

# Subway Emergency

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# Subway Emergency

## 1

Probationary firefighter Rosetta Case, also known as Rose, was standing on the track. Behind her was an empty subway train. On the platform, their boots rhythmically pounding on the floor, her colleagues were carrying a patient packaged in a Stokes basket. As if hypnotized, Rose watched the rescuers moving swiftly to the north exit at the side of the station. Her stomach grew cold; suddenly, the underground air—never really fresh—felt heavy and still, while the columns lining the tracks and the platform appeared to crowd together, trapping her in a narrow cave.

A low battery warning from one of the reconnaissance robots flashed at the top edge of her HUD. She blinked through the menu to hide the icon. When she looked at the platform again, the rescuers with the patient were already gone.

Her crewmate, Adam Mutabi, stopped by her side and nodded to her. "Hey," he said, raising his right hand, fingers clenched. She responded with a similar gesture, and he bumped her fist.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She realized that she was sweating; her bright orange clothes, covered in dirt, stuck to her skin.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Their superior, lieutenant Ivy Kusanagi, joined them.

"Leave your PPE for decon and get some fresh air," she said to Rose. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yes, ma'am."

Rose pulled herself up onto the platform and got up from the floor. There, another probie had just unrolled a mat for her. She stepped on it and started taking off her protective clothing. Her goggles, helmet, gloves, boots, pants, jacket—everything landed in a bag. With her clothing reduced to the Department-issued navy blue shirt and her own private shorts, she slipped into spare shoes. She grabbed the bag and headed for the exit. At the south end of the station, she walked through the faregate to the stairs leading to the street level. Deep in thought and

not realizing she had chosen the east-facing exit instead of the south-facing one, she reached the top briskly and ducked under the police tape.

Outside, a strip of cloudy sky showed between the densely packed buildings of Manhattan's Thirty-Second Street. On the sidewalk, an homeless man was sitting with his back leaning against the elevated plaza surrounding an office tower. At his sides were stuffed suitcases and in front of him a cardboard with an old poster glued to it, saying: *Better life through automation*. Across the slogan, a shaky handwritten *LIES* was marked.

Straight away, Rose noticed that the man's luggage was right in front of the inlet valves of the building's standpipe and sprinkler systems. She came closer, cleared her throat and said, "Sir, I have to ask you to move."

A hostile look on his weary face.

"Just a couple of feet to your right. For safety," she said, putting her free hand on her chest. "You're blocking a fire department connection."

Muttering something incomprehensible, the man started to gather his belongings. Rose sighed. Turning around, she glimpsed a hologram in a display window on the office tower's ground floor. She paused to take a look at it. A white horse was galloping through the insanely green forest, its mane caught in the wind, a spiraling horn protruding from its skull. All this was captioned *Unicorn Park: where magic meets engineering*. She shook her head and looked at the homeless man moving his bags. *Are we winning yet?*, she thought and turned toward Park Avenue.

In a few steps, she got to the intersection. On the left was the second subway entrance, guarded by a transit worker in a reflective vest. Carefully maneuvering between the pedestrians and bicyclists, Rose crossed the sidewalk and bike lane to the row of empty street planter boxes. Behind them, firetrucks were parked, blocking both northbound traffic lanes.

She looked around; she needed a place to sit down and calm her thoughts. For the first time on the job, she wanted to go home.

## A

Rose's last tour as a probie was supposed to end at nine a.m. She had spent the last eighteen months in the firehouse in the Kips Bay neighborhood of Manhattan. Two basic fire companies—an engine and a ladder—were stationed there. The first was primarily responsible for fire suppression while the second for search and rescue. Rose had been assigned to the ladder company. Although it was commanded by captain Gleick, she had worked most of the shifts under lieutenant Kusanagi.

Apart from fires, Rose's job involved responding to a wide range of emergencies. Even during the last night, there had already been a litany of calls: a stuck elevator, paramedics in need of assistance in transporting a large patient, a minor

car accident, an apartment filled with smoke from a dinner left on stove, a terrified small dog locked on the balcony.

