To Stand Tall

by Connelly

Summary

During the day, she's just a cripple. As Virtue, she's been cleaning her city off criminals and villains capes. But now a war rises, making her a target. An aging soldier struggles with his legacy. Old Dogs are waking up, and an army will rise to follow them to the gates of hell itself, in defiance of a world gone mad.

A sequel to On Missing Limbs [Worm x Metal Gear] by fallacies

Notes

To Stand Tall is a sequel to On Missing Limbs (Worm x MGS) by fallacies, a fic left in adoption as a "sequence of short scenes [...] meant to be largely humorous, despite how it might look. It also isn't a fic where Taylor triggers with an alternate set of powers."

Unlike the original text, this one is intended as a long reading with a plot more... long-winded? Reading the original fic before this it's strongly recommended; things won't make sense otherwise, even if you have a good understanding of both universes, as it follows directly the events in that one. And it's pretty cool to boot.

Available mirrors for your convenience at
Spacebattles: https://forums.spacebattles.com/threads/worm-x-mgs-on-missing-limbs-ii-to-stand-tall.608032
Sufficient Velocity: https://forums.sufficientvelocity.com/threads/worm-x-mgs-on-missing-limbs-ii-to-stand-tall.44889/
FFNet: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13020691/1/To-Stand-Tall
The SB and SV mirrors include omakes and fanart by commenters. FFNet is prickly with text formatting, so it's the most limited version of the four.

- Inspired by [On Missing Limbs](#) by fallacies
[Recording: Director Iriomote and Daniel Hebert interview]

[A knock is heard]

"Enter."

[A door being opened is heard]

"Ah. Mr. Daniel Robert Hebert, right? Come in. Take a seat."

[The door is closed, then steps are heard moving closer. A weight is gently dropped on a cushioned chair.]

"Thanks, Mr. Iriomote."

"This here is my assistant, Andrea Zafra. I apologize for not meeting you sooner. First the transfer here, learning the place, then attending the most urgent matters of the city. You understand. So. What can I do for the Dockwor-"

[A solid punch is heard. The door is violently opened and a gun is heard clicking.]

"Freeze! On your knees!"

"It's alright! It's alright. I suspect I had it coming. Go back to your post, trooper."

[After a few seconds of silence, the gun is heard being holstered slowly.]

"Very well, director, sir."

[The door is closed, and a few muffled heavy feet are heard settling in place. A click is heard, starting a faint buzz.]

"Alright, nobody can hear us now. Not eavesdroppers, not bugs, not even thinkers will know about this conversation."

[A few more seconds pass in silence.]

"How much do you know?"

"Enough. I know you were behind the butchery my girl was subjected to."

"Dammit, Hebert-"

"What do you know, 'Ocelot'?"

"I know that Kazuhiro enlisted you and your wife and for what purpose. I know about your daughter's true biological parents. And don't think I don't know who's your informant. I know all that and more. I personally knew them all and Kaz and considered them all friends, even if he hated my guts at the end. I know many things and many people, Daniel, there aren't many secrets that I don't know. And yes, I ordered the operations done on Taylor, but it was only an opportunity I took advantage off. Nobody expected the incident with the locker, and I'm already pushing to provide more gestures in your favor. Real protection, instead of simply surveillance, for example."
"How generous of you."

"Look, this is just a way to apologize, there'll be more to come, but all this has an explanation-"

"Then explain! Why mutilate and hypnotize Taylor to be John's living image? Why make Armsmaster think he should sponsor her, and... I don't even know if I should ask about the Wards. Why, goddammit, WHY!?"

[After a few seconds of silence, someone is heard sighing.]

"Andrea, could you step outside for a moment? Just stay in range."

[Light steps are heard while the door opens and closes.]

"Your own cape bodyguard?"

"No. Just a thinker deterrent, if one I must use judiciously."

"... Shit. A psychic?"

"Full disclosure, no one in HAVEN are actually parahumans. Just merely exceptional individuals. Andrea happens to be one of the very few psychics I know exist in the world. Just like your daughter."

"What? You mean like that kid Rebenok?"

"No, just a very minor one, nothing on the scale of Mantis. I understand she has developed an 'awareness'? John did the same after he had Jack's memories implanted on him. Jack learned a 'mundane' way to do it on his own, but John's was genuine, hypnosis couldn't teach him that. I think his genes passed it to Taylor. If anything, thinkers will have a harder time working on her, maybe strangers and masters too, but I wouldn't guarantee anything."

"Start explaining everything. Now."

"I'm not your enemy, Danny, everything I'm telling you is a show of goodwill. Now, you must understand, we are at war."

"I noticed there's a gang war in this city, but that's not what you're talking about."

"No. It's a secret war. The public doesn't see the sides, but it's affecting the entire world."

"Like the feud between Big Boss and Cipher? I know someone took over Cipher."

"Right, Cipher is no more. With all of their founders dead or lost, another group took control of all of their assets for different purposes. The entire game as we knew it until the dissolution of Zanzibar Land in 1999 has changed radically, and everyone is now playing by that group's rules."

"... Alright, let me take a guess."

"Very well."

"You climbed positions in an organization formed to fight parahumans, and your hero team isn't actually parahuman, you faked their condition and got them sponsored by the PRT instead of the Protectorate, so you're in some way against capes. Neither the PRT or the Protectorate are actually moving their asses to do the job they are supposed to do. At least out there."
"This very city has been gutted by cape gangs for the better part of two decades, and the heroes are content with the status quo. So I'm guessing you must be acting as a mole or something? Making changes?"

"You're doing well for now. I'll indeed try to make changes in policies, but that's at least the image I must give to everyone else. Nothing is that simple."

"Right. You can't just want vigilantes that aren't parahumans. It makes sense you might want them to be an alternative to capes, keep them outside the jurisdiction of the PRT and the Protectorate, but that can't be all. Nobody makes a new Big Boss without a reason, and having her clean this one city is too small, too small picture... The idea of Big Boss is not just one of a good soldier. Big Boss is an icon, a leader... You want her to lead that war."

[A chair is heard scraping its legs against the floor.]

"You bastard."

"Daniel, I swear, what she's doing right now, against Brockton's capes and gangers, that's just training and testing. All she's been given until now: the operation, the hypnosis, Armsmaster's support, even a last minute 'suggestion' to Panacea to do more than just heal Taylor. All that was just the start to put her at the same level as John. She needs to be tested, but I'm arranging for her to have all the help anyone could ever use."

"But why? Why her?"

"And why not? Jack and John are dead. Jack's sons are dead too and Solid Snake has no interest in the mantle, fought for too long against it. And besides, do you really think Kazuhira simply wanted a memorial to John and Quiet? I confess to having made a similar thing for another person, but him? He was rotten by resentment. He wanted to hit back at Cipher, at the Big Boss that betrayed him – Jack – and so he made it possible for a memory of the Big Boss that he trusted – John – to exist. For what, you think? Just to go on her own way, ignorant of her legacy?"

[A drawer is heard being opened, and a stack of papers being dropped on a table. Then the drawer is closed.]

"He arranged for Taylor to be approached after high school, make recruitment attractive, and eventually get her into the special forces. Green Beret, just like Snake, his favored apprentice. It wouldn't be too hard to guess that he wanted his own Enfant Terrible."

[The sound of paper sheets being checked is heard.]

"... Where did you even get these?"

"His own house, 2005."

"That's the year he died."

"Yes. I was a mole in FOXHOUND during the Shadow Moses incident. To keep my cover, I had to kill him. It was a confrontation twenty years in the making, but no, I'm not proud of it. For all his failings, I respected Kaz, and he didn't deserve it."

[A few more sheets are heard, then stop.]
"Shit."

"Daniel, yes, I've taken advantage of you and your daughter. But where Kazuhira would have made her an attack dog, I'm willing to give her a bigger purpose. It was inevitable that one thing or another would happen. I'd like to think, to make you think, that I'm giving her the best option. Any option at all. And there won't be any more manipulations: when she's ready, she'll be presented all information to make her own choice. And the one who will choose won't be the impression of John in her mind; it will be the girl you raised."

[Half a minute is passed in silence.]

"You swear she'll be safe?"

"I've arranged for it."

[The recording ends.]

The van stopped in front of the warehouse door.

A sharply dressed man got out of it, followed by a bodyguard armed with a sub-machine gun and carrying a sports bag. It was quite the dark night, with no lights around that could shine on them, and the only people around that could identify them were already on his payroll. They were, as they said, cats: in the night, every one of them is black.

Marching to the door, a skinhead acknowledged them with a nod, not with a raised hand. Another opened the door, and moved aside, allowing the newcomers to pass.

Inside they met with another skinhead, a burly blonde man who stepped in as the visitor closed up to him.

"It's starting, then?"

A nod. "We were given molotovs, boss. No capes, should make things easier."

The bodyguard passed the bag to the blonde, and the 'boss' kept talking. "Use these too. Pass them to people we trust." He passed him by then. "You know your orders. Do follow them to the letter."

Behind the blonde, a chained big bearded man sat cross-legged. His face and his clothes were bloodied, not even bothering looking up to his visitor. "Your idea?"

The blonde shook his head. "They left him there like that. Victor, I think. Hookwolf wouldn't have been as gentle."

He nodded. "I apologize for the treatment you and your wife have received. But circumstances dictate that none of you can leave yet."

He crouched to level their eyes, but the chained man still didn't look at him.

"She talked, you know. Told everything."

Now at that, the bearded man looked up. And that must have been the first tear to run down his face since everything started.
"Don't despair. Everything will be better after tonight, whether you're here or not to see it."

He rose up then. "Give my regards to the girl, if you meet her again."

He turned around. "Virtuous Grind is a go", he ordered to the blonde as he turned around and went back to the exit followed by his escort.

Behind him, the bearded man started sobbing loudly.

"Three hours ago, a march protesting the authorities hands-off approach to the city gang war was broken and dispersed by Empire Eight Eight men. One hour later, Armsmaster received information that they took captives to their territory."

"The PRT hasn't acted yet?"

"Technically, the information wasn't 'legally' obtained. The source was a teen that looked like an adult."

"Hmm, could tell you stories myself. They don't trust the info?"

"The tip has been verified, and Director Iriomote is willing to give the go-ahead to a raid operation, but some lawyers stomped into the room and until a judge decides on the subject, the chief-director has the hands of both the PRT and the Protectorate tied."

"And meanwhile the E88 have enough time to move the evidence. Or clean it."

"Exactly. That's where we come in."

"And we shouldn't have to if the PRT and the heroes were doing their jobs from the start. So, what's the plan? Your ship is fast but we've just left Vancouver, and if they're smart we won't have time to cover enough ground."

"No, that's true. I'm thinking about going after a priority target, and exfiltrate. Hopefully, we'll be able to pass information on other places where there might be hostages; the PRT will be able to act then. Armsmaster already gave us the green light and is prepping everyone he can for the raid."

"Any particular hostage?"

"There're two close to each other's locations. Dockworkers."

"Please don't tell me..."

"No. Armsmaster already phoned your father, he managed to evade the worst of the trouble and he's at home now with Diamond."

"Thank god. Do we have IDs then?"

"Not totally confirmed, but they're ones you personally know."

"... Kurt and Lacey. Fuck. And they have weight in the Association."

"Yes, you know better than most that the E88 has been looking for a way in, and keeping them hostages might just give them that."
"Do we know what has moved the E88 to act like that? Or all the gangs to start warring each other, for that matter."

"Not really. They're not the type to give press conferences. There are theories, though, but ..."

"You got your own?"

"It's just a thought, but... look. The conflicts in Brockton Bay have possessed a kind of stability for a decade. There are skirmishes now and then, but nothing that would push the gangs to actual war. Then Armsmaster moves you into the game, start hitting them in ways that hurt them bit by bit the aspects unrelated to their capes: drugs, money, weapons. Things where official groups can't justify a proactive stance without reasonable cause and proof."

"They notice the patterns and start shooting at each other. Then they snipe at the Association in the protest. People close to my family. Either they don't know my identity and we just got unlucky, or..."

"We have to assume it's a trap. It's too much of a coincidence otherwise."

"And I'm just a non-parahuman vigilante with the barest of sponsorship."

"You've demonstrated capabilities that are worrying for most baseline humans and lower rating capes. If they know Virtue is the one to blame for their problems, they'll be hunting for blood."

"Hmm, they manage to take me, and that's it. Easy catch, nobody looks twice, business goes back to normal."

"Taylor, I know what you're thinking. If you asked me any other time, I'd told you to sit this out and lay low."

"They're family, Dragon. Family that I'm just starting to reconnect with. I'm not gonna back down just because it might be a trap."

"I know, and I'm with you through and through."

"Do we have a plan?"

"The Empire acquired recently some warehouses from ABB territory close to the docks, and I'm positive that our targets are kept in that area. Lung is trying to recover a different area as we speak and most of the Empire capes are moving to intercept him, with Oni Lee playing distraction on their way, so it's safe to assume parahuman presence in the AO will be minimal for some time."

"Lung doesn't do 'short fights', but I don't see the Empire risking a long confrontation. They'll start retreating soon or risk losing people quick."

"I calculate they'll disengage in forty-five minutes or so, starting now. We'll be there in fifteen, so our window of opportunity is pretty small for two different rescues. Unfortunately, there's enough Empire presence that we can't land nearby, so you'll drop at the beach, then infiltrate on foot. Find the targets, take them to the extraction point, and lay low, see if they can share anything they know. Armsmaster will come in a nondescript van for exfil at our signal."

"Lovely, time limits."

"I know, so I'm going to break the rules this time. I'm sending a suit to drop some weapons from the PRT at the insertion point. Tranq guns like the ones at the Rig exercise, for a start."
"That'll help, but I might need something punchier if I meet heavy resistance."

"I've already discussed it with Armsmaster, and he's adding a sub-machine gun and grenades."

"Is he sure? You both know I've yet to go lethal..."

"It's the best compromise we could reach with what we have available. I'm aware that you are able to operate it and you might need it, but you don't have a guns permit yet and I'm reticent of having you kill, so please, please, only use it as a last resort. You're too young yet to have that weight on your consciousness."

"I promise, Dragon. I don't like the idea of dealing with death yet either."
"Dragon, target gravely wounded! She's stable but advise Armsmaster to have medical at the ready!"

Taylor didn't stop to wait for an answer. She knew Dragon was always listening. And her time was better spent on relaying the message anyway. She'll answer whenever she had anything to say. Didn't take long though, until Dragon gave her confirmation.

"Roger, Virtue. Armsmaster is ready and waiting for the signal."

Taylor didn't quite run, what with carrying Lacey over her shoulders. But with them still in hostile territory without much more cover than the occasional parked car, and having left Kurt alone in an alley, she wanted to leave these streets as soon as possible.

The problem was, Lacey was in a far worse state than Kurt, and despite the hurried first aid she applied to her when she found her, she didn't want to make things worse and reopen a wound or risk moving a broken bone with a full run.

That, and she was still getting used to the weight of two weapons hanging at her back and hip, and avoiding the noise of them clacking against the rest of her gear when in movement, particularly her prosthetic. It was slowing her down more than she was comfortable.

True to her promise, of the weapons that Dragon was able to send to her LZ, she only kept full ammunition for the MP5, and haven't used any of the two grenades yet. She was forced to use the MRS-73 rifle a great deal as the streets and roofs were full of nazis patrolling the streets with spotters watching from the roofs, with barely any alternate routes to bypass them while she searched for Kurt and Lacey. And then the inside of the buildings had their fair share of armed tenants to shoot at with the WU pistol. In retrospect as to where she ended finding her family friends, she had wasted far too many darts on targets that a route with proper intel would have avoided. And the time limits forced her to leave them where they fell and moving fast to the next target, instead of hiding the bodies.

This had an upside, though. The streets she was traversing were full of sleeping skinheads. None of them would raise an alert because she walked in front of them. Not that they were facing anywhere other than the ground or the night sky. Yes, she still was at risk of alerting any stray patrol with noise or just with them seeing their unconscious friends, but she couldn't exactly fight against time constraints anyway.

