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## Special/Lion

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I hate you. I. Hate. You. I hate you for putting me through this. I hate you, who chose this, and I hate you for doing this to me now. And I hate... myself... for not doing anything about it. Well, there is plenty I can do about it. I can just go to the medicine cabinet right now and I can do something about it, I can— Is that Megan? Is she outside the door?

“Just a minute!”

No answer. Good. Nobody has to see. If I hide the marks under my clothes, then nobody has to see. Oh, they can check my wrists all they want. They won't find anything there. But my hips?

N—No, I can't. I can't do this. I— no. NO.

I'll just... I'll just breathe. And I'll—you know, I'll just take it one day at a time, and I'll just make a little trip out of town when it's time. Just another hospital in another town, and no one needs to know. Just breathe.

You know, between working and being there for Mom, time gets away from me. Days turn to weeks, and weeks into months. Mom grows thinner, and I... I mean it's perfectly normal for a girl my age to wear, you know, baggy clothes all the time. I mean, who doesn't love a hoodie three sizes too big? It makes you feel safe, you know?

Like wearing this big, squishy armor. Like having these arms wrapped around you. And anyway, this isn't about me. Okay? It's about Mom. It's about getting Mom well again, about getting her what she needs, and—

And time is getting small now. Any day now I'm going to make that trip to the hospital, and that will be it.

Mom's going downhill fast, but she's alert enough to ask me again, all slow and coherent, “Leah... are you pregnant?”

“No, ma'am.”

“You know you could tell me if you were, honey. We'd get through it together.”

“... No ma'am.”

The day arrives. I'm climbing in my truck by seven. I'm at the hospital by eight, and by noon... by noon a perfect little miracle has happened... for someone else's family.

I am trembling, and raw, but I can't stay here. I can't afford to waste any amount of time feeling sorry for myself, because my mother needs me, and if I don't get out of here right now and go to her... No, it's fine. I'm fine. I'll just take deep breaths... and think of the ocean. Just one breath after another... and think of the ocean.



**SPECIAL / LION** Navida Sulemi Roman Payne