Then, at around two a.m., a trash compactor fire on the ground floor of a high-rise commercial building.

Initially, it had been just a case of smoke detector going off. But shortly after the first due engine and ladder companies had arrived at the scene to investigate, a sprinkler head above the compactor activated, resulting in the assignment being upgraded to the full structural response.

When the alarm rang in the firehouse, Rose was using her short break for sketching scenes from the earlier calls. Hearing the tones, she put her notebook down and sprinted with everyone downstairs to the garage. There, their protective clothing and equipment was kept, neatly arranged for a fast suit up.

Donning the gear on autopilot was one of the first things Rose had learned on the job. As always, she started with putting on a protective hood. Then, she stepped into boots, pulled up the turnout pants, closed them and tightened the suspenders. Next, she adjusted a safety harness and attached a bag with a rescue rope to her waist. Afterwards, she put on and fastened a turnout coat. Finally, she finished the sequence with putting on a helmet and adjusting its chinstrap.

Ready to go, she got into the cab, sat down and buckled up. Inside the seatback was stored a backpack harness holding an air tank; she strapped into it, avoiding entanglement in the seatbelt, while the ladder truck was leaving the firehouse.

"A trash fire for the last night of our probie. A big one for the grand finale," Josan Miéville said, sitting diagonally opposite Rose and watching her tightening the straps. "There never are real fires when she's on duty."

"Whatever." She grinned, looking him in the eyes. "It's a structural fire like any other."

"Bullshit. It's probably already out, as we speak."

"Boring," Ben Taliaferro said from his seat next to Miéville. "Last night of hazing, and it's all you've got?"

"Don't be so harsh," Mutabi said, sitting beside Rose. "He's probably saving up all his creativity for the dad jokes."

Their part of the cab erupted in laughter.

"Cut it out!" lieutenant Kusanagi said from the front. "A night guard is not responding. It might be serious."

The chauffeur, Tony Weir, added, "ETA in six minutes. Use them wisely."

Chewing her lower lip, Rose looked at the overhead screen displaying the fire-ground information. Outside the cab window, neon-lit storefronts glided by as they rode through the nearly empty, quiet streets.

When they arrived at the scene and reported to the lobby, the situation had already been almost under control. The suppression team was flooding the compactor from the floor above, and another crew was working on freeing the missing

night guard from the stranded elevator. Rose felt a little disappointed. *You're not here for thrill-seeking*, she reprimanded herself in her mind.

Nonetheless, the incident commander—battalion chief Robert Kowalczyk—still had a couple of tasks left on his checklist. Back in the Academy, Rose had learned that even fires appearing to be minor could sometimes require a lot of firefighting personnel, especially for searches. Under the national standards, only in special cases could a primary search—an immediate and fast but systematic search for life—be replaced by a remote reconnaissance. As one of her instructors had said, "Think of a fire in a hoarder's apartment. A recon robot stuck in rubbish when the room flashes over is just a loss of equipment." And a secondary search—a thorough search performed after bringing the fire under control—had to always be conducted by firefighters, but different than those involved in primary search activities. Hence, a fresh set of eyes and hands was invaluable in a large building.

Rose was paired with Mutabi. They donned their masks, went on air and started checking the rooms and corridors on the floor above the fire. Scanning her surroundings with the *Predator vision*—as captain Gleick often called a mask-mounted thermal imaging camera paired with an in-mask display—Rose was fully focused on her job. During this type of task, she would occasionally find heat sources hidden in walls or a ceiling; once she had found a dog under the bed and brought it outside to a thankful elderly couple. But tonight, she and Mutabi, and other search teams found nothing. Similarly, the building sensors weren't detecting anything unexpected.

"Told you! No real fires with her on duty," Miéville said when they returned to the lobby. "No real action."

Rose tightened the grip on her Halligan bar but said nothing.