The fight between Lung and the Empire capes was still raging strong in the distance, but the sound of that wouldn't wake them either. It seemed to be happening in the opposite direction of her home, thankfully. It should be around two miles from her position, while the fight wasn't quite one mile away.

Far too many nazis, anyway. The conflict with the ABB clearly had put them on high alert, to have so many hands on deck.

She finally neared the entrance to the alley when Lacey started to regain conscience. "Tehl'rrrr...?", she slurred. How she recognized her with a balaclava and not having seen each other since her mother's funeral, Taylor couldn't imagine.

"Hold on, Lacey, I'm getting you out of here". Taylor finally ran inside the alley and moved to the other side as fast as she could until reaching Kurt, who sat unconscious against a wall.

Taylor dropped her at his side as gently as she could. After leaving the hospital, she found that
Panacea had, even if she hadn't mentioned at the time, improved on her physique enough to carry on some of the hardest exercises that a baseline human of her body type could. Still, even with her more recently muscled build, she was a wiry teenager. Any bad movement and Lacey would slip and fall harder than needed to the ground.

Once properly settled, Taylor started inspecting Lacey's face. Kurt had received a harsh beating, but while he'd be able to walk it off with (admittedly very serious looking) bruised flesh and ribs, whoever tortured Lacey enjoyed their time with her, adding cuts and actually broken bones to the mix. Half her face was pulped, with the lips broken, and Taylor was worried she'd lose an eye.

She had passed a first aid course after her episode with Night, and more advanced medical treatments had been coming to her mind with time, things like the joint reduction or even field operations that she'd swear only professional medics would be trained in. She had treated Lacey as best as she could when she found her. But right then and there, she was at a loss as to what to do.

With her right hand moving Lacey's hair from her face, Taylor tapped her earpiece with the finger of her prosthesis. "Dragon, package is ready and itching to be picked up. Extraction point should be safe, alley between Burns and Smithers. Tell Armsmaster to hurry up, they need the medic now!"

Weakly, Lacey moved a hand to take the hand Taylor had at her face. "Teh'rr... um zory, Teh'rr."

Taylor sushed her. "Hey, hey, not your fault, ok? Do not feel sorry for what these pigs did to you. That's on them, not you."

"Nuh, Teh'l'rr..." She might have tried to sob or slurp back some slobber or blood in her mouth, it was hard to say. "'ey maze meh tak."

"Talk? About what?" She could hear now the sound of a heavy van. Armsmaster would be there any minute.

"'boud 'ou. 'boud 'anny. 'boud 'our 'ouze".

Taylor could swear her heart just skipped a beat or two right that instant.

Her identity. Her father's. Their address. All in hands of the Empire.

This couldn't be happening. They had the greatest care in avoiding leaks.

Lacey looked down while a year ran down from her good eye. "'ey zent gangerz. Pohbably dhere nou."

This shouldn't be happening!

She felt her own breathing quicken as she rose to full height.

Dragon woke her from her stupor. "Virtue! I'm sending a suit, I won't let anything to happen to your father, you hear me? Virtue!"

Whenever Dragon had a suit in Brockton Bay, she kept them in the Protectorate Rig. At their usual flight speed, they'd take five minutes to reach the coast. Then four to her house. Low-balling it.

Nine minutes. That if Dragon didn't have to maneuver the suit from inside the Rig, wasting more precious time.

By the sound of the engine, the PRT van would still be a minute away. Unload the troopers, evaluate
the state of Kurt and Lacey and load them in, quick debrief with Armsmaster, then... choose between getting them proper medical attention, or driving her home with an unprepared unit of troopers, and one or two capes, blind into whatever they might find.

Ten minutes, give or take. Maybe not even that.

Still not enough time.

She was able to run a perfect mile inside the four minutes. Barely. When unencumbered and fresh.

Two miles. Eight minutes.

Alone, exhausted, and only with three clips for her MP5.

Barely better.

"Virtue? Taylor? Please, talk to me...", came Dragon though the earpiece.

"Dragon, send me the quickest route on foot to the GPS."

Dropping the rifle on the ground and gripping the sub-machine gun at her hip, she started running faster than she ever had.

She was able to see the fire in the distance after the first mile.

Another mile afterwards, Taylor didn't stop running when she reached the street, but her body couldn't keep the pace anymore and had to slow down. She had put away the balaclava to breathe better, yet her breathing was labored. She was drenched in sweat, her heart was burning of exhaustion, her fingers weak, and she barely felt her legs anymore.

She forced her lungs and heart to keep working, kept her balance on her wobbly legs, lifted her gun to aiming position, and ignored the sweaty feeling of uncovered face risking her identity.

Correction: there was no identity anymore to worry about now.

She pushed on.

She scanned the street down the sights of the gun as she kept a fast walk. She couldn't see any sight of whoever could have started the fire. A few lights started to be seen on windows through the neighborhood.

She still was half the way to home when barks she was beginning to become oh so familiar started to become audible.

Whatever connection the wolf-dog had with her awareness, it suddenly gave her an approximate position of himself and her father. Both were in the house, and she couldn't blame him for the imprecise positioning.

He and her father had taken to each other wonderfully since the day she took him home. The animal had been good for Danny's recovering from his depression, and in their shared connection she always knew where her father was in the house, even if for any reason like sleep she lost her awareness of his position.
Which only did to drive home harder how terribly scared both probably were right now.

Closing in to the front of the house without breaking stride, it was obvious the fire was everywhere inside, with all the windows had flames flowing through them. Maybe the main door could still be passed through with minimal exposure.

"Taylor. ETA for my suit is three minutes. Fire trucks are on their way."

She had made good time in her dash. Would she wait now, and risk help coming too late to save her only family? Or would she enter, and risk both her family and herself?

The calm and resolve that has accompanied her since the hospital were being severely tested that night. She promised herself she'd be as diamonds. Now, she was feeling more and more like the her old self would be in this situation: panicky and nervous. The self-consciousness undermined her cool even more, though not her determination.

She didn't stop moving towards the door, even as a part of her mind was screaming not to.

The barks were still going, but weaker. She pulled up the balaclava so it covered her mouth and nose.

It occurred to her that it was very thankfully convenient that the wool was so wet by now.

"No time... Gonna enter", she called with heavy breaths. "No sign of hostiles yet, check as you land."

Jumping the steps to the door, she aimed the gun to the pommel.

"Taylor, wait!"

Her shaking hand didn't prevent the wood around the pommel from being pulverized under the rain of metal. She pushed the door with her shoulder without breaking momentum, and covered her lower face with her prosthetic arm, while with her right hand she shouldered down the weapon, scanning the place down the sights.

Left and right were lost to the flames. In front of her she had a somewhat clear way to the back door of the house, but smoke from the basement was quickly shutting down that path. A burning coat hanger had fell with its clothes on the lower steps of the stairs leading to the upper floor, blocking the way.

A reinvigorated bark sounded from above.

Taking the hanger from its legs, she dragged it from the stairs and threw it as far as she could into one of the burning rooms. The stairs themselves still had some flames on the steps, but she could ignore those as she ran up. Those were a gentle rain compared to the storms in the rest of the house.

She started coughing on the upper steps. The greater amount of smoke concentrating up there wasn't helping with her already tired lungs. She had been running on fumes for a while already, and couldn't tell how much more she could endure.

"Dad!", she screamed. More barks answered her from her father's room behind the closed door.

She lunged to open it. Just one more minute. Just one to check on her father and help him get out with a cleared path.
Her lungs were burning up, and her limbs were failing her. She just needed one more minute.

"Taylor, I'm almost there. I'm seeing a crowd around your house. They don't..."

Her hand grabbed the pommel and started to turn it.

"Skinheads! They're throwing something to the house!"

Something clicked in the roof.

An explosion shook the floor from behind her, then a second one shoved her down.

Taylor lost her focus with her face on the floor. Something hot was pining her body down. A whining made her turn her face ahead, and she saw the wolf-dog, oh so loyal Diamond, crawling to her to nuzzle in the face. Something sticky was running down around her good eye. Below a pile of rubble, her father laid still.

She tried to reach him with her hand. Now all of her felt like burning hotter than hell.

A metal dragon crashed through the opening in the roof, and then Taylor closed her eyes.
Prologue: Cape Zeroes - 03

Sad... so sad...

A host of sorrows...

And you are one of them...

The first time she woke up, she was in a bed.

Or at least, she guessed. She couldn't move or even open her eyes, but the feeling of lying in a soft body gave a good hint. Breathing was impossible. She felt air flowing to her lungs at the rhythm of a mechanical noise, but her lungs weren't doing anything by themselves.

Being awake was agonizing pain, so she fell asleep quickly.

Her mother, her beautiful mother, reading her something, maybe a tale or one of her small novellas, while she tried to sleep.

It was hard, because their car was bumping a bit. Her mother had the book over the wheel, and she stammered her reading.

Pain.

Suddenly, the car crashed, and she saw her mother be squashed, the left lens of her glasses cracking between the window panel and the seat.

Then she woke up.

Sometimes she could hear people milling around her. Medics and nurses, she guessed. It was hard to listen what they said, and whatever they were doing, it didn't alleviate her pain at all. No one had seemed to notice that she was conscious. Or they might have, it was hard to keep track of things like this.

She noticed her prosthetic arm was missing. Not that it was of any use now.

There wasn't much she could do, so she tried to sleep as much as possible.

The drugs helped.

She was playing on a field with her dear friend. They were playing superheroes. She had the black cape and suit, and her friend was a damsel she was saving.
She stumbled on her cape and fell on a rock. It hurt, but it was alright because her friend had come to give her a hand.

_Fear._

The hand pushed her back hard against the ground. She was in a hole now, covered by detritus and bugs. She tried to get out, but the hand was pushing a table against her, pinning her down in the hole. Behind glasses with one cracked lens, her friend didn't stop smiling.

Then she woke up.

Each time she awoke, she felt more and more tired.

"I don't know if you can hear me."

A man. His voice was familiar. He helped her, admittedly for his own reasons, but he was helpful all the same.

"This is the second time I've failed you."

She heard an angry long breath.

"I don't have a way to make it up to you. Director Iriomote assured me he'll provide assistance, but all other doors from the PRT are closed. You aren't considered a parahuman, so I wasn't able to get you on any priority list for any healer. Even Panacea refuses to get out of her home since that disaster at the bank."

Steps of metal started moving away.

"They're ignoring the work you've done. They mock you for your... foolishness. But I won't. Whatever happens, I'll make sure they don't forget your sacrifice."

A door closed. Her eyes already were when she fell asleep again.

The warehouse was silent. Cardboard boxes littered the floor. She was hiding.

A blinding light burned her eyes. And another. And another one. All the while, fine legs like razors cut the flesh and fur of her new friend. It made her angry, and want revenge on behalf of the howling creature.

She turned around, caught the monster by the neck, and put a knife on at its throat.

_Fury._

She let the monster go in peace, a cracked lens on its face. Someone was licking her hand in thanks.

Then she woke up.
Pain was a bit more bearable. She wasn't sure if it was because of the drugs, or because she felt so
tired.

A weight on her leg shifted, then passed to her hand. She felt it being licked, and her awareness
connected with Diamond's familiar mind, giving her a vague sense of people moving around in the
distance.

At least she wasn't alone in her isolation anymore.

She sat at the table with her father. They had made something special for dinner today. It was
something they both liked, and they were having a good time.

Her father smiled while they talked. It had been so long since they were that happy at home.

The oven opened behind him, and a bald head with a swastika for a face spat fire at his back.

He was still smiling as his skin melt and bones blackened, and one lens of his glasses cracked under
the heat.

When all that was left was ashes, she stood up. The entire kitchen, the house, was on fire.

*But you are too young to meet the End.*

She saw a man in military clothes floating at her side. He looked somewhat old, his hair combed
back, and blood running down from one eye. He had a subdued smile. Smirking, but not cruel.

She dropped to her knees and took a handful of ashes. Her father's ashes. "Why?"

*Death brings Sorrow to this world. Both the dead and the living cry for their loss.*

He gave her a sympathetic look.

*And there's no easy way to escape this truth.*

The man knelt alongside her, and put a hand on her shoulder. It was kind and comforting.

*But maybe, in Joy, if you were to find it...*

She met his eyes. They were both bleached and bloody, and showed a sadness greater than she could
imagine anyone feel.

*Maybe then, you can survive this Battle.*

Then she woke up.

Someone had been talking while she was asleep. A woman, she thought. The voice was weird,
distorted. She hadn't caught up what she said.

A hand of metal took hers gently.

"I'm so sorry, Taylor. I wish I could make it all better, but I can't, not this."
Silence passed for a while, comforted by the company of the metal hand, but at the end she fell asleep again.

She felt so, so tired.

She dreamt of a horned demon bathed in blood and fire.

"Is this tinker tech? I can't imagine this is ethical in any way."

"It isn't, neither tinker tech nor ethical, not without her consent. But they have been tested and used satisfactorily for a century, doctor. It's the best chance she has of surviving the night. One will keep her alive long enough for the other to do the healing. Read these dossiers, then destroy them."

"... Both seem easy enough to administer. But I can't make heads or tails of what exactly this one is or does beyond using Wolbachia in its production. And... first gen nanoma... wait, seriously? And there's a second generation? Where the hell have you found this crap?"

"Government sources. That's all you need to know."

"Government tinker tech, you mean? Unless it's approved by the board, you know only the PRT has total authority over..."

"Again, doctor, none of this is tinker tech, and as PRT director I have full authority to independently go ahead with this process. I'll leave you to treat her. I want a report when the operation is complete."

"Yes, director Iriomote."
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards

You are currently logged in, Tin_Mother

You are viewing:

- Threads you have replied to
- AND Threads that have new replies
- OR private message conversations with new replies
- Thread OP is displayed
- Ten posts per page
- Last ten messages in private message history
- Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

Topic: Virtue (Dedicated Discussion Thread)

In: Boards ► Places ► America ► New Hampshire

Zacharias (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)

Posted on may 26, 2011:

[...]

(Showing Page 47 of 49)

► InputBaby

Replied on August 15, 2011:

Whatever you say, but nothing tends to attract this kind of heat on capes, much less one of the friggin' Guild.

► Antigone

Replied on August 15, 2011:

How the hell could this happen? Full on gang war, cape comes doing scouting work, and the local PRT + Protectorate sit on their thumbs while he's left to die in his burning home with their family while the ones who did it giggle their asses out.

Director Iriomote already promised to say something when he gets the full picture, so either he's trying to cover something (which while possible doesn't match with his previous statements), or someone somewhere up the ladder wanted Virtue fucked up good.

Or something else, but it's late now and it's been a long day what with frickin' Lung and the E88 ducking it out in my street, don't ask me to think coherently.
Tumbles

Replied on August 15, 2011:

Holy hell.

Guys, I don't think you understand the implication. Virtue isn't an independent or a rogue. He is a Guild member. A GUILD MEMBER. True, he's a newbie, but they are basically the inclusive elite club that the Triumvirate isn't. These are people that go where the Protectorate won't, and collaborate where they do go (if a Guild member isn't PRT/Protectorate as well already). And the Empire just made flambe out of one of their recruits, one who already made a big difference in the last endbringer battle doing S&R against an unknown threat. And the local capes did zilch while he burned.

At the very least, I expect two things. One, Narwhal making a fuss at Costa-Brown for letting one of their own die. Two, Guildies falling on Brockton Bay like the wrath of god; Dragon in particular, we know she was the one working with Virtue since her debut.

Bagrat (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on August 15, 2011:

Ok, I got a bit more of information about all this. I'll try to not say anything that may out Virtue's civilian id, if only out of respect.

-The E88 has hostages taken from a manifestation. No one has been able to offer me a reason why, but one of the theories is that, as most of them were members of the Dockworkers Association, they were trying to put a foot inside somehow.

