



DANGER ZONE ONE

— THE CARNIVAL —

“So, what do you say,” Reena began, clasping her hands together to further illustrate her plea, “only for an hour or two?”

Madison had just finished putting on a casual tank top and pair of matching shorts before tossing her police uniform in the locker. “For the last time, *no*. It’s late, I’m tired, and all I want to do is go home.”

“Aww,” Reena cried, “*please?*”

Slamming her locker shut, Madison shot an icy glare at the rookie. “You’re persistent—you’ve got *that* going for you, at least.”

In a frenzied rush Reena pulled up her denim skirt, buttoned her white shirt, and removed a NetPhone from her locker. She tapped the screen, activating the device’s digital clock. “Actually, it’s not *that* late. It’s only after seven, so—”

“Forget it, girl,” a playful voice boomed through the locker room. “You’re wasting your breath.”

Startled, Reena’s NetPhone bounced between her fingers, almost escaping her grip. She had thought that, other than Madison and herself, no one else was in the women’s locker room.

“The infamous Ice Queen of the PCPD doesn’t socialize with fellow officers,” the voice continued. “Isn’t that right, Ms. Wynter?”

“If I wanted to socialize,” Madison replied, her tone brisk, “I’d work at a bar.”

“All work and no play is mighty unhealthy.” A tall woman with short blonde hair stepped out from around the nearest row of lockers, a grin on her face. She was dressed in a police uniform and had been in the process of putting on her duty belt. “You know,

Madison, that kind of lifestyle will put premature wrinkles on that alabaster skin of yours.”

Madison rolled her eyes. “I’ll make do.”

The blonde officer turned to Reena and held out her hand. “You’re the new rookie, huh? Heard about your run-in with that power suit. Pretty impressive work, walking away from that in one piece. And on your first day, no less. The name’s Celia Denson.”

“I’m Reena,” the dark-haired girl replied, shaking the officer’s hand. “Reena Saffron.”

With an impish smile, Celia nodded in Madison’s direction. “I like this new one, she’s got spirit, and she must’ve broken some kind of record. Over a week and *still* your partner. You usually go through them a lot faster than that.”

“Isn’t your shift supposed to be starting?” Madison snapped. “Or is the locker room your new beat?”

“All right, all right,” Celia chuckled, turning for the exit. “I’m gone.”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Denson!” Reena called out.

“Same here,” the blonde officer replied, exiting the locker room with a friendly wave.

Reena turned to her partner. “She seemed really nice.”

“Yeah, a real asset to the force,” Madison replied, sarcasm brimming in her voice. She approached the door in a hurried pace. “See you tomorrow, rook.”

Reena frowned. It was only her second week as an officer with the PCPD and Pallad City was still foreign to her. The sprawling metropolis was nothing like her quaint hometown in Old Metro. She had hoped Madison might’ve offered to give her a tour of the city one night after work—any opportunity to get to know her rather distant partner better would have been a bonus, which was proving to be a difficult task while on duty.

“H-hold on,” Reena protested, “just think of it as training!”

Madison stopped at the door and sighed. “What are you on about now? What training?”

“Since I’m new in town, I need to know my way around,” Reena raised a finger to expound her point, “and a *good* officer should be familiar with the city she’s sworn to protect. You said yesterday that an officer must always be aware of their surroundings. So, if you showed me around a bit—even if for only a little while—it could *really* help. I mean, your partner *should* know the layout of the city, right?”

Madison clapped a hand against her forehead. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

Reena shook her head. “Nope!”

“Fine,” Madison hissed through gritted teeth, “just for an hour, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

* * *

“Pallad City is really something at night!” Reena’s eyes glowed at the sight of the neon-lit structures that filled the skyline. The buildings in Old Metro were downright minuscule when compared to the towering edifices of Pallad City. During the last few

days, she'd been on patrol in the rougher parts of the city, like the Alka and Lago districts, which housed dilapidated vestiges of a failed development project. Both districts were filled with crumbling, outdated architecture and derelict warehouses. Aside from the neighborhood near her apartment and the area around police headquarters, Reena had seen little of Pallad City's less infamous locations. She did get a brief aerial view of the downtown area, but even that was interrupted after their plane was hijacked by Mr. Jack—a criminal with a personal vendetta against the mayor. And the less said about her trip to Fantasy Funland, the better...

Madison yawned, pulling a NetPhone from the back pocket of her shorts. She checked the time. "It's been forty minutes, you done sightseeing yet?"