With the fire extinguished, smoke vented and sprinklers shut down, all the companies began preparing to return to their quarters. Just as Kusanagi's crew marched out to the street, someone from the building management showed up. An important-looking man, glued to his phone, he bumped into Rose on the sidewalk.

"Fuck," he said, trying in vain to wipe soot off his expensive blue jacket. "Damn you!"

Speechless, Rose stood for a moment, waiting for an apology, but the man just turned around and went to the building's entrance. Hoping that no one would notice, she showed a middle finger to his back and continued toward the ladder truck. It was time for a decon and packing everything up.

Back in the firehouse, she stood in the shower for a long time, thinking. Water was flowing through her long curly hair, running down her skin, helping her muscles relax. But Miéville's *no real action* echoed in her head. She knew that old saying about the *black cloud* probies who seemed to draw a number of fires unlike their *white cloud* counterparts. All of the structural fires she had responded to so far turned out to be either minor or already contained by previously arrived units.

Instead of heroically carrying kids out of the inferno, she searched unoccupied rooms, set up fans, placed salvage covers on furniture to protect it from water and smoke, waited on standby in case of *mayday* calls, opened up walls and ceilings for suppression teams to quench the remaining stubborn flames... Once she had reunited the dog with its owners, though.

*Miéville wasn't on duty, she remembered. And the fire wasn't that serious.*

*So what?*

"Never wish for a fire," both captain Gleick and lieutenant Kusanagi had said to her on many occasions.

*Never.*

Rose turned off the water.

"No more calls till the end of the shift," she whispered to herself. "Let no one be hurt."

For some time, it seemed that her wish was granted. But at seven a.m., when Rose was filling the bowl for Milo—a gray tabby living in the firehouse—another call came in. A person struck by a subway train.

## 2

Her bag resting beside her, Rose was sitting on the rear bumper of a firetruck, facing south. Further down Park Avenue, behind a police cruiser blocking the roadway, a swarm of electric rickshaws and taxicabs was turning right into Thirty First, trying to fit into a narrower street. Meanwhile, on Rose's left was a constant stream of pedestrians and cyclists. In need of detachment from the scene, she closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind.

An unexpected voice pierced through the sounds of crowd and distant traffic, snapping her back to reality.

"My tax dollars at work."

Rose glanced up and saw a young-looking businesswoman towering over her. Dressed in a tailored suit and high-heeled shoes, she was standing straight, holding hands on her hips. Rose hated her from the first sight.

"I'm talking to you," the woman said.

"How can I help you?" Rose asked, rising from the bumper.

The businesswoman didn't step back. They were so close that Rose noticed subtle wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, and stripes of gray in her black hair.

"Oh, don't mind me." The woman smiled. "I just find it ironic that your unionized job—in which you just sit on your butt—makes you a hero in the eyes of general public. You didn't even put your uniform on."

"I just—"

"You, firefighters, always come with a lot of noise. Moreover, when some of you waste enormous quantities of water to put out a small flame, the rest just loiter around, doing nothing."

Preparing to respond, Rose took a breath, but the businesswoman was faster.

"Besides, modern buildings don't burn. That's a fact."

"That's not—"

"And it's not just you—the whole public sector is oversized. Just my humble opinion."

"With all due res—"

The woman had already turned away from her. Without looking around, she crossed the bike lane, forcing cyclists to stop or swerve around her. A boy and a girl, riding on a tandem bike, almost fell down, but before Rose could react, they managed to maintain balance. Fascinated by their colorful parrot masks, she followed them with her eyes until she lost them in the crowd. Then she looked toward the raised plaza and spotted the businesswoman entering the office tower. She imagined hearing the clatter of her high heels on the pavement.

"Fuck you, too," she murmured, sitting down.

Picturing lizard scales under the businesswoman's pale skin, Rose laughed. *I totally need to draw that*, she thought. *Lizard Lady. She's made from the same shit as that Blue Suit.* The encounter with the building manager after the night fire still bothered her. Unwittingly, Rose's thoughts turned to what she had learned about him later, in the firehouse's kitchen.