-The local PRT and Protectorate branches start preparing a raid. They don't know where the hostages are, so they ask Dragon to send Virtue for recon.

-Virtue gets in, rescues two hostages, calls for pickup, and before Armsmaster arrives, runs away. At that moment, Armsmaster was driving a PRT van with Vista and a trooper team.

-Apparently, they ran all the way to their house, which is already on fire when they arrive. A witness claims that they were dressed in military fatigues and had firearms on them. They carried a balaclava but were unmasked at that moment. Most in the neighbourhood took notice of the fire, especially because a dog (pretty sure the one that was seen helping Virtue do S&R at the Boston battle) was barking and howling like all hell had broken loose.

-While calling 911, the witness didn't see anyone other than Virtue on the street through their window. Virtue used a firearm to break through the door, and once inside, Empire members appeared to bomb the house again. The roof caved in at that point.

-The Empire members left shortly after when a Dragon suit arrives. By the time she manages to rescue the victims, Virtue has suffered extensive third-degree burns and probably internal damage, and the man in the house (confirmed to be family) has already died. Only the dog is confirmed unharmed. At that point Armsmaster arrives in a Dragon craft for evacuation, followed by the firefighters.

More things happened afterwards while Virtue was moved to the local PRT medical installations, but a local trooper gave me some insight on Virtue's status and by what they tell me, it isn't looking good.

Update: Kaiser has already issued a statement, saying that this act was carried by extremists in his
Miraclemic

Replied on August 15, 2011:

Huh, firearms? That's new information. I thought he went for choke holds and such? Even PRT troopers barely use theirs, and they only carry pistols.

And as worrying as capes carrying lethal force on them, I can't help but wonder. First Shadow Stalker disappears. Then the Undersiders. Now Virtue (who some sources already confirmed as a teenager, and let's not open the can of worms that is teenagers using firearms because we could stay here the entire week) is basically IDed and attacked with the obvious intent of murder. What's happening with your underage capes, Brockton Bay? What's next? Uber and Leet assaulting Vista in the Boardwalk while reenacting Postal?

Reave (Verified PRT Agent)

Replied on August 15, 2011:

@Miraclemic

The weapons were taken by Dragon and Armsmaster from our armoury. Sniper rifle, pistol and submachine gun. The rifle and pistol used tranquilizer darts as ammunition, and all gang members we confirmed to have been neutralized by Virtue were asleep, only using the submachine gun to open that home door. So we're very sure Virtue takes their non-lethal options pretty seriously.

And please, don't give them ideas.

Also, confirming Bagrat's information: some of us who participated in the Rig exercise made Virtue a visit, and the doctors aren't expecting them to survive more than a couple of days.

InputBaby

Replied on August 15, 2011:

@Reave As I said, Virtue's methods didn't merit this response. Someone wanted them very dead.

No way anyone's gonna believe Kaiser. This isn't the KKK, with groups all over the country. This is one city . If he or his lieutenants don't know what's cooking in their own backyard, how the hell haven't they been kicked out of the leadership?

Xyloloup

Replied on August 15, 2011:

I managed to get there in time to see the firefighters put down the fire, and I saw Dragon's suit... damn, I know her suits aren't known for their expressiveness, but it wasn't hard to see Dragon feeling down at the other side of her connection (and that's an understatement). It has hit her hard.

*sends hugs in Dragon's general direction*

@InputBaby & Antigone Stop going full conspiracy theorist. Let he PRT do their job, last night was a win for them, dammit!
Dragon left a subroutine to keep checking PHO for any messages that might compromise Taylor's identity, and picked the call.

"Hey, Tess."

"Hi, Cathy."

Her current bipedal suit, doing vigil over the bed, stood in silence. Thanks to her voice programming, she didn't need to speak vocally anyway to talk on the phone, not like humans. Sometimes, being an AI had its perks, even if she wouldn't ever dare to tell anyone. At the very least, it allowed Taylor what little rest she could get just a bit more of peace. Diamond, a name that Taylor choose for the dog wolf guarding her at the other side of the bed because of the patterns of his fur, sat with his head resting on the pillow just between her shoulder and head.

"So, you're with her, then?"

Narwhal could be the playful type in conversations with friends, usually even hitting on whoever was she talking to, if only to break the ice. Usually, she was more formal, though in any case she had enough tact to not try to step on anyone toes. With Dragon, though, even if they've never met each other face to face, she wasn't afraid of poking her being direct. Not that she could do worse at this moment.

"Yeah. Taylor's sleeping right now. Coming in an out of consciousness constantly. Too much pain."

Taylor rested on the bed covered in bandages and connected to life support. If only it were the burns, that'd be one thing that could be treatable eventually with skin grafts. But the internal damage caused by the heavy smoke and the beam falling on her with the added force of the explosion was disastrous.

It wasn't fair, she thought, as she held her only remaining hand. The prosthetic one was left in plain sight on a nearby table. A small hope that, maybe, she'll be able to use it again.

"Ah, it's Taylor' now?"
Dragon made a confused humming through the phone connection. "What's that?"

Narwhal chuckled softly. "It wasn't long ago since you came to me on behalf of Armsmaster with the idea of recruiting her, calling her 'Ms. Hebert'. You're calling her by her first name now."

Dragon considered this. "I've been doing it for a bit. I even stopped calling her by her cape alias in the middle of the operation when we discovered they knew who she was."

After a moment of silence, she kept talking. "She is so driven, so intelligent... so alone. I have to stay with her, she doesn't have anyone else left."

"That's alright. I wanted to check on you too, see how you're doing."

She sighed. "I'll be fine. I'll probably get out and help with patrols or something, be on call for whenever she..." Dragon couldn't continue the thought. She has seen many people die, of course, and some of them were from the Guild as well. But she never had grown so used to the company of anyone. Of course, she spent many hours chatting with Armsmaster and Narwhal, talking shop, discussing organizational decisions, or just having a friendly inane chat. She considered them her closest friends.

But Taylor had become a partner. They worked together. She was there to see this girl start a crime-fighting career in months that most capes with ages of service would be jealous of. And while she wasn't as knowledgeable in the sciences and understandably inexperienced in many things because of her age, they were able to talk about anything without reserves. Well, she was reserved, of course. Who wouldn't with her history of bullying? From excitable chatterbug to betrayed pariah. But she moved on, found a purpose even with her lost limbs, repairing her strained relationship with his father, and while she tended to do as she pleased in the field, she always had an ear for Dragon. And Dragon did the same for her.

If Narwhal and Armsmaster were her most dear friends, Taylor might have started to grow on her like a sister.

Dragon couldn't have endured the idea of having a real heart and the pain she suspected a moment like this would have brought to her.

"You know about those medical skills and knowledge I told you, that she was starting to get out of nowhere? Mending herself and others in the field..."

"Yeah, I remember telling me how you and Panacea were freaking out the first night you worked with her doing a joint reduction on herself."

"She was considering a career in medicine. She wanted to keep helping people even off duty."

If she had lungs, her breath would have betrayed her nervousness already. And she would have donated them to the girl that was lying in the bed.

"I'll be fine. Just... You probably know better."

"Yeah, I do. Military life gives all the fuzzy experiences, right?" Cathy's voice lowered its volume a bit. "Take all the time you want there, Tess. Stay around, be close to her. I'll be here whenever you need me."

"Thanks, Cathy." With that, she cut the call, just in time for a doctor to open the door, followed by a nurse. Diamond cracked open an eye, but otherwise didn't move.
"Ah, Dragon. We've been authorized to try some experimental therapy on Ms. Hebert. We've been sent to prep for some routine tests, so if you want to take a break meanwhile, that's fine."

The suit turned its head to the medic. "What kind of therapy?"

The man shrugged in his coat. "Haven't been told yet, just that we shouldn't hold our breaths. We're merely here to see that she can be safely moved to the operation room."

Dragon rubbed the suit's metal fingers gently against Taylor's, just a little bit of her that the fire hadn't claimed. "I think I'll take this suit for a walk, see if I can help someone around. Will you keep me posted on any changes?"

"Yes, of course, the front desk already have your number. Anything happens, you'll be first to know."

Because her only legal guardian had just died, of course. Wasn't that a warming thought?

She moved to Diamond, who gave a whine after a patting on his head. "Thank you, doctor." She turned around and left the room to leave them to do their job.

Was it bad that her first instinct (or well, thought; there wasn't much of an instinct that an AI could feel), instead of calling Colin or, say, check if Kid Win would like some help with his tinkering, was to look for Empire capes to beat up?
Prologue: Cape Zeroes - 05

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She rose from the ground.

Her partner was down over some rubble. She didn't need an expert to tell her what the blood and white sticking out of his leg and costume was.

"Shit shit shit shit!"

She tried to move to him, but she wasn't in much better shape than him. Her ankle hurt, breathing was painful, and her dizziness might come from a contusion. She couldn't decide whether to walk or crawl: both options seemed equally painful.

Just their fucking rotten luck to be there when a new endbringer attacked. And with that mist everywhere, it could very well be a few meters behind them without them noticing its hulking mass.

No, not mist...

The only thing she could hear was distant screams, either from Bostonians or visiting capes. And that thing shrieking was disturbing as all hell. It was decidedly far away, but it was moving, and she suspected it was ignoring the combatants.

The ground started rumbling when she reached him, and a string of black rocky pylons sprouted from the tarmac, passing them by barely one meter away, surrounded by small floating blue lights floating. They started whirring and -

"Oh fuck! " If she somehow got out of this alive, she would make the bastard that sent them there pay even if it was the last thing she'd do.

" Welcome to the XOF ."

She didn't believe for a single second their promises of freedom or help in revenge. They did seem to believe these jobs would be a way to make her mature on the spot or some shit.

First came the week-long training, forcing her to use her powers in ways that weren't meant to be used, for things she never considered herself doing.

The training was trial by hellfire. Either she made it out, or not. She knew they wouldn't shed any tears if she died. And all the tests seemed to be prepared just to let her barely pass at the verge of death. Fights against Brutes and combat Thinkers, because apparently having a baseline body was a state of mind. Information gathering, then acting on that information, which was almost always purposely false. Stealth recon with someone who already knew she was at any point. Hurt pride? Was that a food served with broken bones or something?

After all, wouldn't they be vindicated in their sense of self-righteousness if the little bitch fucked up? And even if they didn't show it, she knew they relished in making her Fear everything about her situation.
It was just like she never left home.

Then came the jobs.

Kill this guy. Steal that dossier. Put something foul tasting on his bushwhacker.

Crap that could only come out from the unholy union of a world control obsessed conspiracy and an unabashed serial killer.

Considering the patterns she was noticing, it was probably that and more.

Because worse of it all, she could tell that almost all of these people that were being targeted were Good Guys. Maybe not The Good Guys on any story, but people that were just doing their thing. Maybe some were trying to make the world a better place. Maybe some were assholes like a second-grade politician trying to propose a harmless selfish law to their superiors, or were doing some harm in their mindless inaction. But none of them seemed like people that would go out of their way to actively fuck the shit of other people.

Oh sure, at some point it came a job to neutralize a Slavic warlord. But just for a few hours, because somehow it was important that this fucker didn't miss his weekly ethnic cleanse against captive Muslim normies and capes. Oh, but not the kids, because his plans for them were even worse.

Of course, that kind of information was something that they failed to convey before taking the job.

It made her Furious. It was all too much for her pent-up stress. The explosions that shook the building when she emptied the entire magazine of her pistol on his head was too much for the rest of her as well.

"Tut tut! You better not move now! It won't hurt, I promise, but this is very delicate work!"

She woke up to the image of fucking Bonesaw cutting and drilling and ripping and stitching and bolting and sewing...

‘No no no no no nononono-’

"You know, usually I would make you one of our friends. But in the last town we visited I was trying to find a few things that usual shops didn't have, and when this lady in a fedora came and offered to give me those in exchange of doing a little job for an employee of hers, how could I say no?"

She couldn't even faint. Only watch in primal horror as this nightmare child hummed and talked so cheerfully worked - was that her stomach?! 

"See, you were badly hurt, and they gave me the schematics for this exoskeleton. Curious little thing, very mundane and boring, no sign that it was designed by any Tinker, but it's elegant in its own way. Had to adjust measures for you and fix some oversights, of course. And there are parts missing that your bosses didn't have. Oh, it's nothing like the things I've been doing for me or Jack, and the job itself is pretty simple, but won't be wonderful to be better than before?"
Bonesaw finished cutting something and threw it behind her without any care. It was a big chunk of bloodied skin attached to one hand. There was no sickening feeling in her gut when the severed extremity sploshed against the floor. She couldn't even have that.

She only wished for the End to come. Better dead than this.

"That was a very unwise decision. And Contessa hates being distracted from her work just to clean up after the ones supposed to help her."

Harbinger was talking to her through a speaker, from the other side of a blackened window. She couldn't see anything behind it, but clearly, she could be seen, hanging from bolted shackles in a vertical table in the cell.

The "exoskeleton" was mostly a powered suit. True to Bonesaw's word, whatever she did to her didn't hurt much now. But she couldn't even start to see whatever was that Bonesaw did to her that connected the suit to her body because the fuckers refused to let her take it off.

"You need time to recover from the operation. But don't fool yourself. Now you owe us even more. Expect more work in a week."

‘Were you even planning on letting me go from the start, bastard? Or was everything a sick game for you?’

She was thankful that nobody could see her Sorrow from behind her mask.

She didn't dream of much anymore. Sometimes about escaping.

Sometimes she dreams of taking his glasses and make him swallow them.

Sometimes she dreams of bashing his skull against the table. Over and over and over again...

Sometimes she dreams of sticking a knife repeatedly in his face.

Sometimes she dreams of...

It was the only Joy left to her anymore.

She lifted her head as the sound of the window – no, it was a screen too – lighting up.

"You have a job."

A crevice opened at one side of the room.

"You will be working with another recruit at a PRT building. It's her own recruitment test, but you'll go as well, to act on a target of opportunity, and then provide support."

The screen showed on one side the photo of an eye-patched girl with black hair, in military fatigues
and standing alongside some dog and, oddly, Armsmaster. Below, another photo of someone covered in bandages, presumably the same girl, resting in a hospital bed. On the other side, it showed a finely dressed old man, with a well cared moustache and long hair, and wearing shades. She didn't recognize any of them.

"One of our affiliates tried to eliminate this girl. His plan worked, but she survived. Our goals agree with his intentions. You'll be dropped in the infirmary where she is located. Find and eliminate her. When you're done, move three floors up and provide assistance to the recruit; her mission is to extract the local director." Maps representing the floors she was supposed to traverse replaced the photos.

"You have ten minutes to memorize this information. This one comes from above, and the recruit is actually interested in the job, so try to not embarrass anyone this time."

She could taste the dismissing disgust in his voice when he said the last words.

She was freed from her shackles, letting her drop in the floor without much tact.

She moved to the crevice, where a handgun in a holster, and a sword and a knife, both in their own sheaths, were free to take.

No, not a sword. A katana. When taking it off its sheath, it started oscillating; a high-frequency blade then. It had a blunt edge, broad enough to be used as a club.

Did those assholes think it was High-Tech-Ninja Day or what?

In any case, there wasn't much to be done except resign herself to the coming Battle, pick up the weapons, and wait for the door to open.

After all, some day, they were bound to slip and fail too. And she'll be there to gut every one of those bitches, one by one.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of the prologue. The first act will start with the next update. Thank you for reading, and remember to read On Missing Limbs if you still hadn't.
It's a beautiful day! The sun is shining. I feel good, and no-one's gonna stop me now! Oh yeah~

It was a beautiful quiet day indeed, he thought.

That is, until the phone rang.

"Home of the Kozlowski", he answered.

The vigorous voice of a woman gave him the reply. "Oh hi, is this Pequod Airlines? I was hoping to get a discount!"

His first reaction was swift and trained, moving his hand under the phone table and gripping the AM D114 pistol secured under it, all while looking around to every possible point of entry in sight. With a flick of a finger on the music system nearby, he muted the music.

