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About 800 words

CHILD OF THE MOLE PEOPLE

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Jumpers often found themselves in strange places. It came with the job, but not like this. Only a dim crack of light from beneath a door illuminated the small, cavern-like space Juno awoke in. Her flask was missing—a first. Though, to be fair, she usually teleported consciously.

Silvia's nagging echoed distantly in her mind, things about sobriety and safety—lists of potential gruesome consequences from a teleport gone wrong. As if Juno didn't hear her brother's screams each time she let sleep win. Perhaps, a jump *would* go wrong for her.

Perhaps, tomorrow.

“Fucking Silvia.” Juno's head throbbed, the dregs of a bad hangover.

She dropped to the floor. Her face pressed along cold rock as she peered through the crack beneath the door. Too narrow. She sighed and made to stand when black lines across her forearm caught her eye. Sharpie scrawl.

Leonard Carlson. 13:22. Last chance, it read.

“Oh, fuck,” Juno said.

Abruptly, the door opened. It slammed against the side of her head, and she sprawled backward as light flooded the room.

“Oh, sorry,” a soft voice said.

Juno groaned and pawed at a rock wedged beneath her spine. She pushed herself up and tamped down on the urge to vomit as her stomach rolled. She pressed the side of her head delicately. Her hand came away dry. “What time is it?”

No response.

Craning her head up, Juno caught her first clear glimpse of the cave. Black stone with a pocket carved out of it large enough for a dusty armchair and a kid-sized stool made up a glorified holding cell. *Livingroom?*

The stranger was a boy—eleven, perhaps—with a shock of unwashed auburn hair and blue eyes that didn’t bother to hide their distrust. He padded to the chairs in the corner. The one with armrests, he tugged out for her.

Juno ignored it. “You got any parents, kid?”

The boy slipped a half-eaten candy bar from his pocket and popped a clump of crumbled brown *something* into his mouth, eyes fixed on her. “Why’s my name on your arm?”

Juno paused. “You’re Leonard Carlson?”

His nose scrunched distastefully. “Call me Leo.”

“Leo, then.” She rubbed at her temples. “You got any sort of clock in here?”

He glanced at a giant watch that dangled from a paper-thin wrist. “It’s one-oh-three.”

Juno froze. “Fuck. Seriously?”

“What happens at one twenty-two?” Genuine curiosity filled his eyes.

Juno scrubbed a hand through her hair. “I dunno, kid. Can’t remember the specifics, but in short, if I don’t get you outta here by then, you die, and I get fired.”

Leo stopped mid-chew. Blue eyes narrowed. “How do you know?”

“Does it matter?”

Leo stared, chewing resumed.

“Christ.” The teleporter sucked back stale air. “I work for a company that tracks and manages various realities in time. We fix problems that would otherwise lead to extreme consequences. Your death, apparently, counts as one.”

“You track time?” he asked.

“And varying realities.”

“Okay.”

“You’re taking this remarkably well.”

Leo shrugged and wiped goo-covered fingers across his pants. “It’ll be hard for you to get outta here, though. They don’t like strangers.”

Juno frowned. “Who doesn’t?”

“The other Grounders.”

“What are you, a community of mole people?”

“Kinda.”

Juno blinked. “Alright, no time to explore that further. I can get myself outta here easily enough. Can you get out in,” she paused, “how much time is left?”

“It’s one-oh-nine.”

“Damn, okay. If you run, can you get outta this place in thirteen minutes?”

“’Prolly not. There’s a lot of doors and tunnels and stuff,” Leo said and licked crumbs from his fingertips. “But I can teleport.”

Juno froze.

“You teleport,” she said, her voice six octaves higher than usual. “So do I.”

“Obviously,” said Leo. “You couldn’t’ve gotten past patrol otherwise.”

Juno shook her head, dazed. “Doesn’t matter. We’re not teleporting. I don’t have the time to assess and teach you basic safety protocol.”

“I’ve done it several-”

“No.” Something buzzed beneath Juno’s skin. “Not without safety protocol.”

Leo pursed his lips. “Would you rather risk us not getting out in time, and something kills me?” The boy’s watch ticked loudly in the cave.

“Fine,” said Juno. “This once. Then, assessment and protocol.”

Leo nodded with a grin, and pulled her flask from his back pocket. He handed it to her.

“Up?”

She shoved the flask in her back pocket and encircled his bony fingers within her own.

“Up.”