As usual after the fire, members of both companies had gathered there to sit around the table and discuss the actions taken during the job. Besides making notes, Rose was covertly sketching lieutenant Kusanagi's new undercut—short black hair on the top of the head swept to the left, contrasting with the shaved back and sides. She was finishing her second picture when Natalia Rivera from the engine company mentioned the altercation with Blue Suit.

"The guard was giving her account of the events to chief Kowalczyk when that smug exec showed up and started yelling at her," Rivera said. "He was furious and really letting it off. He backed off only after division chief Andrews threatened him with arrest for interfering with the firefighting operation."

Back then in the kitchen, Rose had broken the tip of her pencil. Now, rage was building up inside her again. The job wasn't supposed to feel like that. Still thinking about the night fire, she recalled how calm and collected she was during searches. It was what she continuously trained for, and she felt she was good at it.

*But this is not real action*, Miéville's voice said in her mind. *These are not real fires.* She exhaled loudly, thinking, *So what?* On the day she had brought the dog from the smoky apartment, lieutenant Kusanagi patted her on the shoulder, saying, "Well done," and captain Gleick commended her on their next shift together.

Now, she wanted to relive these moments.



Instead, fresh memories of what had happened on the subway track gnawed at the back of her mind.

## B

Since the scene of the incident was just a few blocks from the firehouse, the ride was short. The firetrucks parked in front of a glassy office tower, and Rose—again full of adrenaline and itching for action—opened the door. But before she could jump out of the cab, lieutenant Kusanagi called her.

"You're coming with me, probie," she said. "I've got a special job for you."

"Yes, ma'am."

Rose got out of the vehicle and followed the lieutenant. Cutting through the morning crowd, they went to the subway station's entrance.

"What will be our first task down there?" the lieutenant asked, as they started walking down the stairs, past the people leaving the platform.

"We have to secure the scene, ma'am."

"What next?"

"We have to locate the patient and determine their viability. If they, uh, have already expired, then it's a crime scene, and the police takes over. If they're alive and pinned, then we're going to prepare for the extrication. We, uh, we'll be supporting the rescue or squad company in lifting the subway car."

The lieutenant nodded. Rose continued, "If there's no impingement, then we'll remove the patient. After the removal, we'll package them and hand over to the EMS."

"Good."

They entered the platform. The station was one of the oldest in the city, with express tracks located in the middle and flanked by local tracks with side platforms. The subway train was on the northbound local track, about two-thirds inside the station. Streams of passengers were heading for exits directed by a lone transit cop; occasional bystanders were blocking the flow.

"If you're not injured, move out, people," the lieutenant said.

Rose kept to the white tiled wall. Without tools in her hands, she felt odd and wondered what the lieutenant had planned for her. *Is this some kind of a test?* she thought. After all, these were her last hours as a probie.

They stopped near the front of the train, and the lieutenant peeked inside the cab. Rose put on her goggles; HUD came to life, its minimalist interface waiting at the edges of the field of view.

"The brakes are engaged, and the transit authority has already cut the power to the third rail," the lieutenant said after consulting with the train crew. "What now, probie?"

"We have to check that third rail, just to be sure, ma'am," Rose said.

"Get down there but be careful."

Rose went past the train and stopped at the platform's edge. Remembering the lieutenant's lecture from the previous subway job on the dangers of accumulated metal dust, she quickly put on her particle mask. She sat down on the tiled floor and jumped on the grimy track bed. The lieutenant handed her a voltage-testing probe. Rose tested the device, applied it to the third rail, then tested it again to verify the results.

"Lack of power in the third rail confirmed," she said, turning around.

Lieutenant Kusanagi was already behind her. Above them, Mutabi, Taliaferro and Miéville, laden with the rescue and safety equipment, were walking toward the ladder at the end of the platform.

"Let's go to work, probie."