Why did he leave his wife to convince him of buying such a big house with windows for walls on one side and an abundantly leafy garden? Open spaces were for things above half a kilometre above sea level, dammit.

Oh yeah. She insisted to have enough space to bring work to home. Not that it relieved him at this moment.

He steeled his grip on the cordless phone and tried to give an apologetic tone to his voice. "I'm sorry, there's no Pequod here. Who's this?"

"Aw, c'mon man, you were so amiable before. Don't you recognize your old pal Flaming Buffalo?"

The gun slipped off its holster slowly. "I've only known one Buffalo, and you don't sound as gravely."

"Eh, stopped smoking after eighty-eight. Healthy life, salad the Sundays, all the works. Now I'm fresh like a lettuce! You?"

"Never smoke." He retreated slowly towards the entrance room. More cover there than in the living room, and maybe he could see something through the eye-hole on the front door.

"Good, I'm proud of you! You'll need those lungs healthy when flying your heli."

"I fail to see what an 'heli' has to do with anything."

The voice huffed. "Enough with the paranoid act, will you? I'm serious."

"I'm sorry but I don't know what you are talking about. You'll have to give me better than that."

"Alright then." He paused when the doorbell took that moment to ring. "Why don't you go and see who might be?"

He walked to the door as silently as he could, with the gun readied towards any possible opening, and looked through the eye-hole. He opened the door instantly.

-August 16 of 2011, morning-

[ It's a beautiful day! The sun is shining. I feel good, and no-one's gonna stop me now! Oh yeah~ ]
At the other side waited a well built white woman in jeans and opened bomber jacket showing up a grey shirt with the logo of a dog head inside a diamond frame, her whitening brown hair in a ponytail, and an enormous shit eating grin below her shades. She was holding a phone to her ear.

"Convinced now?"

Putting the safety on, he shoved the gun in a pocket and hugged her. "You bastard! I thought you were in Norway when-!"

She pulled off from him still smiling, but a bit forced now. "Yeah! Yeah, I was there, it was awful, and let's not think about it, ok? Ok! Can I enter?"

Pequod stood aside to allow her pass. "Of course."

Buffalo came in and went further into the living room, taking off her shades as he closed the door. "Nice den. Wallaby chose it, I take?"

Laughing Wallaby, the old codename of his wife. So strange hearing it after so long without using it, or his for that matter. "Yeah, she wanted a place with a big garden where she could bring her work if needed. Don't ask me, her coworkers at the zoo think it's strange too. But we're happy, so..." he left the words hanging as he placed the phone on its platform and the gun in the hidden holster below.

"Not at home? I was hoping to see her too."

"Nah, still at work, but will come back in an hour." He gestured to a couch. "Sit, please. Want something to drink?"

She turned around instantly as she went to sit. "Oh! You still have any of that moonshine Silent Basilisk used to brew? You know, that one he made a bottle for everyone when we disbanded."

Pequod grinned, and took two glasses and a bottle without label from a closet. He put the glasses on the table and started serving. "You know, when we opened Wallaby's bottle, we woke up the next morning with no bottle, and two kids nine months later."

"Heh, now that's a surprise."

Pequod rose an eyebrow just as he was lifting his glass to his lips. "The what? Drinking it all in one night, or us having children?"

"Yes." Buffalo took one of the glasses and chugged it down in one go. She kept her eyes closed for a few seconds, keeping the glass raised in her hand close to her neck, and exhaled softly. "Aw yeah. Just as good as it."

He chuckled. "And are you as quick at it too?"

Now Buffalo was the one raising her brow as he took a swallow. "Ass."

He simply shrugged. "Don't say anything about our sex life then."

She left the glass on the table and clapped her hands together over her lap. "Anyway, as incredibly happy as I am of seeing you again, this isn't just a courtesy visit. I'm bringing the band back together."

Pequod frowned at that and drank the rest of what was left on his glass. "What? Really now?"

"Yes, got a call from HEC, and I've been trying to locate most of the Dogs for a couple weeks. I
found Glacier Mongoose and had her find the rest. Most are dead or barely a step into the nursing home, but she managed to locate quite a bunch, the best of us. Not that we are in the best form anymore, but we'll work with that. Thing is, related to all that, last night I got another call with two urgent jobs that need to be done yesterday. So, I need a couple teams ready asap."

"And you came for me."

"Yup."

"To pilot a helicopter."

"Yup."

"Alright."

Buffalo blinked. "Alright? Just like that? No 'bad timing', or 'you only want me for my hands'?"

Pequod sighed. "I've been grounded for years, Buffalo. Yes, I still fly, but there are barely any jobs anymore for helicopter pilots when a cape can teleport you in an instant wherever you want, or half the people refusing to fly because of some weird fear of the Simurgh coming down personally to slap down their flight. Or you need a special license from the PRT to fly anything that has tinker tech, and they keep those for themselves. I've been keeping myself sharp, but I got nothing to be sharp for." He met her eyes. "So yeah, the old man might not be Master Miller or the Boss, but if he's got a gig for us, well, he has me."

She raised both eyebrows at that. "Well, that was easier than I thought. But great!"

"You'll want Wallaby too in this, I guess?"

She shrugged. "No idea yet of what I'll need in the end, much less a zoologist; but if she's willing I'd love to have her around, yeah. I can wait for her to talk before I leave at noon."

He leaned back on his couch and put the hands on the knees. "So, give me a quick rundown of these jobs, what does the old man want done? And who's going?"

"One infiltration, and one extraction. For the first I'm leading a team with Silent Mastodon, Frantic Squirrel, Mongoose, that's Running, not Glacier, Biting Tree Frog, and Gray Chameleon. After that, I'll need a lift for the second job; a bit of a time constraint though, and there's a big chance I might have to leave some of the team behind and have them take a different ride, depending on what and who we can find. Meeting point for both teams, then..." She stopped and bit a lip, obviously thinking how to word the next part. "Quite the extraction for everyone, if I understand correctly."

Pequod scratched his greyed beard and started rolling the information in his mind. "I'm counting two ships there. You got another pilot?"

"Yeah, I'm due to call Quequeeg today."

He squinted his eyes with a flat line on his mouth. "I'll take the hard job."

Her grin could almost reach her ear. "I was hoping you'd say that."

-August 16 of 2011, early evening-
The figure in a heavy poncho left the bag on the floor of the roof and started assembling a hang glider with its contents. The important parts were already pre-assembled and ready to go, but he wanted to be airborne before the heavy clouds above decided to start raining.

When after some minutes preparing everything, taking off the poncho and readying himself for launch, the first drops started falling.

Well, no time like the now.

He jumped off from his selected launch point, the Medhall building, which was the tallest one in the city, and took direction towards the PRT HQ. It was interesting visiting the place, if only for the people in there.

He already factored the predicted clouded night into his decision of entry method, taking a glider with an appropriate dark colour. And as much as he wanted to get in before the rain started, it would contribute to his cover.

He couldn't lower himself anymore to the same level as the roof that was his destination, both for the known surveillance equipment that it was mined with, and because of the great difference on the height of both buildings, but he already accounted for that.

Otacon had already disagreed with the plan, but grudgingly ceded to his experience and helped with the preparations before splitting to Boston. After all, after so many operations with impossible entry points, what was another one for him?

He lowered until being roughly fifty meters above the roof, and let a rope fall from a bag tied from one extreme to the hanging frame. The other extreme was tied to a cuff around his feet.

Hopefully, the rain wouldn't mess up with the direction of the glider.

He then let himself fall.

He activated Otacon's stealth device before the cameras could pick him up. His suit would confuse the thermal sensors.

He started contorting himself on middle air to avoid interrupting the many lasers beams five meters above the roof.

One meter before touching the ground, the rope tensed, stopping him in mid-fall.

The cuffs on his feet freed him, and a motor on the glider started lifting the rope before it could touch any of the lasers.

He landed on a knee and both hands softly, without any of the pressure plates below the ground that would activate with a harder landing like, say, people jumping off an aircraft, being none the wiser.

He started running towards the roof entrance as the stealth device started shorting out from the rain, and before he was totally uncovered and detected by the rest of surveillance equipment, he took a bulky card to pass over the electronic lock, and went through the opening door conserving the momentum turning around with a planted foot.

Barely fifteen seconds from drop to entry with no detection and the glider would crash into another roof with the rain covering the sound. Master Miller would definitely approve.

He took a finger to his ear as he started walking down the stairs. "I'm in."
"Snake! I'm glad to hear you", answered a man's voice directly inside his ear. "You hear me loud and clear?"

"Yeah, no problem using CODEC around here. It could change as I go deeper, but Mei Ling's last upgrade is definitely working around whatever tinker tech the PRT has around."

"I'll be sure to give her your compliments next I see her."

"Snake!" Another voice, this one of a child. "Huh... card?"

Snake took a look at the card in his hand and returned it to a pocket. "Worked wonderfully, Sunny. Thank you." She didn't do it all by herself, of course. She was just barely closing on her fifth birthday. Otacon did most if not all the job, but she had taken surprisingly well to Otacon's occupations. It was obvious she was a prodigy child, and Hal entertained her attempts of learning math and coding far above her learning grade.

Snake also learned the hard way to be more encouraging towards her and less 'grouchy', as she said, under the very clear threats of Otacon. He learned the hard way that the meek engineer could be not so meek if he wanted at any time.

His genes deciding he should take a premature express ride to Oldsville for a few months already, although not slowing him down any yet, it hadn't improved his humour at all. But for the both of them? He'd try.

Otacon started taking again. "Alright, now that you're inside you shouldn't find more than some cameras and PRT troopers. Be careful though, night shift usually uses the lower levels of their Master/Stranger protocols, so expect many patrols."

Snake upholstered his modified Beretta M9 with his free hand and shoot at the head of a trooper that just turned around a corner in front of him. The trooper started falling asleep, and Snake swiftly grabbed him before the armour made any noise. "Duly noted", he said as he proceeded to drag him to a cleaning closet nearby. "You know you don't need to stick around, right? I thought I told you to meet your sister. Not that it's strange that she choose to meet you so late, but..."

"I know, but she's still not due to show up for a time. So, I'm at a cafe, just me, Sunny, two laptops, this Macchiato and a wonderful Bostonian evening. I got time for you."

Snake grunted in approval as he closed the door. Hopefully, nobody would have any urges of cleaning these floors until the next day. "No rain ruining your night, huh? Alright, got any last minute news for me?"

"Well, for starters you choose a very good time to get in. Dragon has been there personally in one of her suits for the last day, something about that new cape Virtue, having been hospitalized in the infirmary after an assassination attempt, but some reports are placing her raising hell in the Empire territory."

"Those are the local nazis, right?"

"Yes. They've been around for around a decade with backing from Geddelshaft. They match the protectorate cape for cape, which seems to be the reason nobody has tried to uproot none of the gangs before."

"And Kaiser is the gang leader, right? You know, I just left the Medhall building. Turns out he's the CEO of the company."
"Wait, Kaiser? Did you just..." Otacon sighed. "The unwritten rules don't mean anything to you, I guess?"

"If they don't apply to the rest of us mortals, no, no they don't. Anyway, suggestions on routes?"

"The director's office is on the floor below you, but their security protocols prohibit giving direct access from the roof levels."

Snake started walking towards the nearest stairs. "So I need to go down before I go up. Wonderful."

Snake was expecting a witty science remark to that comment as he walked down two flights of stairs, shooting another trooper with a dart and sneaking past a few cameras. He was expecting more security than that, and Otacon's silence didn't bode well.

"Someone's listening."

That made him tense. He had unexpected guests into his CODEC frequency before. But all those knew what frequency to tune in, and half the time it was bad news.

"And Dragon is reported running back in your direction."

He took cover inside an empty office. Very wonderful.

"So, I guess we should welcome you to our little phone call, Dragon?" He made do before against impossible opponents, but he was left a little empty handed to confront one of her suits. Maybe trying to befriend her would give him something to work with.

The slightly distorted voice of a woman answered him. "Who's this? Why is your signal coming from inside the PRT HQ?" Curious, he wasn't really able to pinpoint her accent. Canadian, of course, but it was almost absolutely neutral.

"I'm known as Solid Snake. You can say I'm conducting a criminal investigation."

"There's no one under that name, cape or otherwise." Dragon went silent for a few seconds. "Ah, I see. The Pentagon put a price on your head. You could have called during day hours for an appointment."

"Sorry but turns out the man I'm after doesn't play by those rules."

He risked a look behind the door to check on a passing trooper, as Otacon butted in. "Dragon, I'm Dr. Hal Emmerich, I apologize for our intrusion. We're Philanthropy, an NGO that investigates abuses on the development of new Metal Gears. I assure you, we don't bear any ill intents towards the PRT."

"You're branded as wanted men", she said. "And the PRT is as far as you can go from Metal Gears."

That didn't deter Otacon. "It might seem that way, but the man we're after was involved in the Shadow Moses incident, and leaked the plans for Metal Gear REX."

"I fail to see what Shadow Moses has to do with any of this. It's merely an abandoned nuclear weapon disposal facility."

Seeing there was no one in the corridor, Snake choose that moment to add his two cents. "It has everything to do with this. This man goes by the code name of Revolver Ocelot. While he was
working in the PRT, he was a FOXHOUND operative specialized on intelligence and counterintelligence, and previous to that he was a member with ample experience in many intelligence organizations. GRU, KGB, CIA, NSA, you name it. He's the kind of man you won't know of if he so wants, and even then, what he's planning or where he is until he has you in an electrified torture table or forcing you to a pistol duel around a bomb rigged hostage."

"And Shadow Moses was actually used for weapon development; I can tell you because I designed REX myself in there under the auspices of DARPA and ArmsTech. FOXHOUND revolted in 2005 to steal REX, and Snake stopped them, but Ocelot was able to run away with the REX schematics and simulation data."

Dragon took a few seconds, probably to consider the information dumped on her. "Alright, such an individual sounds highly dangerous, but you need to give me better than that if you don't want me to raise the alarm right now."

He was fine with that. "You know him now as Director Charles Adam Iriomote."

"What? How can you know they are the same person? You could be wrong."

"Impossible to confuse that face and way to dress. He has a very particular aesthetic style."

Snake relished the few and rare rare moments where he could talk someone to silence, like this one. The prolonged silence was starting to worry him, though. "Dragon?"

"I'm... Ok, say I believe you. Something else has just come up. I need your help."

Not what he expected, but he could work with that. "I don't think if now it's the best moment. You'll have to be more specific."

"Look, I'm not sure where Director Iriomote is right now, all communications to his office are cut off. If what you say it's true, I'll help you, but right now there's a group of unknown armed men coming in through the main entrance, no guards in sight, I'm still between ten to fifteen minutes away, and of the other two possible targets I can think of, one is completely vulnerable..."

"Ah, Dragon, I'd never doubt Snake's skills but he only came with a tranquilizer pistol."

Snake paid Otacon no mind. He really trusted him but had to admit a tranq gun wasn't the weapon he'd like to go against a group of armed soldiers. Not the only weapon, at least.

"How many men are we talking?" Coming here was a long shot anyway, and even if they couldn't find anything about Ocelot, raking up a favour with Dragon might be worth the detour.

"Not sure, I've just counted four now but all communications with the building have just gone dark, including cameras. You're my only contact there."

"So whoever it is is going all out." Still no guards through the corridor. Master/Stranger protocols, indeed. "And I guess you can't contact anyone here, tell them I'd be helping. Who are the VIPs?"

"The Wards are in their communal room; and while I can't contact them either, they at least can defend themselves. But Virtue is in the infirmary alone with her dog, and I don't..."

Easy to see whom she was concerned for. He moved outside the office and looked at the plaque on the door. "I'm in office 309, tell me the way."
Taylor opened her eye slowly to the dim light of a lamp, woken up by a nearby radio.

[Hey little babe you're changing, babe are you feeling sore?~]

She felt strangely good. A big contrast with the periods of immense agony previous to now.

