by Lora, the enormous dragoness squeezing Marie and Phoebe in a relieved, loving hug. It's so tight Marie can't even breathe, let alone worm her way out, and Phoebe just makes burbly little baby noises, happy to be with her mom again.

The moment Marie is able to explain that it was Dell that saved Phoebe, actually, Lora practically throws herself on him, as well, lifting the furball from the sand and squeezing him so hard he feels like his bones might explode. *H-how is it possible for someone to be this s-strong...* he thinks, squirming and kicking his legs as the tight, thankful embrace lasts longer and longer, the enormous dragon loudly thanking him profusely all the while.

After what feels like an eternity, Lora lets Dell go and he promptly collapses, still completely exhausted from the day's events.

"W-we should probably sleep... we can talk in the morning, o-okay?" Marie murmurs.

"Oh, alright. Yeah! Y'all rest up. 'n Dell, you can stay in our guest room as long as you want. As far as I'm concerned, you're a member of the family, now." She nods, crossing her arms with a folksy, assertive confidence.

That night, Dell manages a decent sleep. Completely unhaunted...or at least, too dead-tired to have any sort of dream.

In the morning, a knock on the doorbell. It's Nehema and Han, who promptly find themselves seats at the kitchen table. When Dell joins, he finds that he is the last to wake, still yawning as he crawls into his seat.

"Phoebe's still sleeping. Little babies sleep like half the day, anyway." Marie whispers to Dell. He's still too groggy to really be listening.

"RIGHT. Let's discuss things." Nehema clears her throat. "We all had an eventful day, and we're all working on different levels of information and all have very complicated thoughts on yesterday's rescue operation. Lora, Marie, Dell, Han. I'm sure you have opinions, questions, plans. We all need to be on the same page if we're going to get anything done, and that means we all need to exchange information and share our thoughts. Han. You have the least skin in the game, and you've barely even introduced yourself to everyone else, so you get to go first."

"Me?" Han puts a fingertip to his chin. "Alrighty."

Han stands up in his chair. He's still so short it barely makes a difference, however. His body is that of a rather large mouse, though he looks quite smooth. His ears are reddish, with a 'stem' connecting them like a cherry. His tail is striped and tipped with red. His entire appearance makes him look like a rodent made of cake, really. He's...well, truthfully, he's too cute to take seriously whatsoever. His little mousey whiskers flicker.

"Good morning everyone! I'm Han Maraschino. I'm a rookie recruit of the Escort Corps. To be honest, yesterday was only my second day on the job. I was originally just supposed to guide

Miss Sanae to Horizon City, but we heard word about the kidnapping before we ‘properly’ left town. We took an eastern route up Mt. Haemos, and that’s all I really feel like is my story to tell, really. I will say this, though! If you all are going on an adventure, I’m coming with! You’ll need someone in the Escort Corps to tag along, after all!”

Lora balks. “What! Nobody’s going on any *adventure*. We’re perfectly comfortable here, thank ya very much. It’s dangerous out there. So me and Marie –“

“I want to go, actually.” Marie interrupts.

“Whut! A-absolutely not! Honey it’s dangerous out there! I dunno what I would do if you or Phoebe got hurt-!”

“I want to go. I...”

“Ahem.” Nehema interrupts. “I think it might behoove me to...contextualize things, somewhat, for Lora’s sake.”

“Oh. I guess so...go ahead.”

“Whatever it is, it definitely ain’t gonna convince me to let my lil baby wander off to who knows where.” Lora hmphs.

“As most of you know, I, like Dell, was a human until quite recently, much like Dell, here. My transformation was *voluntary*. Part of an investigation I’m on to resolve some... mysterious disappearances, for lack of a better word. That led me to Rose Mirror Cave close to the border between Arcadia and Remia, and then down here to Port Saens. I thought I’d lost all leads, but Dell is, to put it lightly, *quite* the person of interest. If my investigative instinct is correct, following this trail has the potential to save a *lot*

of lives. And I'll be honest, I no longer foresee much progress on this investigation being made without your involvement, Dell."

"R-really?" He murmurs under his breath.