*Please, be in one piece*, Rose thought as she kneeled in the dirt next to lieutenant Kusanagi. They looked under the first subway car, their headlamps illuminating the track and the train's chassis. About a hundred feet from them, they saw a shape in the drainage trough between the rails.

Rose's heart started racing.

"On it," she said standing upright.

She ran along the train and stopped to peek under the subway car.

"Motherfu—" Rose's voice broke off after realizing that the lieutenant caught up with her and crouched beside her.

### 3

Rose was tired. After the subway job, she needed peace and calm, but she was less and less sure she deserved it. Something broke in her. For any reassuring thought she had, she was able to quickly come up with a counterthought. She used to turn a deaf ear to Miéville's comments, but now she seemed to recall them all—and they tied nicely to Lizard Lady's monologue.

She wanted to go home.

"Be humble before Lord!"

Someone nearby was shouting. A visibly agitated white, middle-aged man, in an empty spot in the crowd. Wearing a white shirt with a black tie and black pants, he was holding a book in his right hand; a pole with a loudspeaker was strapped to his back. Wandering aimlessly on the sidewalk, he kept preaching, ignored by the people around him.

"Green New Deal was a communist conspiracy to concentrate y'all in the cities. And cities are full of sin. This place is no exception!"

Something cracked, and the preacher's voice became much more quiet. Grateful, Rose closed her eyes and let her thoughts flow. *Green New Deal*. The name immediately brought back childhood images of her father in a hard hat. He had worked on the construction of the rail tunnel and stations beneath the Third Avenue. A part of the Tri-State Link, the project had been the first new line running from Brooklyn through Manhattan to the Bronx in more than a hundred years, and now Rose herself used it every time she rode back and forth to work. She appreciated the spacious air-conditioned stations, modern design, platform screen doors preventing anyone from falling down on the tracks...

"God doesn't make mistakes!"

Rose lost the thread of her thought and opened her eyes. Apparently, the preacher had solved the problem with his sound system.

"Editing genes is a sin! It is a slap in the Lord's face! Where this will lead you, people? Why are your hearts stone cold?" His voice grew louder. "This city is full of sin! Sodom and Gomorrah! Same-sex couples. Abortion clinics. Socialists. Vegans. Punks."

Rose didn't want to listen to this. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled the air. She needed peace. *Go to Times Square, man*, she thought.

"Repent your sins or your punishment will be severe! A plague like never seen before will decimate you!"

Rose shivered; she had heard enough pandemic stories in the childhood and seen her granddads only in old family photos.

"You will be dropping like flies, and no sinful genetic tinkering will help you." The preacher made a pause. He was in his element. "But that's not all. Oh no, not by a long shot. Day will come when many of your shiny towers will fell down and become reduced to ashes. It happened once, didn't it?"

This was too much, and Rose found herself standing upright with eyes fixed on the preacher. She wanted to yell at him, but after a brief eye contact he looked away from her. *What's the matter?* she thought. *Feeling intimidated by a Black woman?* As if trying to get out of her reach, he walked up the steps to the office tower's plaza and kept talking.

"But you didn't change your way! No! Now you think that you can *improve* God's work! Create *better* living things. And there is more! You want to control the climate. Laughable. Humans can't do that—only God can! Stop following that road for it leads straight to Hell! Repent your sins!"

In her mind's eye, she saw herself on top of the preacher, his back on the sidewalk, her fist landing repeatedly on his face. The vision also included getting tackled by the cops, thrown in jail, and terminated from the fire department.

"Sir, you're disturbing peace of this place." A tower's security guard intervened in the right moment. "It's a private space. Because of your behavior I, uh, have to ask you to leave."

"You can ask me to do anything, but you do not have any authority over me, young gentleman."

"Leave, sir, or I'll call the police."

"I'm not afraid of the *policemen*. I know what it means to be arrested. But today..." He thumped the book. "Today my Lord doesn't want me to waste time in the holding cell. I have souls to save on these streets."