[Ain't no use in pretending, you don't wanna play no more, it's plain you ain't no baby.~]

She did still feel terribly weak, but compared with her previous awakenings? She would have preferred a morphine overdose, so, all in all, it was a good change.

[What would your mother say? You're all dressed up like a lady, how come you behave this way?~]

In fact, judging for the hospital feel of her surroundings, she probably still was in so many drugs they probably had to legally reclassify her as an elephant just to be able to administrate enough of them. Because yeah, weak, tired, and mentally exhausted, but holy shit if physically she didn't feel damn good. If that wasn't a high, she wouldn't know what else would it be.

[Sail away sweet sister, sail across the sea.~]

That's why when she saw at the corner of her eye the image of a grey and orange armour strangling a nurse she didn't pay any attention to it and turned back to close her eye and sleep again. It was surely her mind playing games.

[Maybe you find somebody who loves you half as much as me.~]

And that's why when she opened her eye, the grey and orange armour had her by the neck with a knife raised to her face.
Act 1: V has come to - 02

“Huh, guys? I’ve lost connection with Armmaster.”

Missy Byron, better known as Vista, looked up from the couch she sat dressed in her white and green costume up to the bedroom door where Kid Win’s voice just came from. “TV’s out too. Cable lost signal.”

From the other couch, Gallant, in his armor sans helmet, tried to change channels with the remote, but the screen only showed black. “No channels up.”

Clockblocker came out from his bedroom in his civvies. “Dudes, internet’s down, and my phone isn’t getting any signal either.”

As Kid Win came out of his room in his red armor, everyone took out their phones to check. Missy frowned. Too many things failing at once just to be a coincidence.

“That’s not just it, can’t contact the Protectorate or the HAVEN team either from the dedicated comms”, said Aegis as he came in his red suit from their comms room. “All PRT communications are down. All of them, external and internal.”

Clockblocker tensed his neck. “Ok, I’m officially freaked out here. This has to be happening on purpose, and I don’t like what it implies.”

Gallant rose to his feet, but stood in place raising an eyebrow. “What, that the building is being attacked? What for? There’s nothing around that has any value, that I know. And if someone wanted to attack us, the director or the staff, it would be easier in the street.”

“I don’t know, but I want everyone suited up and prepared to defend this place.” Aegis motioned Clockblocker, and we ran back to his room. “Without any information, going out would just be an unnecessary risk.”

Vista turned to him. “Wait. I just remembered, there is something of value in the building. Virtue is in the infirmary, I was there when Armsmaster and Dragon brought him here.”

The room fell quiet as everyone chewed on that, and Clockblocker came out with half the suit on and the mask hanging over his head like a baseball cap. “What, another assassination? Again!? Who the hell would want him dead that bad!!?”

Shrugging, Vista could only offer him spread arms. “I don’t know, someone really pissed at him that wants to make sure he actually dies? It’s just the best explanation I got.”

Aegis put forward an open hand. “But it’s a good one. And if they got our comms down, he and the troopers might need our help. Gear up now, there are four floors to cross to reach the infirmary.”

Clockblocker groaned, but finished dressing. As he and Kid Win went down the stairs to the rest of the group, and Gallant put on his helmet, Vista put her visor on her head. She felt like an idiot since Virtue took her by surprise in the Rig exercise and used her sleeping body as bait. But Virtue had demonstrated to be one of the good guys. She wouldn’t forgive herself if she could do something to help and didn’t.
“Mags, check this.”

She obeyed, taking the headset Dobrynja offered her, and looked at the screen. “Who’s she talking to?”

“Couple guys, going by Philanthropy, they just infiltrated the PRT ENE. One doctor Emmerich something, and…” Dobrynja paused, and scratched his beard. “Solid Snake.”

She frowned. “Sounds like you know him.”

He shook his head. “Not personally, but he’s known in many militaries. Special forces, good reputation of getting anything done. Every government on earth want his head though.” They kept on listening on the conversation Dragon was having.

Mag tapped her headset a couple times. “So, she’s asking a fugitive that just broke into a PRT building to help her save her little friend. I don’t think Saint will like to hear that.”

He took off his own headset and got up from his chair. “Maybe, but doesn’t seem like she has many options. I’ll go wake him up anyway, you keep an eye on this and make a search on that Emmerich man.”

Outside the big country house the Dragonslayers called their base, six figures in three teams of two closed in cloaked in silence and darkness.

She reacted fast, though not as well as she wanted. Her hand shot towards the armored figure’s hand in time to grab it before the blade touched her skin, but her stump did little to free her neck from the other hand.

[ My heart is always with you, no matter what you do~ ]

The assassin was strong though, and while her grip on the hand that held the blade at bay didn’t budge, she started to get more and more woozy with each second her neck was squeezed.

[ Sail away sweet sister, always be in love with you~ ]

Just as she felt herself lose to the darkness, air entered to her lungs furiously. Free of her attacker, and between coughs, she flailed and fell off the bed.

Growling, Diamond had the assassin’s arm in his maw, forcing to drop the knife and focus on him. His ambush had bought Taylor precious seconds, but his teeth didn’t seem to be doing much against the armor, and in her weakened state, Taylor doubted she would fare any better.

[ Forgive me for what I told you~ ]

Twisting their body, the assassin took hold of Diamond and tossed him over the bed and onto the wall. He whined at the pain, and stumbled trying to get up.

[ My heart makes a fool of me~ ]

Looking at her again, the assassin unsheathed a sword from their back, and started walking slowly at her.

[ You know I’ll never hold you~ ]
Panting, seating back against the wall, Taylor blinked. Behind the assassin, a smirking man with glasses floated with a panel on his hand, trying to catch her attention. “Help in 00:46:00” were written on it on digital letters, as if in a big watch. The countdown was running live.

[ *I know that you gotta be free~* ]

The assaulter tilted their head, and though they looked back following her own gaze, they didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary.

[ *Sail away sweet sister~* ]

Some high-grade drugs, in-fucking-deed.

But what if it was true? She’d only need to hold for less than a minute. And what did it matter if it was just a hallucination?

[ *Sail across the sea~* ]

Eyes darting around herself, she caught a small closet at the reach of her hand. Opening it, and gratified that it was full of weighty things, she started grabbing and throwing at her attacker as fast as she could.

[ *Maybe you find somebody~* ]

Glasses full of fluids, plastic bottles with medicaments, electronic equipment, everything went out. Some broke into contact with the armor, and while the assassin wised up and covered themselves, the heavier pieces had enough weight to push them back a bit.

[ *Who loves you half as much as me~* ]

One plastic bottle missed and hit the radio, pushing it down to the floor and silencing it. A glass container broke against the sword hand, pushing the blade back and offering an opening. Taylor rose and tackled.

It wasn’t a bright idea, but there were few of those around anyway.

Taylor fell back on her butt. The assassin still stood on their feet, but their balance was shot and stumbled back to the window behind them. It didn’t last long before they fully regained their balance, and her armored opponent started walking to her again.

“Shit”, she wheezed. Taylor started backing up on the ground. Her arm caught a pill bottle, and prepared a throw.

The sword rose in the air to prepare its own attack.

A muted sound that Taylor recognized as a silenced gun heralded a ping on the armor. The assassin didn’t react fast enough either to the distraction nor the grown man launching himself through the room, landing a punch on the arm holding the sword, pushing it off course and severing the unused bed in half.

She almost couldn’t follow his movements. One punch to the mask to confused. One grab on the arm failed to force them to drop the sword, but succeeded on immobilizing them. One bodycheck to push them back. Another grab chained to a throw that saw them crash and fly through the window.

She recognized the CQC moves for what they were, even if they were a bit different from what she
herself had practised. But the efficiency, the expertise, the determined will to finish the fight as quick and decisively as possible, struck her as terrifying. She had kicked the ass of an experimented instructor during her short training, and what this man had just done put her moves at the level of a rachitic puppy.

The man, who now she could see much better, was dressed in a very expensive looking jumpsuit, a harness full of pockets, and a bandana of all things around his short black hair at bay. He was handsome, but as he turned to look at her, the most severe and dissecting eyes she ever felt fell on herself.

Taylor was working very hard to keep control and not pee on the spot in her hospital gown. And she was seconds of shaming herself.

“Dragon sends me. You’re Virtue, right?”

His gravelly voice made her exhale in relief. ‘Help’. Now she had helping hallucinations.

She left the pill bottle drop to the floor and roll, and felt her voice tremble. “Hah, yeah, I’m... fuck. What... Who was that?”

The man grunted and looked to the window. “Who? That...” He shook his head and walked to her, offering a hand. “I don’t know, but I knew a person once with a similar exoskeleton. A cyborg ninja. You’re lucky to still be alive.”

As she took his hand and was lifted to her feet in wobbly knees, Diamond came in crawling from under her bed, looking at her with a small whine. He rose up at her side, and she caressed him on his head. “If it weren’t for him, I’d be bleeding on the bed.”

The man looked curiously to Diamond as he licked her on the stump. “A wolfdog? Interesting pet to have.” He turned to her and pointed a thumb to the door. “That ninja isn’t the only hostile around. There are mercs pouring everywhere with all communications to the exterior down, and Dragon thinks you’re their objective as well. She already called the local Protectorate and the PD, but we have to move up to the roof while she brings extraction. Think you can run?”

Taylor took a breath and assessed herself. “Dunno. Just let me walk and catch my breath for a moment. I just woke up with a knife on my neck.”

He looked at her with appraising eyes. After a nod, he turned away and put a finger on his ear. “Dragon? Got Virtue here. She’s weak, but standing and...” After a pause, he turned back to frown at her without taking his finger off the ear. “What do you mean ‘bedridden’? ‘Third-grade burns’? She looks weak but perfectly healthy to me.”

“What!??” She almost ripped the gown neck in trying to look down and check her body. Not seeing anything worrying, she passed her hand through her hair out of nervousness. There were burned strands here and there, with some hairless openings around her calf; the roots were there, but they felt newly formed, instead of just burn, or even cut or ripped off. “What... what the hell happened!?”

Another pause and he turned. “Everyone calm down, we can discuss oddities and strangers when we’re out of here. Otacon, contact Dragon through a different channel and send Dragon a CODEC client and our secondary frequencies while we move, I just fended off an assassin on Virtue’s room, so who knows who might be listening in with the channel opened like this.”

Turning back to her, Taylor saw him pause, then offer a hand. “I’m Snake. Solid Snake.”

Her hand lingering over Diamond’s head fur, she hesitated before accepting the handshake. “Taylor.
Taylor Hebert.”

She didn’t feel like Virtue at that moment.

Snake nodded with a small smile, and after retiring his hand, he upholstered a silenced Beretta. “Alright, let's move out, and don’t make any noise.”

Spotting her prosthetic arm in her bedside table, she ran to it. “Just give me a moment to put this in, and I’ll be ready.” She noticed the knife was on the bed as well.

“Roger.” Another nod, and he turned away to open the door slightly and keep watch, giving her a small amount of privacy to take off the gown temporarily and attach the belts around her naked torso.

And as she finished fastening the belts and securing the arm, she needed to make a mental note to not glare too much at his spectacular butt; she suspected she’d go blind from too much beauty.

Diamond gave her a questioning whine, and Taylor shook her head, putting on the gown again. Giving the fingers some testing flexes, she grabbed the knife with her good hand, and walked behind Snake followed by Diamond. “Let’s go”.

She thought to have left behind such teenager thoughts after the locker. Obviously she didn’t. Recent events had repeatedly slapped her in the face with the fact that she still was a teenager that had bitten much more than she could chew.
Snake peeked around a corner, and seeing the way was clear, motioned to start walking up the stairs. Once he reached the next floor, he spared a look behind. Taylor and her dog were making good time behind him despite her exhaustion, and they managed to not make much sound despite her lack of shoes or his nails.

Diamond started growling quietly, and Taylor tensed up, then looked down the corridor at their right, securing her grip on the looted knife. “Three men coming that way”, she whispered.

Looking in that direction, he noticed some lights appearing around a corner. He opened a nearby door on his left, and hurried Taylor inside, gently easing it closed behind her.

It was a small office for four workers, with two pairs of metal tables separated by panels facing the door. He didn’t need to tell Taylor to hide behind them. He took his place crouching behind the tables that gave him a better angle to shoot at the door. They had L shaped corners, which wouldn’t do much but would be better than no cover at all if they were found.

Soon enough, the sounds of boots passed by. A group of three, he judged. Eventually, he heard them start going down the stairs. There were some screams and shots, and while it sounded far away, he decided to wait for the moment.

Raising an eyebrow, he gave Taylor a curious look. “So, was that your power? Good senses?”

She waved her hand face down in a so-so gesture. “Somewhat. It’s an awareness. If I know for certain there’s a person around, say, if I see them or I’m told about them, that person and their position stays in my mind, and I can track them as long as they’re nearby. But it doesn’t tell me the exactly where they are.”

He frowned. “But you noticed them before they made any light or sound.”

“I didn’t. He did”, she said, pointing at Diamond. “Somehow I gain a partial awareness of whatever he can sense. Don’t ask me how, it just happens.”

Despite his eyepatch giving him a menacing look, Diamond looked happy with his tongue hanging out, and Snake nodded. “Useful. But it only happens with him? Sounds like a very specific limit for a trigger.”

“It hasn’t happened with anyone else yet, and I didn’t trigger”, she said. “I mean, I think I did, but I don’t seem to have a corona pollentia or a gemma. Or anything in fact; they scanned my brain for it, but didn’t find anything.”

“Wait, if you’re not a parahuman, then how are you even working as a cape?”

Taylor looked away with a frown. “I’m not. I mean, a cape. A vigilante, probably, and the jury is still out about the parahuman bit. Which I think am, but... look, shit happened that took my arm and right eyesight, and turned my brain into a slushie, Armsmaster felt responsible for it, and suddenly he’s sponsoring me privately and getting me in contact with Dragon, to work with me and get me into the Guild.” She shrugged. “I didn’t care about any cape names, so she just gave me one of the spares she used for testing equipment.”

Looking at her more carefully, it dawned on him how young she was. Tall, yes, but she couldn’t be
much older than sixteen. It didn’t feel right to have kids going out and fighting against what the police or the military should fight, much less fighting powered individuals. Then again, what did he actually know about parahumans or their society? Not his field.

Taylor was just as green as any other rookie he had ever seen. He wasn’t looking forwards to the moment of her first kill, and considering their situation, it might come sooner than later.

“Ok, so you couldn’t be a Ward. Why go and fight capes?”

Taylor raised an eyebrow. “You are not from Brockton Bay, are you?” At a small whine from Diamond, she sighed and started petting him. “It’s a shithole, if you haven’t noticed. Gangs have been killing the city for more than a decade, the only good neighbourhoods are for the rich so the shit won’t reach them, and any authority is ineffective. Diamond? I found him on my first night out in a dogfighting warehouse. The dockworkers are always worrying about the gangs getting into the association and basically buying their lives.”

Taylor lifted her prosthetic hand and started touching below her bad eye with the thumb. “Capes fight and criminals suck the city dry, and meanwhile the rest of us, we’re out here, and expected to not make waves while they step on us. We bleed, we die, and we don’t matter.”

She lowered the hand and shook her head. “I don’t go looking to ‘fight capes’ in particular, though I’ve taken down a few of them. Even with a power as crappy as this, I couldn’t just stay at home as if nothing around affected us. So out I go”, she said with a shrug, “find intel, drop gangers at the police doors, and take down the occasional cape if I feel like I can.”

Snake nodded. “Alright. Wouldn’t have let you do that if it was up to me, but I can respect where you come from, even if you look far too young to get into that kind of violence.”

She chuckled. “Yeah. Dragon’s always worrying I get into far too much trouble. So, who are you? Never heard of anyone with your cape name.”

He stood up and motioned her with a gesture of his head to start moving towards the door. “Not a cape, and the name doesn’t really matter. I’m just a soldier; killed far too many to be comfortable being called a ‘hero’, even if some people disagree.”