Reena frowned. Madison had barely said more than a dozen words during their whole outing, and the silver-haired officer seemed less than thrilled about the excursion. "Just a little longer, okay?"

With a groan, Madison returned the NetPhone to her pocket.

That's when Reena spotted it: a tapestry of flickering lights not more than a few blocks away. The illumination seemed to come from a massive circular object, one she couldn't discern due to a large billboard partially blocking her view. If Reena hadn't known better, she'd have guessed that it was a Ferris wheel. "Hey, what's over there?"

"Probably the fall carnival. Pallad City has one every year in Ventura Park."

"A carnival?!" Reena squealed, almost leaping off her feet. "That's so cool! Old Metro only had a small fair, but nothing exciting."

"Yeah, well, this one ends tonight," Madison said. "Why don't you go check it out for yourself, and I'll go home."

"No way, going to a carnival alone is no fun!" Reena shook her head in defiance. "You have to come with me."

"You can't be serious?"

"I sure am!" Reena seized Madison's arm and dragged the unwilling officer along towards the blinking lights.

"Ugh! After that fiasco at Fantasy Funland, a carnival is the *last* place I want to go to!"

* * *

Plock. Plock. Plock.

Reena took aim with the air rifle, but every shot was a miss. She squeezed the trigger one last time, firing a soft plastic pellet through the air. The projectile whizzed by a row of animal-shaped targets, each mounted atop a moving conveyor, less than twenty feet away.

An electronic wail escaped a nearby speaker, followed by a booming pre-recorded voice. "No prize! Sorry, try again!"

"Heh," Reena chuckled, scratching her head, "guess a shooting gallery wasn't the best carnival game for *me* to pick, was it?"

"You're as bad a shot with a fake gun as you are with a real one," Madison sighed. "There's not even any recoil with these."

“Heh, you're not wrong,” Reena chuckled. “Anyway, you should try—I bet you’d win the big prize!”

“Forget it,” Madison scoffed. “I’m not playing some ridiculous kids’ game.”

“Oh, come on! Here, I’ll even pay for it!” Reena put a few coins on the counter and nodded to the burly man running the game.

“Sheesh!” Without hiding her lack of enthusiasm, Madison grabbed the rifle and aimed at the row of tin animal-shaped targets. Her index finger snapped against the trigger in rapid succession, each squeeze firing off a plastic pellet that hit its mark. Every target in her line of sight was struck, causing them to topple back with a brassy *clink*. Not one managed to evade Madison’s precision marksmanship.

The large man behind the counter staggered back, his eyes bulging. “N-nice going, lady—that was the *best* shooting I’ve seen all week!”

Madison tossed the air rifle on the counter. “It’s easy when the targets don’t shoot back.”

“Huh?” The man scratched his head, dumbfounded. “Shoot...*back*? What kind of carnivals have *you* been going to?”

“Had enough games for one night, rookie?” Madison turned towards the crowd, not waiting for an answer.

“Hey, hold it!” The man behind the counter grabbed a large stuffed animal from the nearest shelf. “You forgot your prize!”

Too late. Madison was already out of earshot.

“Don’t worry,” Reena said, grabbing hold of the plush prize, nearly the size of her upper body, “I’ll see that she gets it!”

“Your friend’s one heck of a shot,” the man replied. “I’ve had guys from private military companies play this game and couldn’t do what she did! ”

Reena realized that the stuffed animal resembled an elephant and a familiar one at that. *It’s Tuffy*, she thought to herself, *I remember him!* Tuffy had been the star of a long-running cartoon and was now a popular mascot for the Minova Corporation.

Stepping into the crowd of carnival-goers, Reena glanced around for her partner. *Did she leave?* She asked herself just before spotting Madison sitting alone at a nearby park bench. Reena rushed over, planting the Tuffy doll on the wooden seat. “Look what you won!”

Madison’s eyes rolled back in derision. “How exciting.”

“Aw, come on, *everyone* likes Tuffy.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Really? He’s been on television for years.”

“I don’t watch much TV.” Madison gave Tuffy a brief peek from the corner of her eye. “Looks familiar though. Isn’t he on the side of the Minova Corp building?”

“Yeah,” Reena nodded, “I spotted that when I first arrived in Pallad City.”

“Had enough *‘fun’* yet?”

“Hold on,” Reena responded, her attention shifting to something in the distance. “I’ll be right back, just wait here.”