He walked down the stairs and stepped on the sidewalk. Strolling toward Thirty Second Street, he again shouted about the Green New Deal and a *communist conspiracy*, beginning a new cycle.

Rose sat down and sighed. *Am I now a magnet for awful people?* She missed her sketchbook—doodling always calmed her down. Without it, her thoughts gravitated to the subway track, again.

To the first person in her career who really needed to be rescued.

## C

A teenage boy sat in the drainage trough, leaning back. Slowly, he moved toward the front of the train by pushing himself with his elbows and right foot, dragging his limp left leg. His eyes closed, his face pale and pinched, he was visibly in pain.

"Fire department here," the lieutenant said loud and clear. "Don't try to move. We'll help you."

The patient stopped moving, opened his eyes and stared at them. Then, he began trying to get up.

"No, no, don't move."

As if tired and resigned, he kept moaning quietly but stayed in his pose. Rose looked at Kusanagi.

"What's your name?" the lieutenant asked.

"Luis."

"Hi, Luis. I'm Ivy," she said. "And this is Rose. She'll assist you."

Luis mumbled something resembling a confirmation. Lieutenant Kusanagi turned to Rose.

"Go behind him," she said.

Carefully, Rose ducked under the subway car and crawled into the drainage trough. She came up to the boy on all fours and kneeled behind him.

"Hi Luis," she said, trying to sound friendly, her head close to his. "Nice to meet you. How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Well, then I'm almost twice your age."

"Isn't that ol—" He stopped. "Sorry..."

Rose chuckled. "Never mind. I'm here to get you out."

"Hey, Luis," lieutenant Kusanagi said. "This is Natalia. She'll take a look at your leg."

Natalia Rivera, peeking from the outside, quickly examined the boy. Then she crawled under the train dragging her trauma bag and approached the patient from the side of his feet.

"You're in good hands, Luis," Rose said. "Don't move! She'll take care of your injuries."

"Okay..."

"What hurts you?" Rivera asked, again scanning him from head to toe.

"The left leg... the most. Both arms, they... hurt just a little..."

"I see. Can you lay on your back?" she asked opening her bag.

"Yes."

Rose reached out and held his shoulders. Just as she helped Luis lay down, a new icon showed up on her HUD. Robot handlers were going to work—their two machines logged in to the incident command network. Judging by the IDs, they were briefcase-sized tracked robots, well-suited to provide additional eyes under the train. But being on the front line, she already had the best view.

Trauma shears in her hand, Rivera easily cut the boy's jeans from ankles to thighs. Gently, she peeled off the blood-soaked denim from his left leg. Automatically, Rose turned her head away.

It was her first open fracture in the field.

Luis yelled. Kneeling above him, Rose looked him in the eyes. *Do something*, she thought.

"Why..." Luis said quietly, his face glistening with sweat.

Trying not to look at Rivera working on the leg, Rose grabbed his left hand.

"I'm with you, Luis. You're safe. We'll get you out."

"I don't want to be here. It hurts!" He was close to tears.

"I know. We're working on it," she said. "We'll get you out of this."

"Uh-huh."

Rose could tell Luis was scared like never before in his short life. Trying to comfort him, she smiled, only to realize that all he could see were her eyes behind goggles—and only if her helmet's flashlight wasn't dazzling him.

"Everything is going to be fine, Luis," she said. "Everything is going as planned."

"I don't want to be here." Tears started flowing down his face. "Am I gonna die?"

Rose's throat tightened, and she felt as if something heavy was placed on her chest. She glanced at his left shank; Rivera had already dressed the wounds and was attaching a splint to his leg to immobilize the fractured bone. Forcing herself to open her mouth, Rose said, "No, no, no. We'll get you out, Luis. I promise, we'll get you out."

"I don't want to die," he said, sobbing. "I want... my mom."

"Is she here, in New York?"

"Hoboken," he said and wiped his face with his forearm.

"Oh, she'll be with you, soon. We'll get you out, get you to hospital, and reunite you with your mom."

"She'll be mad at me."

"You don't know that."

Then, an order came from the outside, "Time to get him out, probie!"

Rose looked to her right. Someone passed her an orange roll with straps.

"Give me a sec. I have to prepare something to get you out."

She moved backwards, unrolled the flexible stretcher and returned to Luis.

"Now I'll drag you. Ready?"

"Yes."

Rose knelt on one knee and leaned forward. She grabbed Luis by his shoulders and pulled him toward her. Alternately shifting back her left knee and right foot, she dragged him onto the stretcher.

"Mom doesn't know I'm here... She was still on a night shift when I left..."

"I'm on a night shift, too. What does she do?" Rose asked, as she and Rivera covered Luis with side flaps of the stretcher and began securing the straps.

"It's a meat factory. She makes sure that the meat grows like it's supposed to." He paused. Crying, he added, "It wasn't my idea, I didn't want to be here!"

"I understand. You won't be here for long. We are leaving."

Using the same technique as earlier, Rose began dragging cocooned Luis by the straps near his head. Soon, she started feeling heat from the train's engines and brakes. The space was tight. Luis was quite heavy. Except for sporadic glances backwards, she didn't see where she was heading. But she kept going; hours of basic confined space rescue trainings were finally coming in handy.

"Hey... Was, uh, there anyone else with you here?" Rose said in short breaks between pulls. Seeing his eyes widen, she added, "I don't want any details, I just need to know if anyone else might be injured."

It was a lie—surely there was no one else under the train, as she'd already heard an *all clear* on the incident tactical channel. Still, she was curious why the boy had ended up on the track.

"Just my... my friend was there," Luis said, sounding distant. "But he was on the opposite platform. He... he waved at me to... to—" His voice broke off.

"That's okay, Luis," Rose said. "It's not your fault. Don't think about it."

"I don't understand... I didn't want to do this."

"Luis," she said. "Luis, don't blame yourself."

He fell silent. Rose looked him in the eyes. All she could see there was fear. She didn't know what else to say. For a moment, she felt as if the outside world ceased to exist.

"Stop, probie!" someone shouted. "Duck under the axle!"

Rose was almost under the front bogie of the subway car. She laid down on her stomach, reaching out. She pulled the stretcher, stopped, crawled backwards and reached out again.

"Almost there, Luis."

Repeating the sequence of motions, she moved under both axles of the bogie.

"Luis?"

Searching the building during the night fire, Rose hadn't found anyone. Now, however, she was actually responsible for someone's safety. The boy's life was in her hands. Her heart beating faster, Rose pulled the stretcher out from under the train, yelling, "He's unresponsive!"

Immediately, firefighters and paramedics surrounded them. She reached out to Luis, but rescuers stepped before her. Someone told her to move aside.

Her job was done. She was no longer needed.

"Calm down," one of the firefighters said. "He's breathing."

"Geez, she sounded like he was DOA," the other added. It took her a moment to realize it was Miéville.

Suddenly, she felt tired and useless.

## 4

Rose closed her eyes and focused on her breathing: on her chest rising when inhaling air and falling when exhaling it. Trying to be in the moment, she couldn't ignore the tight knot in her stomach; she also noticed stiffness in her neck. Slowly breathing in and breathing out, aware of the pain, she began to feel heavy. Just below the surface of her mind, Miéville's comments and her encounters with Blue Suit, Lizard Lady and the preacher were still present. Sitting alone on the firetruck's bumper and trying to meditate, she still couldn't find peace.

"Hello." A familiar voice interrupted her.

She opened her eyes and saw Kusanagi standing opposite her. Unlike Rose, the lieutenant was still dressed in her technical rescue clothes—she hadn't crawled in the drainage trough. She had took off her helmet, mask and goggles, though.

"Ready for orders, ma'am," Rose said, rising from the firetruck's bumper.

"What's going on, probie?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's the first time I see you so anxious," the lieutenant said. "Do you feel that what happened down there was overwhelming?"