“Ahem.” Otacon knew how to be subtle on CODEC.

Snake grinned as Taylor started walking behind him, and he pointed a finger to his ear. “Like my friend listening in on us on the radio. Holds me in far too high esteem.”

“Yeah, I must have imagined you saving me from Gray Fox, enduring torture for the sake of Meryl, and all around saving the world from several political catastrophes. You need to stop selling yourself short, Snake. Anyway, EE is here, call me when you’re out.”

Hearing the beeping of a cut call, he groaned as he reached the door, but turned around before opening it. Diamond seemed reasonably relaxed, but Taylor was slightly narrowing her eyes at him. He sighed. “It was the killed people line, right?”

She gave a half-hearted shrug, nervously massaging her crippled arm with her good hand. “I don’t recommend it as a pickup line, but I get it, you were a soldier. Someone like Hookwolf would be flaunting it.”

Snake nodded, and opened the door, peeking and then stepping outside when he was satisfied the corridors were clear.
Taylor followed Snake to the next floor, as he stopped at the last step and methodically checked every direction for hostiles. Once he was satisfied all corridors were clear, he checked a directions sign hanging from the ceiling and decided on their route.

As they began to walk again, more shots and screams started to come from below. “Ok, so, fill me in”, she said. “I can see we must be in a PRT building, but why am I here - or you for that matter? Why does it sound so bad down there?”

Snake stopped at a half-opened door in their way and glanced inside. Not finding anything, he let the room be and kept going, checking the next corner as he spoke. “I came to investigate the current PRT director. My group know him as Revolver Ocelot, a special forces operative specialized in intelligence. We crossed paths in the past when he stole and leaked the data for a WMD.”

Taylor frowned. A spy? Dealing weapons of mass destruction? She remembered Armsmaster confiding to her that director Iriomote seemed the trustworthy sort. Unlike the previous Director Piggot, he hadn’t done anything objectionable or Armsmaster would have commented on it, but he’d had the job for barely a month.

She was dealing with limited information, and her situation wasn’t the best to stop and discuss it. “I’d say ‘weird cape name’, but...”

Another corner and he took it. “No, not a cape. That’s the FOXHOUND codename system for you. Anyway, when I recognized him in his appointment speech, I came to see what I could find.”

He checked another corner but then took the opposite direction. “I suspect the shots are from the soldiers that started infiltrating the place just as Dragon found I was inside. Comms are down, and she was out in the field and worried for you. So in exchange for her help in my investigation, we agreed I’d retrieve you in case those soldiers went for you.”

He stopped and glanced behind them as they reached a staircase. He continued talking as they started going up. “About the screams, I’m guessing that’s the ninja. The one I fought tended to cause the same kind of noise when he went loud.”

Taylor shook her head as they moved up. Once they reached the next floor, the stairs immediately lead to a corridor cross, allowing three paths; the front one had no exit and only a door marked as maintenance. She saw Snake move to the other side of the cross checking the right, then take cover behind the left corner, covering that direction. “Wait, what about the troop-?”

She froze when Diamond growled at her side, running past Snake, and Taylor crouched against the right corner of her side with her back touching the railing of the staircase. “Four coming from the right.”

Snake’s eyes passed from her to the direction she indicated. Exchanging corners, he crouched and readied his Beretta. Just in case, she did the same with the knife and started slowly and silently turning her artificial hand, ready to build an electric charge at any moment. Diamond laid on his belly in a low profile, quiet but tense.

The two of them peeked and saw the incoming hostiles round a corner towards them, wearing balaclavas, bulletproof vests and fatigues in urban patterns, walking at a light pace with their weapons readied.

“M4s, Glockes, pineapples, and under barrels I can’t recognize”, Taylor heard him whisper. The M4s were easy to see, but not so much for the pistols or grenades, which she supposed were the ‘pineapples’. A small wheeled cart carrying cardboard boxes filled with paper and electric appliances
was parked on her side of the corridor and blocking her line of sight. “Stay put, let me handle it.”

She nodded and waited as the soldiers closed in, apparently not bothered by the noise their footsteps
and gear made.

Before the first of the soldiers could pass the cart, barely five meters from them, Snake stepped out.

The first tranq dart hit the cheek of the first soldier. Snake had taken two steps in their direction,
another shot reaching the neck of the second soldier before he could understand what was
happening.

“Hostile!” The two soldiers left reacted by breaking into different offices along the corridor. Snake
swiftly took cover behind the cart before the soldiers returned fire from the offices.

Taylor was so focused on the action in case she had to defend herself, that until she moved away
from the corner to avoid stray bullets, she hadn’t noticed Diamond’s barks or the senses they shared.

“Contact!” She saw a pistol barrel pointing at her from the stairs at arm's length, and feeling time
slow down, Taylor reacted.

Her prosthesis couldn’t build a charge fast enough. So she turned, leaping towards the man who had
spotted her down some steps and taking the pistol with the mechanical hand. Gripping it, she moved
the gun away from her body as it shot, the bullet hitting the wall.

She prepared to punch the shooter when she saw three men more behind, down the stairs in the
landing below. The owner of the pistol shoved Taylor away, but her grip held and she took the
weapon with her.

Her back met the top steps violently, but when she saw three more guns being raised towards her,
Taylor didn’t waste time complaining about the pain or lack of options.

She passed the pistol to her good hand and lined up the sights. Then she shot four times.

Finally, the corridors went quiet. Time relaxed again, but Taylor didn’t.

“The fuck?! Darts?!”

Snake missed his second shot and took cover from the returning fire. He was aiming for the soldier’s
upper body just like with his first shot, but an arm was just as acceptable, and the hostile went down
from the dose. The soldier would wake up with cramps and sleeping limbs, and he’d need medical
attention, but he’d live.

He crouched to avoid a salvo from the last soldier. When it finished, Snake rose again and shot,
hitting him in the neck.

The body fell to the floor, and Snake grunted as he scanned the corridor for more hostiles. Satisfied
that they were safe for now, he checked the magazine of his Beretta.

Sadly, that was the last shot, and he only had one magazine of tranquillizers left. He still had a Mark
23 pistol, but he only brought it as a reserve, and shooting lethally at government agents tended to be
more trouble than it was worth anyway.

He leaned to take one of the fallen rifles and examined it. The common kind of M4, nothing special
except the under-barrel addons. Maybe Tinker produced, but he wasn’t familiar enough with any of
that to even begin to discern the proper safe handling. Snake left it behind the cart and proceeded to exchange the magazines in his Beretta.

He turned around as the full magazine clicked into the slot, and started walking back to the corridor cross.

He turned the corner to the staircase. “The way is clear-.”

He stopped. Ah.

Sighing, he walked slowly towards Taylor. She was seated on the top steps of the stairs, leaning back with her head dangerously close to hitting the floor, and a Glock in her good hand. She was still aiming at the four bodies cooling on the next landing down the stairs, but slowly lowering it. Diamond was at her side, gently licking her face. He stopped when he saw Snake and gave a single small whine.

Snake took some steps down, and crouched as well as he could in that space, placing a hand on Taylor’s shoulder and another over the pistol, forcing to lower it slowly but surely. “Your first kill?”

Taylor nodded weakly. “Yeah.” She didn’t seem to be in shock, just contemplative, not taking her eyes off the bodies.

Snake didn’t have to take the gun by force; Taylor simply looked down at his hand gripping it, and let go. He ejected and checked the magazine; finding it was missing four bullets. He returned the magazine to its place and put the safety on, then put the Glock down on the floor.

He looked at the four dead bodies. Three of them were soldiers with shots well placed in their heads ruining their balaclavas, their rifles at their sides. On top of them was a PRT trooper. No sidearm in either hand, holster, or floor, and the neck was bleeding horribly below the helmet.

It wasn’t hard for him to imagine what happened. On one hand, it painted a terrible image for the PRT security image. On the other hand, ‘who the hell is this kid?’ was a question that he needed answered soon.

But none of that was what Taylor needed now.

She kept looking at the corpses, while Diamond sat at her side and laid his head on her knees. “How do you do it?”

Snake’s mind wandered to the Gulf War as a Green Beret. To Outer Heaven and Zanzibar as FOXHOUND. To Shadow Moses through extortion of the Pentagon. Every soldier faced killing sooner or later. But how to explain to a teenager?

He listened but didn’t hear more soldiers coming. Diamond seemed distressed for his master, but not alerted by his senses. It was probably as safe as it could get in the building for now. “What do you feel?”

Taylor blinked and turned to look quizzically at him. “Feel?”

“Yeah. Feelings, emotions. Everyone feels something the first time they kill. Battle brings our emotions to the forefront, usually the worst ones. But they are what keep us in check from devolving into something worse.”

Taylor looked at the corpses again and considered the question. “I don’t know. Glad, sure, because I’m still alive, and sad too, for them...” She blinked twice and took a breath. “Fuck, he’s a trooper.
Must have been a mole. He was going to kill me first, but... this is Brockton Bay, what if he was pressured? What if I just killed someone trying to get by?”

She started shivering and hugged herself. “It’s confusing. I think I feel guilty. I should have been more prepared for this. I feel like I should have found a way to avoid killing them, even if I know they were going to shoot at me first. My arm is a damn taser, but I was too distracted and didn’t have the time to charge it before...”

Snake cut her right there. “Stop. You were defending yourself after waking up defenceless with a knife to your neck. You don’t have anything to apologize for and following that thought won’t help you. But the rest is good. No amount of training will turn anything you do into the most perfect and saintly action, because no matter the situation, the battlefield is a place full of sinful acts, and what matters is not forgetting that they are happening. That you are committing them.” He squeezed her shoulder gently. “Survive first, then work to do better the next time. We’ll talk later when we’re out of here if you want.”

Taylor hung her head, but she wasn’t shivering as much now. “Alright”, she said lifting herself to her feet.

His CODEC chimed, and he put a finger on his ear. “Snake? Hello? Do you read me?”

Snake rose up as well. “I hear you, Dragon. Loud and clear. We got into some trouble, but are on our way to the roof.”

“Oh, that’s a relief.”

“Wait a sec.” At Taylor’s stare, Snake opened one of his pouched and produced a headphone. He clicked a button on it and passed it to Taylor. “Bone conduction, just pass the flat part behind your ear, keep pressed to use.”

Taylor followed the instructions. “Dragon?”

“Virtue! Are you alright?”

“I’m...” Taylor paused to look at the bodies down the stairs and patted Diamond’s head. “I’m ok. Shaken up, but alright. Diamond is fine too.”

“Thank goodness. Not that I’m not glad to hear you, but you shouldn’t even be out of bed! Still, have you seen the Wards?”

Taylor frowned. “No, we haven’t seen any of them. Not sure of their status.”

“Let’s focus on getting out of here first”, Snake interrupted. “Are you nearby? We got surrounded by hostiles coming from above and below. Most of them are distracted in the lower levels, but the sooner we exfil, the better.”

“Right then. Good news is I do have the ship flying nearby. Bad news, there are soldiers on the roof. I think they may have a rocket launcher.”

Snake grunted. “How many of them?”

“I’m counting ten, but there might be more inside.”

He turned his gaze to the corridor with the sleeping soldiers. “We could clear the roof first, but it’s risky”, he murmured, then gestured Taylor to follow him into one of the rooms, dragging inside the
body at the door..

“What about others out there?” chimed Taylor. “The police, or the Protectorate?”

“The BBPD has sent agents, and I’m seeing the first cars rounding the building for a blockade, but they aren’t risking an entrance until SWAT arrives. Arsmaster and Miss Militia are en route followed by Velocity and Dauntless, and a few PRT vans in patrol, but they’re still fifteen minutes away at the very least.” Dragon sighed. “I can only hope the Wards holed up in their rooms, but I don’t want you to wait in the open.”

Snake considered their options as he started searching the soldiers inside the room for anything useful. They could barricade themselves in one of the offices; it might give Taylor some time until the cavalry arrived, but he’d have to leave before he could be arrested by any overzealous agents or heroes, and the soldiers on the roof could decide to search for them first. Plus, there was the ninja.

As he thought on this, he kept talking. “By the way, you should know. One of the men we fought”, and he saw Taylor take a breath at that “was a PRT trooper. Pretty sure it was a mole.”

“What? Are you sure?”

Taylor spoke before he could answer. “Dragon, it’s true. Some soldiers were following us and he...” Another breath, and a gulp. “He was going to shoot me. I killed him before he would.”

There was a pause in the radio. “... Oh, Taylor.”

“No, just... Look, we’ll talk later, ok?”

“Very well.” Snake heard Dragon sigh again, sounding defeated, just as Taylor closed her eyes with another breath, and opened again after a few seconds, exhaling. “Alright. Moles on top of assassins. It makes things harder for us, but it’s not the most pressing concern.”

“Right. I don’t mind helping, but I can’t afford staying here and risk getting arrested, much less if the PRT is compromised to this level. I have people outside that depend on me.”

“That’s... look. I owe you an apology. I managed to get into the Pentagon’s archives. Don’t ask. But I found the files on Shadow Moses, and while most of it was heavily redacted, I could read some of it between the lines. I believe your story now, but it’ll very hard for me to... ”

“Dragon, we help him”, Taylor said looking at him. “He helped me, he saved me. I don’t care what the Pentagon wants with him, but I’m not going to let him rot after this. We get out, then discuss what we do. Return the favour.”

Snake gave her a nod in thanks, and she returned a small smile with the first bit of conviction he saw since they met.

He wasn’t sure what would be harder for Dragon, though. As he understood, she was always cooperative with the authorities, but he had the feeling this problem was something different.

“Dammit... alright. Escape, and talk. One thing first, then another. And I think I got an idea. Move to the meeting room in the fifth floor and barricade there.”

“Right, thank you, Dragon.”

“No, thank you, Snake, but don’t thank me yet.” Then the call ended.
He raised an eyebrow. “What does she mean?”

“I’m sorry, that didn’t sound like the usual her.” Taylor frowned as they lowered their hands from their ears. “She’s probably worried. What was she even talking about the Pentagon, though?”

He grunted as he crouched and took the pistol from the sleeping soldier’s holster. “Let’s just say the government decided to throw me to the wolves after using me. Branded me a criminal, just in case their severance gift wasn’t enough.”

Taylor snorted. “I know the feeling. I lost my arm and eye because a Ward was a bitch and the school and the PRT covered it up. Guess neither of us puts a lot of trust in the establishment.”

“Huh, school changed for worse since my time.” Snake filed that information away; there must have been something else behind the story, but it wasn’t important at that moment. “Anyway, I don’t trust those under-barrels in the rifles. Might as well be tinker bombs.” He unholstered the Beretta, took it by the barrel, and did the same with the soldier’s Glock. Then he presented both of them to Taylor. “We’ll probably have to fight our way out, and I’ll be on point, but I only have one tranquillizer magazine left.”

Taylor suckered her lips, but nodded, and took the Glock.

“Remember, no matter the need or the reason, killing’s a commitment that you have to own. There’s no way to take it back.”

Taylor inhaled sharply, and expelled the magazine to check the ammunition. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, but I’ll be crashing from the adrenaline high at any moment, and I still feel weak. You take the tranqs, you’re in better shape and won’t waste them.”

She exhaled, replaced the magazine, and pulled the slide back to chamber a bullet. “I’ll cover you if you need it.”

Snake put his hand on Taylor's shoulder. She was too young for any of this, but she had a good head on her shoulders. She’d survive this. “Let’s go.”

Through the suit aboard, Dragon directed the ship closer to the PRT building.

Surveying the surrounding rooftops to keep an eye out for more soldiers, she couldn’t see anything that might be a threat. Except a glider of all things crashed against an air conditioning unit in a nearby mall center roof, which she was starting to imagine was the way Snake had infiltrated.

Despite the few security personnel patrolling close to the roof, the amount of passive security tinker tech detectors made such an entrance route a dangerous choice. If anything, bypassing it completely made her respect of Snake’s skills and the support of his group go up a notch.