Nehema continues. "My plan was to head to the border to inquire about a nekomata, Anjean – the sole name Dell can remember other than his own. This plan was flawed, however, because it turns out she was much *closer* than the border. But I'm getting ahead of myself. On the way up Mt. Haemos, Han and I made a discovery – the Fountain of Lead, deceased. And not recently, either. Apparently, an imposter had been roosting on the summit and scaring cult-minded petty criminals (or...maybe just the one...) into bringing valuables as tribute. The imposter was Anjean, who escaped with the stolen goods. I don't know if Anjean was the one who took the Fountain out, but I highly doubt it. Thus, another mystery."

She taps a claw on the table. "Regardless of whether you view it as dangerous, ma'am, *I* am going after Anjean. Han has already expressed his opinion on the matter. Dell? Your turn."

Dell blinks slowly, unsure what to say at first. Then, he opens his mouth, feeling it dry at first. It takes several moments for him to work up the courage. He looks at Lora, at Marie, at Nehema. He can feel the part of him that snapped on the mountain, like a torn muscle. He takes a deep breath, then speaks.

"I... have to come clean about something. I remember...most of my human life. I don't remember names, and I don't remember many faces, but I remember...dropping out of college, living in a dead-end job, being an absolute failure, being

absolutely miserable, and trying to pick up girls and being very, very bad at it. I didn't have a lot of friends, and I wasn't on very good terms with my mom. I remember Anjean, my...familiar, being the only one in the whole world who actually ever wanted to be around me. But, she's a medium, so I couldn't ever understand her. I didn't even know mediums could talk. When I woke up, in this body, I kinda thought...that maybe it was a punishment, or a vacation. That for being a sex pest and getting stabbed my reward was a life where nobody knew me and nobody cared. But to be honest, I still hate myself. I remember the kind of person I am and it...sucks. I don't want to be him. But Anjean...doesn't recognize me...like this. So...I...I want to be human again.”

“About that.” Nehema clicks her tongue. All around the room, everyone is silently averting their eyes, awkwardly. “That’s not happening.”

“W-why?! You said that before, but...why?!” Dell shouts.

“Do you think you’re the first medium to ask that question? *How do I become human again*, I mean.” Nehema challenges. “I’ll be honest, I thought you would figure this out from talking to enough of your fellows. Giving you time to read the room and understand what it *means* to be a medium was most of the reason I insisted you stay behind, but I suppose I have to be the one to tell you.”

“T-tell me what?”

“Dell. When I first became a medium, I didn’t trust anyone. I spent my first weeks eavesdropping and doing research – mediums can’t just speak, they also have *libraries*, Dell. And the

first thing I checked in said libraries was if there were any books about that problem – the *human becomes a medium* problem. I was surprised. There are *hundreds* of books on the topic – *philosophical discussions, scientific research, magical investigations, interviews, the works. It's a field.*” She pauses for a moment, her eyes locking onto Dell’s. “Dell, tell me something. Do you know what it means when there are *hundreds of books* on a particular topic?”

“Uh?”

“It means there are *hundreds of authors. Thousands, possibly millions of readers.* The topic is *popular.* Do you have any idea why it might be a *popular topic,* Dell?”

“W-what are you trying to say?”

“Here’s a factoid I learned from my research. Of the mediums currently in existence in Arcadia or elsewhere, how many would you guess are *former humans?*”

Dell gulped, nervous. “T-thousands?”

“A good guess. Genuinely, not a bad first guess.”

Nehema’s eyes narrow. “The correct answer is *everyone.*”

A pause. A moment of silence, and then:

“WHAT?!”

“That’s about the reaction I expected.” She nods.

“There’s no way that’s true, is it?” Dell turns to Marie. She sheepishly puts the tip of her tail below her snout, like a finger to a chin in contemplation.

“She makes it sound a lot more recent and pressing than it is.” Marie says.

“Recent?”

Han speaks up. “See, if you’re a medium, then you’re basically one of two categories. Either you were born a human and transformed into a medium, or you were born a medium and you’re directly descended from someone who transformed.” *He makes it sound so normal-!*

Lora scoffs. “Most’ve us were born this way. Hmph.” She scowls at Nehema.

Sensing this animosity, Nehema clarifies. “That’s accurate. *Rapture* is what most sources call it. The entire population was *turned* about 800 years ago. Life expectancy on most Specimens of medium isn’t *hundreds of years*, so dozens of generations have passed. *Most* mediums are born into it. I don’t know for sure how many are *first-generation mediums*. But ‘first-generation’ would also include any mediums who happened to be alive at the time of the Rapture that *did* live that long.”

“T-that can happen?” Dell asks.

“Yes.” Lora, Nehema, and Han answer simultaneously.

“I don’t understand. I-if that’s true...how has *no* human ever found out?”

“We don’t want ‘em to.” Lora answers.

“It’s a secret that keeps itself, Dell.” Nehema leans forward. “Humans can’t enter Luwall without *medium* permission – *our* permission. And even if they did, the Trails are so thick with airborne magic breathing it raw is fatal to humans within the hour. And, more importantly, humans can’t understand us. We are, for all intents and purposes, very intelligent magical animals. Virtually nothing we can do will be *uncanny* enough to spurn that realization.”

“More importantly, nobody wants ‘em to.” Han repeats Lora’s answer.

“What do you mean?”

Lora sits up. “Hundreds a’ years of research and it’s turned up squat. Far as anybody knows, it’s impossible ta turn back, so frankly, the less they know the better.”

Han nods, still smiling gently. “Our lives can only really get harder if humans figure it out. We work for humans, and while humans can turn into us, we can’t turn back. That’s pretty lopsided, as far as power goes. So...you know...” he rolls his front paws, looking away.

“Anybody who becomes one of us also gains an incentive to keep the secret. I can tell you more about this later, Dell, for now we really ought to get back on topic-!” Marie chimes in.

It feels almost eerie how Han, Marie, and Lora seem on the same page about this. Dell thinks. “R-really...?” Dell stares at the floor.

No way back? A vacation that never ends. That...how should I even feel?

“By the way. I suspect Anjean was lying about not knowing you.” Nehema says.

“Huh?”

“She claimed not to know you, but you obviously know *her*. You know more about her than she was willing to admit, and she knew it. She lied, probably because she didn’t want to fight us. She said she was ‘absolutely certain’ her lord was alive and not a medium. How? Don’t you want to find out?”

“O-of course I do! It’s just...”

“You feel like you’re taking advantage?” Marie asks.

“I...don’t deserve all this kindness.”

“Bullshit!” Lora hooted. “Y’saved my baby. Far as I’m concerned, I can’t pay you enough.”

“...I want to go. I don’t know why I feel sick to my stomach about it, but I want to go.” Dell says, looking up at the rest.

“Then I want to go too!” Marie adds.

“Sweetie, no-“ Lora’s reaches across the table to try to rest her palm on Marie’s head. She squirms away.

“I want to go! Dell’s my friend. And I haven’t really had many friends. Since we moved here, anyway. I want to see the world.”

“But it’s dangerous, sweetie-“ Lora moans, aghast.

“She saved me, too.” Dell murmurs. “I’d probably have just gotten killed again if Nehema and Marie weren’t there.”

“But-!”

“Everybody agrees except you, Mom!” Marie snickers. “I’ll be fine!! We’ll all watch each other’s backs. I’m not a kid anymore, besides!”

Lora hums with disapproval for a long note. Finally, she lets out a sigh, deflating and sinking as she sits. “Awright, fine. But if anything happens to ya, I’ll beat you all silly, got that? Come back home safe. ‘n soon, too. And write me every so often, and-“

“Okay, okay!! I promise.” Marie says. She shakes her head and rolls her eyes.

“I’d go with ya, but I can’t take li’l Phoebe out there.”

“Oh, definitely not!! I hope you weren’t thinking we were asking you to!” Han squeaks. “Please! By all means, stay here and take care of your baby! We’ll be fine!”

“I promise, ma’am. We’ll stay safe.” Dell says.

Something crawls down his spine as he says it.

It feels like a lie.