“You’ve got five minutes, rookie.”

“Okay, okay...” Reena bolted off into the crowd.

It had been six minutes before Reena returned to find Madison sitting with her arms folded, appearing more annoyed than when she had left her.

"You're late," Madison pointed out, her tone frigid. "What are you hiding behind your back? I hope it's not any *more* stuffed animals..."

"No, it's even better!" Reena held her arms out to reveal two chocolate-coated wafer cones, each topped with double scoops of vanilla ice cream and multicolored sprinkles. "Ta daaa!"

Madison's face twisted into a scowl. "Junk food?"

"I have a special talent for guessing someone's favorite flavor! I bet you like vanilla—that's *my* favorite too!" Reena handed her partner the cone.

Reluctant, Madison took hold of it. "You know how *bad* this stuff is for you? It's filled with artificial flavoring and—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know all that, but it tastes so *good*!" Reena began licking her ice cream. "*Yummy*!!"

Madison stared at the ice cream in her hand.

"Hurry up and try it before it melts!"

Madison stuck her tongue out, pressing it against the cold surface. Her eyes widened at the taste.

"See—it's great, right?"

"Y-yeah," Madison muttered, a slight redness flushing onto her cheeks, "it's not too bad, I guess..."

"Told ya!" Reena could have sworn that the corner of Madison's lip curved into a partial, blink-and-you'd-miss-it smile. "Vanilla is the absolute best, though I *do* like chocolate and strawberry too—as long as the strawberry doesn't have little pieces in it."

"Thank you for coming to the annual Pallad City fall carnival," a deep voice echoed over the park's speaker system. "We hope you had fun and that you'll return again *next* fall! The carnival will be closing in one hour."

"Only an hour left?" Reena groaned. She turned to her partner with a cheery expression as bright as the neon glow that illuminated Pallad City's skyline. "One last thing before we go, we *have* to take a ride on the Ferris wheel!"

"Are you for real?" Madison could tell from the rookie's face that there would be no use in arguing. She sighed. "*Fine*."

* * *

"What a beautiful view!" Reena gazed in awe at the city below. She pressed her hands against the passenger car window, realizing that they had reached the top of the Ferris wheel. The city's twinkling lights appeared to have an almost rhythmic pulse. Skyscrapers were alight in a varied assortment of radiant, gleaming colors and the headlights of countless vehicles shifted through the streets like tiny orbs, all moving along in perfect unison. "It looks so peaceful from up here."

"Don't be fooled by appearances," Madison countered. She sat across from Reena, leaning back and gazing out the window. "This city's good at deceiving people."

Reena rested a hand atop the stuffed Tuffie seated next to her and raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “Pallad City can’t really be all *that* bad, can it?”

“Worse than you could imagine,” Madison responded, hunching forward. “They don’t call this place Danger Zone One because it’s a nice vacation spot. It’s a crime-infested time bomb waiting to explode. The only city ranked as an even lower cesspool’s Nu Metropolis—and even I’m not sure if *that’s* true.”

“Heh,” Reena let out a nervous laugh, “well, I guess I’ll find out for myself soon enough.”

“Yeah. You’ve already had a good preview. Believe me, it doesn’t get better.”

Reena forced a smile, hoping to divert the conversation towards a lighter subject. “We used to have a Ferris wheel just like this in Old Metro, but they pulled it down a few years ago. I would go on it all the time. When was the last time you were on one?”

“Never. This is my first.”

“For real?” Reena’s mouth dropped open. “You’ve *never* been on a Ferris wheel before?”

Madison shrugged.

“Not once—not even as a kid?” Reena pressed.

“I didn’t do *any* of this when I was a kid,” Madison sighed. “I grew up in the Kurtow ruins. Every day there was a struggle to survive. Things like Ferris wheels, ice cream, and carnivals were a luxury you don’t get living in a place like that.”

Despite growing up in Old Metro, Reena knew all about the ruins—nearly *everyone* did. Having occurred over two decades ago, before Reena was even born, the Kurtow Earthquake had leveled a portion of Pallad City, leaving sprawling devastation for miles on end. Over the years, developers rebuilt over some of the destruction, but a large section had been left in disrepair, forgotten as the city restructured itself around the disaster area.

Vrrrrm.

Reena could feel the Ferris wheel begin to turn again, initiating their journey back to the platform below. “I didn’t know you were from the ruins. I couldn’t even imagine what living there must have been like...”

“Most of the people in the untouched parts of this city couldn’t either,” Madison replied. “After all, they’ve done a fine job *ignoring* the ruins—over twenty years later and it’s *still* considered forgotten land, left to rot. Why do you think they’ve built massive walls to section that area off? There’s still a lot of people living in the ruins today.”

“Didn’t city officials send help or supplies?” Reena asked. “I would’ve thought that, after the quake, they’d get everyone out of the ruins as fast as possible.”

“Yeah, that’s the *logical* thing to think,” Madison sneered. “But, apparently, that’s not very cost-effective.”

“But isn’t it part of Pallad City? The PCPD has jurisdiction there, right?”

“There *isn’t* any jurisdiction in the Kurtow ruins—it’s a lawless zone. You’d be hard-pressed to find an officer that would so much as *fly* over that region, never mind step foot in it.”

Klomp.

The passenger car shook as it made contact with the platform and the automated door slid open.

Reena grabbed hold of Tuffy and followed Madison out. “So, what did you think of your first Ferris wheel ride?”

“Nothing to write home about,” Madison began, not showing any indication that she derived even a smidgen of joy from the experience, “but, all the same, it *was* kind of relaxing.”

Reena smiled.

Madison turned away before pausing a moment. She craned her neck back, eyes locking with the dark-haired officer’s. “Tell me, rookie, why *did* you want to join the PCPD?”

“Well, it’s simple really,” Reena wrapped her arms around Tuffy, tightening her grip and giving him a firm, playful shake, “I want to help people. I’ve *always* wanted to be a police officer—it’s been my dream since I was a kid.”

“That so?” Madison asked, her words drenched in noticeable doubt. “No other reason?”

“That’s the *only* reason there is, right?” Reena countered with a jubilant, sincere nod. “Why else would anyone become an officer, if *not* to help others? And that *includes* the people in Kurtow. I wouldn’t be scared to step foot there—in fact, I hope I *can* one day. Why shouldn’t the people there get the same assistance and treatment everyone else does?”

“You really *are* serious, aren’t you?”

“Sure am!”

Madison shook her head and walked into the crowd. “You’re either the most naïve person I’ve ever met, or so completely idealistic that—” Her face contorted into a look of pure anger.

“Uh, M-Madison,” Reena stuttered nervously, “wh-what’s wrong?”

“Why, you—!” Madison’s hands clenched into fists and she spun around, swinging a right hook that flew past Reena’s cheek and into the side of the nearest man’s head.

Reena had only seen the man brush up against Madison’s behind, causing her to suspect that he may have tried to cop a feel but, clearly, something *else* was going on...

The man crashed to the pavement, sprawled out and unconscious from Madison’s single furious blow. A NetPhone fell out of his hand, clattering to the pavement nearby.

“That NetPhone...” Reena muttered, instantly recognizing it.

Madison picked up the device from the ground and shot a fierce look in the rookie’s direction. “That’s what happens in this city, you take your attention off your surroundings for *one* second, and some scumbag like *this* guy tries to pickpocket you.”

“Wow, you really knocked him out but good!”

Madison activated her phone and selected a number to call before raising it to her ear. “This is Officer Wynter, I’ve got a perp in need of pickup—the charge is pickpocketing. Location is Ventura Park—I’ll be waiting with him near the Ferris wheel. And do me a favor, send Officer Denson. She could use the extra work.” Madison hung up and restored the phone to her back pocket.

* * *

Celia Denson's police cruiser sped away as Madison and Reena exited Ventura Park.

"That was incredible, Madison!" Reena cheered. "Even off-duty, you're a criminal-catching machine!"

"Know your way back to your apartment, right?"

"Oh, yeah—that's easy!" Reena smiled. "Thanks for showing me around town tonight and for going to the carnival with me."

"Yeah, it was..." Madison bit her lip, struggling to admit the words, "...an experience. Especially the ice cream."

"Maybe next time we could—"

"Don't push it, rookie!"

"Oh," Reena held out the stuffed Tuffy, "don't forget about this guy, he's yours, remember?"

"Nah," Madison waved a hand in refusal, "you take him."

"Y-you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Gee, thanks!" Reena beamed, squeezing Tuffy. "He'll go great in my new apartment!"

Madison turned, giving a casual wave as she walked off. "See you tomorrow, rookie."

"You got it," Reena called out, offering a playful salute, "partner!"

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