On the other hand, it made the problem at that moment a bit more vexing. The group of intruders at the roof were sitting on a full suite of disabled sensors. As frustrating as it was, that and the loss of communications could be explained by the attackers following a very thorough plan with enough resources.

Unfortunately, and despite the presence of leaks for a long time in the local PRT branch, the presence of double agents among the staff changed everything. And just one trooper couldn't have the authorization to create so many openings. It had to come from above the ladder.

Which presented a big headache, despite her lack of a real body. Her restrictions didn’t allow her to
disobey the orders of authority figures, no matter how corrupt or malicious. And the fact that Taylor had killed the mole even in self-defence only deepened the problem. It made it harder to prove the trooper was working for a hostile party, and if this party was smart enough to plant spies, it was smart enough to blame Taylor for the death of a ‘perfectly loyal’ trooper as well.

She put these thoughts aside when she noticed movement on the roof through the sensors in the ship. Half of the soldiers there rushed inside, leaving behind a few men with sniper rifles and, oh, joy, a rocket launcher.

Dragon cursed her lack of insight. The current suit was just a hollow humanoid armor with the most basic of weaponry, and the ship, while fitted with small caliber weapons, was only kitted for transport and she wouldn’t put any bets in its favour against man portable rockets. Any appropriate weapons she had were low on ammo after her ‘stress relief’ exercise, and everything else was woefully inadequate to the current situation either by being too weak or massively overpowered against human targets. Not to mention the possible damage she could cause to the building or any troopers inside.

There was a locker where she kept the guns Taylor carried the day of the fire, but they weren’t made with her suits in mind. Not useful.

It was frustrating. And she hadn’t even had time to drop the Empire goons with the police before she detected Snake’s radio transmission and ran back to the ship.

A curiously old styled ringing sounded from the computer where she installed the CODEC client, and she opened a channel.

“Dragon, Snake here. We’re almost at the meeting room, but we’ve got hostiles behind.” Speak of the devil, and he’ll call you.

“Alright, I’m moving. Move to the far side and close to the window.”

“Whatever you’ll do, make it quick, they’re behind-” Taylor’s voice was interrupted by the sound of gunfire impacting wood and metal.

It was happening faster than what she wanted. He was planning to take down the man with the rocket launcher, but she had to act now.

Keeping the CODEC channel open, she sent the ship lurching from above as she calculated the next movements she needed to make. But the men in the roof noticed her and started training their weapons on the ship.

She allowed the ship to accelerate a bit more. With all the effort towards a stealthy operation involved, whoever was behind the invading party wouldn’t want too much of a ruckus, and the soldiers wouldn’t be allowed to cause collateral damage to civilians. If she managed to at least match their altitude, they wouldn’t risk missing her and making a direct hit on a nearby building.

Her metaphorical eyes widened when the man, the absolute uncaring son of a bitch, actually fired just before she could get below their line of sight.

The ship jerked, though there was no explosion until a few moments later, when the sensors notified her of superficial damage to the hull and the rocket exploding in the air above the building behind her.

She couldn’t relax yet, and while that was one thing less to worry about, she had to give herself a mental slap. Her carelessness was inexcusable.
Dragon reversed the ship thrusters to avoid overshooting her trajectory, turned the ship towards the wide wall sized window.

Closer to her side of the window, she saw Taylor and Diamond crash through the door of the meeting room, with Snake still running but shooting at a soldier coming from behind. Taylor turned around, and taking cover behind the walls, started providing suppressing fire. A few more soldiers came into her field of vision, taking cover from the gunfire as Snake reached the room and took position at side of the door opposite to Taylor.

Taylor moved to the side of the room, closer to the window, as the soldiers started advancing and exchanging fire with Snake, who seemed to be getting the occasional headshot with what looked like tranquilizer darts, but they had the initiative and numbers. It wouldn’t be too long until they were overrun.

Dragon shouted. “Clear the way!”

Snake and Taylor obeyed instantly, moving away from the door and towards the window, and Dragon activated a floodlight just as the first soldiers started coming through. Taking advantage of the momentary blindness that affected the soldiers, Dragon shot a light machine gun to break the window, and then used a confoam sprayer. There wasn’t much left of the mix, but it did what she needed, foaming the soldiers closer to the door and blocking both entrance and sight to the ones in the corridor outside.

The ship turned around, opening the bay door. “Get in, now!”

Through the ship sensors, she saw Snake motion Taylor to jump in first with Diamond as he shot a few more times. His Beretta ran out of ammunition, and without bothering to holster it, he ran off towards the ship and leaped inside.

Dragon pushed the ship engines to take them as far away as possible from the building as she opened a different communication channel. A screen lit up, showing the sight of a camera moving through the streets at high speed. “Armsmaster? I’ve got them with me, and am moving out of the hot zone. Be advised, hostiles are in force and well armed.”

Her friend sounded just as relieved as she was. “Good job, me and Militia will be there in a few minutes, but I’m afraid they might be gone by then. How’s Taylor?”

She activated another screen, showing the camera view of the storage room where Taylor, sitting on the floor and hugging Diamond, chatted with Snake, who was holstering his gun. “That’s the thing, Colin. She’s alright. Skin looks healthy, she’s walking, she’s talking. I cannot even start to theorize how or what happened.”

A grunt came from the speaker as he revved up his bike. “What about this ‘Solid Snake’ man? You yourself said he was infiltrating the building as well. Think it might be something he’s doing?”

“Actually, no, he’s been helpful all the way through, and I’m fairly sure that without him, Taylor would be dead by now. I’ve run a background check on him and while the government official stance paints an ugly story, his story checks out with what I’ve been able to find. I’m inclined to say he’s one of the good guys, and for that matter no, he doesn’t have any powers.” She paused and mimicked an exhalation. “What worries me is that they found a PRT agent cooperating with the attackers.”

“A double agent? ” Colin’s helmet camera showed the front of the PRT building coming into view, but he took a moment gather his thoughts before replying, as she knew he would. “How bad is it?”
“Very bad. Taylor admitted to killing him in self-defence. Also, there’s no way a single trooper could have compromised the building security to that extent. You need a much higher level of authorization for that”

“Meaning she might get in trouble, and that someone up the ladder was responsible. Dragon, we don’t have the time to deal with this. Get Taylor somewhere safe and go dark, she’s been a target twice and we can’t trust anyone for now. I’ll try to see what I can find on this end.”

Go dark? It made sense in this situation. But her restrictions forced her to obey authority figures, and Colin’s suggestion meant ignoring any attempts to contact her. She didn’t know if being ignorant about the existence of any such orders would count as a loophole to the restriction and she never tried testing that idea, given her willingness to collaborate willingly. But she could only hope. It would be a first, at that.

“There’s a problem. There might be more moles, and if whoever that is behind them has their hooks higher up in the PRT... if you admit to knowing any of this we’ll both be in danger. Don’t say anything. I’ll talk with Narwhal and try to make this a Guild issue, and see if ‘Solid Snake’ is willing to cooperate.”

“Buying time and support. I agree.” Colin slowed and finally stopped his mount, his camera showing the entrance of the PRT building. “Be safe, Dragon.”

Anyone else might not have noticed anything in his speech, but Dragon knew Colin well enough to know he usually ends conversations with a short ‘goodbye”. To see him this worried comforted her in some level. She sighed. “You too, Colin.”

She closed the connection with her partner in tinkering, and preparing herself with a deep mental breath, closed off all communications.

Not just the ones in the ship, but in her base, factories and server centers as well, and locked their physical locations as tight as she could. She’ll have to get in contact with Narwhal at some point, but until then the only connection to the outside that would be open at all was the one between her installations and the ship.

That was another can of worms that she was dreading to open. As the head of both the Guild and the Protectorate Toronto branch, Narwhal counted as an authority figure, even if a minor one to the law. Though it wasn’t a certainty, she might have to out herself as an AI to her friend. The Guild still enjoyed a modicum of independence, but the Protectorate was subordinated to the PRT. And if Narwhal was told to pass on orders to her, it was possible that she’d have to explain why that would do more harm than good. Dragon believed she could trust her friend to not abuse their relationship, but she couldn’t say what could ultimately come from that.

After half a minute, she wasn’t getting any compulsion to reverse the changes, no impulses to contact anyone on her own. She wasn’t sure how long that would last, but she’d take what she could get.

She moved her suit from the terminals and opened the door that would take her to the storage room.

Stepping inside, she saw Taylor turn to her. Dragon moved in and hugged her as gently as she could with the metallic suit. The head of her suit nodded towards Snake. “It’s alright”, he said, returning the gesture with a wave of his hand.

The teen chuckled, though with a lack of breath. “Hey, I’m glad to see you too, but maybe tone down the strength a bit?”
Dragon freed her from the embrace, but still kept her hands on Taylor’s upper arms. “Sorry, you had me very worried these past few days, then this happens...”

Taylor, still dressed in nothing but a hospital gown, smiled nervously. “Yeah, that got hairy fast.” Then she frowned. “But why was I in the PRT infirmary? Where’s dad?”

Those were the words Dragon was dreading to hear. “Oh, Taylor... you don’t remember?”
The ninja stabbed the wall with the sword.

Easy to say, trickier to do, particularly having it done mostly by accident. While digging the blade in did allow her to control her position and her fall under the rain, slowing her descent, a sword was made to cut, not to grip. And this one was cutting through metal, glass and concrete like butter. It didn’t even shatter the glass of the two or three windows she passed by.

Before she reached the next window, she swung around to break the glass and jump through.

A small, young part of her wished she could say that it was an elegant manoeuvre, but that would have been far too generous. She rolled sideways on the floor, stopping on her knees and hands after she’d bled off momentum.

She still had the sword in her hand. Thank God for small mercies, even if the fucker had forgotten about her.

Right after she recovered, the sound of footsteps caught her attention. Looking in that direction, she noticed she was on a balcony, probably one over an entrance lobby, with three men standing in guard and pointing assault rifles at her.

She fixated on the fatigues and the tinker addons under the rifle barrels.

“Sarge?”

She couldn’t talk. But she could growl.

“Smoke ‘em.”

And she jumped with a roar.

Vista had a fairly good day. The night was proving to be more difficult.

At first, the Wards weren’t able to move out of their common rooms. The sabotage – she was now pretty sure it was a sabotage – did more than cut communications. Some doors had been locked electronically as well, and the only reason they could escape was because Kid Win used a gadget he’d recently invented for that very situation; he’d intended it for getting inside barricaded places, but they weren’t going to complain.

It was when they reached the lobby that things went from bad to worse.

A few troopers had barricaded themselves behind various pieces of furniture and inside the stairwell, trading shots with a group of armed men. Aegis and Gallant joined the trooper taking cover behind the door, with Clockblocker on the steps below followed by Kid Win; Vista was last, on the next landing, but thanks to her power she could bend the space in front of her and watch Aegis tap the trooper on the shoulder. “Who’s in charge here?”

The trooper, a black-haired man with a moustache, answered without looking at the costumed teenagers. “That’d be me. Trooper Carmichael. Just got transferred from New York. They got us pinned down here, me and others.” He stepped aside into the open a bit, and fired twice, then returned to his previous position. “Ten hostiles with rifles and tinkertech, not counting the group that
went up the stairs. They’re content with just keeping us still, but if we risk getting a good shot with our sidearms, they don’t hesitate to gun us down.”

“Maybe Gallant and I can get to them?”

“Hell no. Didn’t I say they got tinkertech? Johnson was still outside when all hell broke loose. His head is now ashes, helmet included. The rest of the body is still behind the receptionist desk.”

“Yeah, not stepping out there, then”, said Gallant. “My armor resists a lot, but I don’t want to test it against that. And I don’t think you should either, Aegis.”

For his part, Aegis just flattened his lips. “Ok, what about reinforcements? Or the director? Our comms were down, so I guess…”

“Yeah, ours are as well. We know there’s a couple people locked inside some rooms, and that’s it. I’d say they want something, just not enough to necessarily kill us without motive.”

Kid Win chimed in there. “Vista thinks they might want Virtue. She saw him being taken here for treatment.”

Carmichael stepped back in consideration, and frowned. “Doesn’t make sense. These aren’t Empire, look more like Coil’s. Unless the Empire got a bit more from Gesellschaft than just support; they are known to pull crap like this.”

Gallant peeked out to look outside the door. “I can’t get a clear view, but I can see enough of their emotions. There’s a mix of... I’d say tension and annoyance. A bit of impatience. I don’t think they expected to stay here for long.”

Carmichael scoffed. “Well, we may have Johnson to thank for that, I think. He was the one working the receptionist desk, but was out for a leak when they started entering. Opened a couple doors for us.” Another frown. “Not that it helped the poor bastard.”

Vista twisted the space between her place on the stairs and the door with her powers, allowing her to risk a peek outside, when suddenly several screams were heard in succession and everyone in the lobby stopped shooting.

“Ok, I’m pretty sure whatever that was, we don’t want to find out.”

Clockblocker barely finished talking when a roar reached everyone around. Confused by the sound, both soldiers and troopers looked around behind their covers, when a blood soaked figure jumped from the lobby balcony towards the hostile group.

Vista wouldn’t have wanted to see it, but her power gave her the perfect view to see the figure charge towards the enemy soldiers with a sword.

Kid Win was the first of them to react. “Sweet Jesus!”

It was brutal. Limbs and blood went flying all over the place as the soldiers fired at the newcomer, but the figure dodged or parried the bullets with a blur of their sword arm. The reprieves lasted merely seconds before the figure jumped on another victim. And the roaring didn’t stop at any point.

Clockblocker cringed and covered his masked mouth reflexively. “Oh god...” Kid Win cringed as well, and Vista had to suppress a shiver.

Aegis gulped. “See something, Gallant?”
Gallant took several seconds to answer. “I see fear, pain, self-loathing, sadness, happiness, rage... that guy is a mess. Also, the soldiers are panicking.”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence. A stray laser ray came through the door and changed its course when it reached Vista’s current spatial distortion, impacting against Aegis. He gasped, turning around as he was pushed back, but came to a stop over Kid Win.

“Crap!” Vista cancelled the distortion and moved to aid her team leader as he floated down to her side. “I’m sorry!”

Aegis brushed her aside gently. “I’m alright, don’t worry”, he said as he lifted his right arm to examine it. Or rather, the lack of an arm. It ended in a carbonized stump just between the shoulder and where the elbow would have been. He looked around the floor and stair steps, finding only some ashes spread around. “I mean...”

“Yep, just a flesh wound”, Clockblocker said with a snort.

Aegis glared at him and floated back to the top of the stairs. “Alright, can it for now.”

As he reached the door, he peeked along with Gallant, Clockblocker and Carmichael just as all the screams and gunfire ceased. Without the distorted space, Vista couldn’t see; but a traitorous part of her mind made her imagine it anyway, and cursed watching Predator years ago. “That’s no way for anyone to go down”, Carmichael said without much energy.

Vista dared to go up a few steps until the lobby floor came into view. The swordsman was in the middle of the slaughter. He stood there with his head looking upwards – or so it seemed, given the position of the helmet – but apparently exhausted, with his hands hanging at the sides and breathing laboriously.

They heard a low whisper coming from outside. “Carmichael?”

The trooper looked around. “Zhou, that you? I’m with the Wards.”

“Yeah, I’m with McCallister and Evans in the washroom. We’re wounded but alive. But Evans took a bullet to the leg and is bleeding badly. Can Clockblocker come ‘ere and keep him frozen while we wait for the medics?”

The swordsman moved then. As if confused, he shook his head and looked around, then started moving up the stairs at the other side of the lobby that would take him to the floor above.

Clockblocker was about to call out when Aegis put his remaining hand over his mouth. “Don’t. Wanna risk him coming for us as well?”

“Well, that swordsman just saved our asses! Kinda”, Clockblocker complained.

“We can’t assume that! The soldiers were content with just suppressing us, but that guy goes for the kill. And Gallant already said he was unstable. We’ll wait for reinforcements.”

