

The First Hesitation

Timeline: Seven years before Chapter 1

POV: Elara Sterling, age eleven

Eleven-year-old Elara stands over her first wounded supernatural creature.

Her instructor orders her to finish it.

She raises her weapon.

The creature doesn't attack.

It is injured, frightened, and trying to crawl toward the forest.

For one heartbeat, Elara hesitates.

Then her father's voice comes from behind her.

"One heartbeat is sufficient for death."

Elara obeys.

Everyone congratulates her.

That night, however, she secretly writes a question in the back of one of her training manuals:

Why didn't it attack me?

Years later, someone has torn that page out.

New canon revealed: Elara's doubts didn't begin in Chapter 1. They were conditioned out of her.

This directly echoes her memory of receiving essentially the same lesson now being given to another twelve-year-old Sterling child.