A slew of thoughts raced through Rose's mind. *What's the right answer? Is this part of the performance grading? Calm down. Calm the fuck down.* Her gaze darted between the lieutenant's dark, intent eyes and the mouth forming a straight line.

"You're so tense. It's the last shift during your probation, and you wanted it easy, right?"

Rose took a deep breath. *Spit it out*, she thought.

"At least easier than down there, ma'am," she said. "I feel like... I didn't do enough."

Lieutenant Kusanagi nodded.

"Let's talk about it. What more could you do? What would be enough?"

"I, uh—" Rose hesitated. "I don't know, ma'am. But he was so scared, and his, uh, the patient's leg looked pretty bad."

"Do you feel guilty about it?" the lieutenant asked. "Do you feel guilty about the patient's injuries and mental state?"

"I, uh, I don't know, ma'am. Maybe it's the guilt, yes."

"Okay, let's dive deeper," lieutenant Kusanagi said. "Starting with an easy one: have you followed my orders?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Have you been with the patient the whole time during the rescue operation? Have you held the patient's hand and assured them everything would be fine?"

"Yes, I have been with the patient and held their hand, ma'am."

"Has the patient been safely removed from under the train?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who has removed the patient?"

"I— It has been me, ma'am."

"Have you ensured the patient's well-being utilizing your knowledge and skills?"

"Y-yes, I have, ma'am," Rose said and thought, *In your face, Miéville*.

"Is this notion that you didn't do enough based on facts?"

"I..." Rose paused for a moment. "Now I don't think so, ma'am."

"So, did you do enough?"

"Yes, ma'am." It was like removing a heavy weight from her chest. At the same time, she felt her stomach relaxing, and warm, calming sensation spreading through her body. "I did enough."

"There, you said it." The lieutenant smiled. "Remember it."

"I'll, ma'am," Rose said. Suddenly, she saw in lieutenant Kusanagi not an officer, but an older sister she never had. She let the thought dwell in her mind for a moment; it was inviting and puzzling at the same time. She decided she needed to tell the lieutenant something. "One more thing, if I may, ma'am."

"Sure."

"Since this is the end of my probation, I would like to thank you for your guidance."

Another broad smile appeared on Kusanagi's face.



"Training a new member of the Department is always a pleasure to me," she said. "Training you was no different. And I hope that you feel like a part of the family now."

"I do, ma'am," Rose said and felt she really meant it.

"So, if you would like to talk about anything that happens on the job, don't hesitate."

"Yes, ma'am," Rose said.

But deep inside, she wasn't sure how much she could reveal should the serious problem arise—after all, they were a boss and a subordinate, not sisters. Now, however, it wasn't important, because she felt light and calm. As Rose pondered her new state, battalion chief Kowalczyk walked up to her and the lieutenant.

"Probationary firefighter Case, you ready for becoming the full firefighter?" he asked.

"I'm ready, sir," she replied.

"You don't look ready." He shook his head. "The hurricane season starts in a few weeks, and NOAA predicts it will be much more active than last year. We need everybody to be ready."

Rose straightened up and said louder, "I'm ready, sir!"

"That's more like it. Let's hope that this fine metropolis of ours doesn't drown this year."

Rose wanted to point out that Manhattan—encircled by a seawall—was safe, unlike the regularly flooded neighborhoods in southeastern Brooklyn. Instead, she just said, "Hope for the best and prepare for the worst, sir."

"That's the spirit." Chief Kowalczyk grinned. "Now, I'd like to talk to the lieutenant in private."

"Sir. Ma'am," Rose said, turned around and grabbed her bag.

Keeping her head up, she walked between the fire department vehicles, smiling. *I'm ready*. In that moment, the first few raindrops began falling. When she got to the ladder truck and opened the equipment compartment to store her bag, the drizzle grew stronger and turned to a downpour.

Standing in torrents of rain, her clothes already drenched, she thought, *Spring in New York*, and laughed.