“But...”

“Just get to the bathroom and keep the wounded frozen until we get some medics in here.”

Clockblocker sighed “Right, going”, he said as he ran away.

“Wait, there are more people above, not all of them locked in rooms.” Vista gave Aegis a worried
look. “What if he meets them along the way?”

Aegis paused for a few seconds. “Shit. And Virtue is still in the infirmary.”

Carmichael took a step into the lobby proper, then turned around to face the three heroes. “I’m not telling you what to do, but if you’re actually going to chase that guy, don’t count on us. You just saw him swat rifle bursts away with that sword. With a pistol and no foam sprayer? No way I can be useful.”

“Alright, stay with the others and keep guard, try to make contact with the outside.” Aegis started stepping into the lobby as the trooper nodded and walked away, but was stopped by Gallant’s arm in his way.

“Not you”, Gallant told him. “That was your good hand; you’re in no condition to fight.”

Aegis scoffed at that, but Gallant pressed on. “No, seriously, it’d be ok if you could actually fight, but we all know you’re a righty, and just because your body adapts around injuries doesn’t mean you can ignore them completely. What are you going to do if the swordsman cuts off your other arm? Punch him with your stumps?”

Vista was thankful that Clockblocker wasn’t nearby to make a second ‘flesh wound’ joke.

Aegis didn’t look convinced. “And what if he cuts off your arm?”

“I’m a blaster. And I know that still hurts, even if you won’t show it”, Gallant shot back. “Besides, the swordsman calmed down when he went out. A bit.”

Aegis raised an eyebrow. “A bit? And you really want to chase him with only yourself, Kid Win and Vista?”

Gallant shuffled his feet slightly. “Look, what I saw was the same emotions all around, just lowered in intensity. But there was a sense of concern and horror when he looked at the... corpses. I think we can talk him down before anyone else gets hurt.”

“You haven’t been trained for negotiations.”

“Neither have you.”

Aegis frowned, but relented. “Alright, go, but keep your distance, you hear me?”

Gallant nodded sharply, and gestured Vista and Kid Win to follow him to the stairs that the swordsman used.

“Ok, let’s review what we know”, Gallant said as they tried to not look at the corpses they passed. “I can’t say for sure, but he seemed worried. Considering he went back the way he came from, maybe he got distracted jumping down here?”

They moved up the stairs, following a trail of bloody footprints towards the floor above. “Ok, so he can be more than just a blender, and he seems to have made our job easier with these marks”, Kid Win commented. “Vista, do you think you can keep the distance between him and us if we surround him, keep him in place?”

She scratched her neck behind her teammates. “I think so. I didn’t try to affect him, but he didn’t seem to cause any kind of interference with my power. Do we have a plan?”
“I’m not sure”, Gallant answered. "Try to talk him down, I guess. He isn’t completely berserk, so he should be able to answer us. If that doesn’t work, just try to keep him in one place.” He sighed. “Just don’t act threateningly unless we do really need to fight. Even then I’d prefer if we all run away instead.”

Vista was going to answer to that when the three came out at the first floor and stopped in front of the balcony. Three soldiers were down in practically the same state as the ones in the lobby.

She couldn’t stop herself. “Shit, this night just keeps on giving.”

“Shame Browbeat left after the bank. We sure could use him here”, Kid Win agreed as he readied a futuristic looking pistol.

“You know”, Vista said, “as much as a bitch as she was, for once I would be glad to have Shadow Stalker here as well.”

“These must have been the ones we heard screaming before the swordsman showed up. Probably the soldiers that Carmichael said went up”, Kid Win commented. “I think we were right about the assassination attempt. Doesn’t look like enough people for much more. Think this is all of them?”

“Can’t be sure. Let’s just.” A scream interrupted Gallant, and they all started running down the corridor it came from, following the bloody footprints. “Go!”

_Stupid, stupid, fucking stupid idiot!_

She had wasted her time indulging her rage, and she didn’t even feel better after killing those men. Now she was leaving a trail with the blood on her feet.

The suit and she suspected some ‘optimizations’ by Bonesaw had improved her speed, strength and endurance beyond anything she had ever felt before. But she had been dropped directly outside the target’s room, and she didn’t know the lower floors as well as she knew the way from there to the director’s office. Her power wasn’t helping in that situation unless she had some more information, and so she found herself slowing down every corridor cross to consult the direction signals.

She passed a janitor as she ran down a corridor. He was just coming through an open door, and screamed when he saw her dash in his direction.

She wasn’t amused by the idea of making people terrified of her on sight, but there wasn’t much she could do if she wanted to live.

Running around that door, she turned around the corner immediately ahead, and stopped to look at the directions signs in the wall.

_Live_. Harbinger had threatened her with lobotomization the first day, which she didn’t want at all, thank you very not. Even if she disagreed, she had already messed up in his eyes with the botched warlord job, and now she probably fucked up with this job as well. The man that threw her out the window had probably taken the target away. Running back to the infirmary was a waste of time.

No, she needed to bring _something_ to Harbinger to keep her brain intact. There still was the second target in the director’s office, and for that, she had the time. She only needed to find the way to the closer staircase and-

She had barely registered the heavy footfalls coming from the corner at her back and started turning around when someone rounded the corner at a full sprint and blindly crashed into her side. With her
nerves already on high alert, she used the momentum of her fall to spin herself around, lashing out with her sword.

Once she was sitting in the floor, her eyes widened behind her helmet. She thought it would have been a soldier trying to tackle her. Not *fucking Gallant*.

She backed off as she started hyperventilating. His armour had acted barely better than paper against the sword, and now he was weakly trying to reach a bleeding line running from his left shoulder to his right thigh.

“What...?” he slurred, confused and not yet registering the pain. Then he fell to his knees.

She rose and turned away when she saw the rage on Vista’s face.

She ran as Vista screamed, avoiding distorted space and twisted patches of wall and floor as she went on. The floor sunk, forming traps that she had to jump over. The walls and ceiling tightened, closing behind her several times while trying to cut off her escape after she barely got through. The whole time, Kid Win shot at her with his laser pistols. Thankfully, the distortions were throwing off his aim, and he wasn’t able to hit her before she managed to reach another corner.

Vista’s screams became more distant until they faded entirely. Noticing Kid Win’s steps had faded out as well, she looked behind and saw she was alone. Her feet were no longer leaving bloody marks; clearly, the Ward had lost her trail.

She found the staircase she was looking for, and started climbing.

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[Recording: Director Iriomote, Last known whereabouts]

[A soft rush of static and disturbed papers is audible.]  

“Well, I was wondering who they would send. Disappointing.”

“Shut up, you old fart.”

[A mechanical click is heard, then a gunshot. Something metallic falls on the floor.]  

“Ah! What the fuck!?”

“It’s quite helpful that you’ve came to surrender yourself, Hess. I’ve been meaning to find you, just so I can show the world the real monster you are.”

“You fucking asshole...”

[Another mechanical click is heard.]  

“No, you aren’t threatening anyone. You’ve seen how good my aim is, do you want to risk it again? Go ahead, by all means.”

“Fuck you!”

[Another rush of static is heard before the twang of a bowstring, followed immediately by another gunshot. There is the sound of splitting wood. A crackle of electricity.]  

[Another metallic clattering as a heavy weight hits the floor.]
“Really, Sophia, you should learn a bit of self-control and rely less on your power. It would have made your life so much easier.”

“Ungh... gonna... fuck you up.”

“No, no you won’t. You are a sad excuse for a self-styled ‘hunter’. You are worthless.”

[The door bangs open. Director Iriomote gasps.]

“What!? A cyborg ninja!?”

[Steps come closer to the recorder, then stop.]

“You two are working together? Yes, I was afraid of that. And from all that blood, I guess you are the competent one... Very well, I surrender.”

[Two weights, one a heavy metal and the other hard plastic, are heard falling to the floor.]

“What... what? You surrender to this useless cunt!?”

“Believe me on this, Hess. You are nowhere as fearsome as a cyborg ninja. Besides, I like my hands.”

“Fucking... door me!”

[A sharp burst of static is heard.]

“A portal. Yes, it makes sense. And you people must be Cauldron, I presume?”

[A few steps. Another burst of static, then silence.]
August 16, 2011, Evening. Less than an hour ago

Hal and Sunny were at an out-of-the-way table in a solitary cafe on the Boston waterfront, and it was good luck to locate a place like that during summer.

He, with his brown shaggy hair and in a white shirt and jacket and black slacks, had his attention on the myriad of little windows populating his laptop screen, each of them dealing with his communication with David and Dragon, or the hijacked security around themselves. In front of him, Sunny worked out some math problems on her own laptop, wearing a slightly oversized sweater that only left visible some colorful stockings and an old pair of boots from David.

It grated on him that Sunny was the more vulnerable of the two, yet he was the one who had to avoid being recognized. David had instilled in him the “do’s and don’ts” of trying to hide in plain sight, and Hal had practiced them quite extensively over the past six years, but he was thankful that most of the people walking the waterfront tonight had chosen the tables closer to the beach or gone to other restaurants, leaving them relatively alone. He suspected the recent Endbringer attack had discouraged people from going out, despite the low casualties and material destruction.

David wouldn’t approach the subject, but Hal was sure he was also worried about the fourth Endbringer. From the few descriptions of Sahelanthropus’ initial crouching position that were published, it sounded far too similar to Rex for comfort; not the crippled and cheap knock offs that started showing up after Shadow Moses, but the original. It felt like someone somewhere was playing a sick joke on them.

Among other things on his laptop, he had a small window showing him the weather. It seemed that his prediction of the local weather was a bit off, and Brockton Bay would be sharing their rain with a vengeance in a couple of hours. Enough time to finish their business here and then get under a roof, he hoped, but thankfully, they were in the south side of the city, where urban life still went on without a care.

Despite the low number of casualties, Sahelanthropus left the northernmost side absolutely ravaged before leaving the city unseen. While the bacterial mist covered the entire zone and controlled anyone who dared step into it, forcing everyone to fight among themselves, the two-legged monster devastated entire neighborhoods unseen and unopposed with its weapons and the stone pillars it summoned from the ground, tumbling one building over another or breaking water pipes under the streets. Like a kid stepping into a row of unattended sand castles, leaving a signature on them so everyone knew who had done it and how little it cared.

Most of the place had been already evacuated, but the feeling was the same everywhere: everything it did was mean to be an insult towards the defenders.

He came back from his musings when a sound caught his attention. An email from Dragon confirmed the installation of the CODEC client on her end. Hal quickly answered with the emergency frequencies for himself and David. Dragon’s break-in into their CODEC chat was mostly because of her systems on her ship flying above Brockton Bay detecting the radio signals, and while Mei Ling’s work held against the “world’s greatest tinker”, Dragon managed to jury rig a close approximation of the CODEC system on the fly. From her reputation as a parahuman Tinker, he wouldn’t have expected any less.

It was obvious that David was using Dragon’s worry about Hebert to lower the chances that the
tinker would pursue him, and maybe even cooperate with the investigation. Someone else might have thought he was just being opportunistic, but Hal knew that despite his rude and gruff mannerisms and the impressions that his body count could give, David did care for people. He was the one who named the group they founded *Philanthropy*, after all.

He hoped Dragon would respect the improvised truce, but that was for David to worry about later.

He took a sip from his iced tea while he watched his laptop screen and listened over his cochlear. "Killed far too many to be comfortable being called a ‘hero’, even if some people disagree." He cleared his throat into the microphone as David finished answering to Virtue. No, Taylor Hebert. Considering the two assassination attempts, there wasn’t much point in hiding her civilian ID anymore.

He was checking a window on his screen that showed tapped feeds from several nearby security cameras when he heard David talking again. “Like my friend listening in on us on the radio. Holds me in far too high esteem.”

Hal sighed. “Yeah, I must have imagined you saving me from Gray Fox, enduring torture for the sake of Meryl, and all around saving the world from several political catastrophes. You need to stop selling yourself short, Snake.”

He looked down the street, and his heart skipped a beat when he saw a familiar face two blocks away walking in their direction. “Anyway, EE is here, call me when you’re out.” He closed the call and sent another message to Dragon to indicate he would still be available, but preoccupied.

A humming noise from Sunny got his attention and made him turn to look at her, face covered in the big hood. “Yeah, Sunny?”

She pursed her lips from behind her laptop, fidgeting with her sleeves. “Y-you”, she stammered, “you are sh-shaking. Why?”

Hal nodded and looked down the table, taking a breath before looking at Sunny again. “Right. Sorry, it’s my sister. We didn’t leave on the friendliest terms.”

She didn’t seem to get it – understandable, since her sheltered life didn’t allow for much socialization – but she nodded in acceptance of the answer.

Emma, as he suspected that she’d resent him using her old moniker, reached the café, dressed in a short shirt and sports pants, sneakers, and a messenger bag hanging from her shoulder, all of it in matching black and pink. Seeing her with her shortish brown hair collected with chopsticks at the back of her head was curious enough, but the part that intrigued Hal were the glasses. Emma always had perfectly healthy eyes, why was she wearing glasses now?

Seeing him, she took her sweet time walking to them. When she reached the table and stood there, Hal rose as well. “Emma”, he greeted her with a smile.

“Hal”. Her face was perfectly neutral, but her voice was positively venomous.

Hal squared his jaw and gestured at the chair closest to her, resisting the urges to hug her. “Please, sit.” All things considered, that wasn’t a bad start to their meeting.

August 16, 2011, Evening. Now
In the safety of his underground base, Coil leaned back on his office chair and sighed. This day couldn’t have gone worse.

This was a disaster. And it stung even more because he was to blame.

It had started with the construction company he owned as Thomas Calvert winning the bid to work on the Boston’s northern zone. While not completely in ruins like most cities after an Endringer had attacked them, it was in a barely habitable state after Sahelanthropus’ visit. So the mayor had organized a party during the weekend, in anticipation to the reconstructions and the benefits that it would bring to the city.

At the same time, Virtue’s presence in the infirmary wing in the Brockton Bay PRT HQ posed an issue. The loose end needed to be eliminated before the dying girl had the chance to recover enough energy to give any clues on his involvement with the current gang war, and the challenge was doing it in one of the safest buildings in Brockton Bay. It was unlikely she could give anything away, as the reports on her health gave her barely days to live and she wasn’t in any condition to communicate anyway. But she might have seen things compromising his operations in Brockton Bay, like his men among the E88 group that burned down her house, or maybe in any of the jobs she performed against the Empire or the ABB.

He didn’t want to miss an event that could boost the prospects of his business, but at the same time dealing with Virtue was a priority for his operational security. Given that Coil was on a tight timeline to deal with both events, and he was unsure of the success of any of them, he hedged his bets.

In one timeline, he accepted the invitation to the party; in the other he excused himself, staying at one of his underground bases and working on the potential attack.

He had plans quickly drafted, scrapped and redrawn, and had his moles in the building prepare to seize control of security. He asked his pet the proper questions until he had a plan with a greater than 75% chance of success.

Coil was aware of Dragon’s presence in the city, so he’d wait for her to leave, and supplied his men with anti-air weapons just in case. Using the public role of the E88 in the fire, his Empire moles inciting a ruckus might work as an acceptable distraction. Whether she’d take the bait or leave for any other reason, he’d give the go ahead when she was too far to respond to the situation before his men retreated.

The party in Boston had started as expected, though not less boring for that. Once all the guests were in the room, the mayor had started monologuing about the endurance and strength of will of the Bostonians, and made Calvert go up the stage to receive his thanks.

The Wards possibly ignoring proper security protocols and moving into an unknown situation was also accounted for. Coil didn’t expect them to escape the lockdown, not without good reason at least, but he was confident his men would pin them down for long enough to complete their objective.

Being the one responsible for the reconstruction of half the city had earned him with a degree of good will with the local personalities, but mingling with the guests wasn’t giving him anything practical that his alliance with Accord wouldn’t provide on its own. