

## **The Day That Doesn't End**

### A Deleted Scene from Life After: Huntress

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The cafeteria was loud. Greetings were shouted to Romona as we made our way to the food counters. She smiled and waved in whatever direction they originated. I eyed the food suspiciously, wondering which would be the least likely to come back up later. Maybe I should only be eating crusty bread and water?

“You’ll want to get some good carbs because of all the calories you are burning, but also some protein to help you gain some muscle and keep up your energy. Here, try this.” She started filling up my plate. “As a hunter our bodies are somewhat super charged. Right now you’re only as strong as you were on Earth, but you’ll find yourself getting faster and stronger as you continue to train, but for the most part our bodies function the same way.” She looked at me with a smile as she spooned green beans onto my plate. “You know what they say, ‘you are what you eat’.”

With a loaded tray I obediently followed Romona. The cafeteria reminded me of a cross between a very large sports pub and a ski lodge. Solid wood beams arched high above our heads and ran the length and width of the expansive eating area. A hodge-podge of high and low-top tables, all made of rich wood with a thick layer of shiny sealant, crowded the floor. The ground, also wood, was pounded and beveled as if it had had many years of foot traffic. Windows ran from floor to ceiling letting in a plethora of light and a view of the distant mountains.

As we navigated our way through the tables I looked up at flat screens in various corners and nooks. They were floating eerily in mid-air without support. I caught a

glimpse of the front of one and saw they were broadcasting a sports game. One I didn't recognize.

Parts of the room erupted in loud shouts and raucous table pounding. I was so startled I almost tipped my tray. I took a deep breath as I steadied, allowing myself a small smile for the averted crisis.

I took a step forward and nearly screamed. I was pelted in the side of the head with something warm, wet, and sloppy. Romona heard the commotion and turned. Her eyes wide, brows raised, and mouth stretched open in the shape of an "O". She quickly set her tray on the nearest table, ignoring the people sitting at it, and rushed over.

"Oh no, Audrey, are you, ah, alright?"

I felt a glob of whatever had hit me slide from my hair down my cheek and land somewhere on the ground. Romona bit her lower lip.

"I'm so sorry. Sometimes they get a little rowdy when these matches are on. I think someone accidentally hit you with their mashed potatoes."

She bit down firmer on her lip - I suspected to keep from laughing - as a lump detached from my ponytail to splat on the floor.

"I am SO sorry!" a deep male voice said. I turned and found myself staring at the number "7" printed on the front of a T-shirt. I winched my neck up, up and up until I was looking my assailant in the eye. His height was on par with most of the other men in the room, but he had a thin gangly-ness about him that was different. A blush peaked through his deep chocolate colored skin. His eyes skidded back and forth across my face and hair.

"Man, I really did nail you, didn't I? I swear I wasn't aiming for you. I was trying to hit Alrik."

He pointed his finger to my left. I followed the line. Alrik sat at a small high-top table two down from us. He was doubled over in laughter. The only other person sitting with him was Logan. He barely gave us a look before shaking his head and refocusing his attention up at the screen. When Alrik realized that we had noticed him, he stopped laughing long enough to cup his hands together and shout, “Thanks for the interference, Audrey! I owe you one.”

I hopelessly searched for a way to get the remaining food off my hair and face. Romona grabbed someone’s dry napkin and tried to mop it off my hair. The guy that had pegged me was still making apologies. I’d already tuned his voice out. Romona turned to him with a heavy sigh.

“Hey, Kevin, can you help us out and go get some wet paper towels so we can get this stuff off her hair? We’ll be sitting over there.” She indicated the tables by the windows.

“Oh yeah, sure!” He looked happy to have been given a task and took off.

“Come on, Audrey, let’s get out of the line of fire.”

We made it the rest of the way without incident. Relieved to be able to put my tray down I shook my head. Large chunks dislodged and plip-plopped to the ground. It was starting to dry to my face. *Yuck.*

“This is nasty,” I finally spoke.

“Yes, I know, but its just food. It’ll wash right out. We’ll get the rest of it off after lunch.”

Fast footsteps approaching from behind. I braced myself for another attack. Kevin reappeared with two handfuls of dripping towels. He dropped them on the table next to me, where they immediately started leaking streams of water towards my tray.

“Thanks, Kevin,” Romona began. “Maybe you can keep us company for a bit to make amends.” She smiled sweetly at him.

He gave the screens a longing look as he shifted his weight back and forth. Eventually chivalry won over indecision. “Ah, yeah, I guess I could do that.” He pulled out the seat next to me. I noticed he still had a partial view of the game.

“So, Kevin, let me introduce you to the person who absorbed your mashed potato curve ball. This is Audrey. She’s new. This is her first day of training.”

I scowled at Kevin as I mopped dried potatoes off my cheek. He smiled in an awkwardly nervous but friendly way. It was hard to stay mad when I knew he genuinely felt bad about nailing me with food. Besides, just the fact that he was aiming for Alrik gave him a few extra points in my book.

I conceded. “Hi, Kevin, it’s nice to meet you.” I gave him a forgiving smile and small wave with my free hand. His smile grew less nervous and more authentic. Two large dimples appeared in his cheeks giving him a youthful charm.

“Hi, Audrey! I heard you were here. We don’t get a lot of girls in this line of work so word gets around fast. How’s your first day going?”

I lifted my eyebrows in response and held out a napkin full of potatoes as if to say “how do you think its going?” Kevin laughed back kindly.

“Ha, I guess it could go better, huh?”

“Yes, you could say that. Although, I wish the mashed potatoes were the worst part.”

“Don’t worry. The first day is the hardest for most of us.” He leaned his head in closer as if he had a big secret. “So, did you toss it yet?”

“Kevin!” Romona interrupted. “That is so rude!”

“What?” Kevin looked up at Romona innocently and clearly confused. “We all do.”

“Right after the warm-up run.”

“Ha, see!” He pointed a finger at Romona. “I knew it! Don’t worry about it, Audrey. We seriously all lost our breakfasts the first day. I didn’t make it much past that myself.”

Romona rolled her eyes.

“So, who’s your mentor, anyway?”

I speared a green bean a little harder than necessary. “Logan.”

Kevin sat back and appeared thoughtful. “Hmmm, that’s an interesting choice.”

I sat up straighter. “Why?”

“Kevin.” Romona’s soft voice held a warning. It only heightened my curiosity.

He gave Romona a quick look before responding.

“Oh, no reason, really. He’s a good guy. A great fighter. I’m sure you’ll be able to learn a lot from him.”

What weren’t the two of them telling me?

“So, do you know anything about trisiege?”

“Tri what?” I was sidetracked by Kevin’s obvious shift in conversation.

Kevin nodded his head towards one of the hovering screens. "It's the greatest! It's the best parts of all sports games wrapped into one, along with a few interesting twists."

"I'm not sure I like sports." I replied honestly.

That seemed to faze Kevin, but he recovered quickly. "Well, I'm sure you'll like this one. Everyone does."

"By everyone you mean all the hunters?" It wasn't hard to imagine this room full of people being into sports.

"No, like everyone, everyone. It's literally the perfect sports game."

I shook my head. "It's so strange that sports still existing in the afterlife."

"I know, isn't it cool, though?"

Romona spoke up. "When you think about it, it really does make sense."

"How do you figure?" I asked.

"Well, God's the creator of everything good, right?"

"Hmm, yeah, I guess." God? That was the first time anyone had mentioned the big "G" by name. Celeste and Shannon had referred to a mysterious "him," when I was being processed, but never clued me in on the details. I didn't remember going to church, conversations about God, or ever praying, but as I dug internally I found facts about God embedded in my mind. Much like the knowledge I had of things such as the process of osmosis and how to do long division by hand. I must have been taught about all of that at some point, but I didn't remember anything that gave me a personal connection.

"Well 'fun' is something good." Romona stated simply. "Why wouldn't we be able to enjoy the fun things we did on Earth?"

“I know I don’t remember what I thought about the afterlife and dying before I, you know, actually died, but all of this,” I waved a hand towards the nearest floating screen, “does feel odd to me.”

Romona tilted her head. Kevin was using the opportunity to catch up on the game.

“So if you had to guess, what would you say you thought it would be like?”

I chewed on my bottom lip. It was difficult to speculate at something I couldn’t remember.

“I’m not sure exactly. Maybe a lot of flying angels with harps? Perhaps something about non-stop singing?”

Her face split into a grin as if she found my answer amusing. “I do believe there are some people who play the harp, but they aren’t angels, and again, it’s fun for them.” She leaned forward and I thought she might give me a hug, but caught herself mid-act and sat back in her seat.

“You have an entire eternity to digest. You don’t need to figure everything out all on your first full day. Today you just need to take one step.”

She turned to Kevin who was craning his neck to the left and leaning on two chair legs to get a better view of the screen.

“Kevin, why don’t you explain the game to Audrey?”

Kevin looked back at us guiltily. “Oh yeah, sure!”

I sat in silence as Kevin spent the next fifteen minutes explaining the rules. He was extremely animated in his descriptions, using his hands a lot and utilizing the condiments on our table to explain formations. The only thing I really understood was that there were three teams on the field (thus the “tri” part of the name), goals, a ball, and

players could get picked up and flown around the stadium by angels. It sounded kind of cool, but I didn't think I was a big sports person. A lot of the terminology he used went over my head. Besides, it kind of seemed like cheating to me that angels could just fly people around. Where's the skill in that?

By the time Kevin finished his explanation, I was done eating and noticed the cafeteria had almost completely emptied.

"Come on," Romona grabbed my arm and tugged me from the seat. "Let's go to the locker room first and clean the rest of that food out of your hair. See ya around, Kevin, thanks for keeping us company." She gave him a smile and a wave.

Kevin offered me a smile and extended his hand. I was still uneasy about this empathy link thing, but I needed to get used to it sooner or later. I bravely extended my hand. Kevin's emotions were all friendliness and warmth, exactly what was written on his face.

"Anytime, Audrey. And don't worry about it, the training will get better. I'm sure you're going to make a great hunter. Things will start falling into place soon enough."

He must have picked up on my reluctance to return to training. There was no irony in his voice. His sincerity gave me a tremendous boost. I smiled and waved back at him as Romona tugged me from the table.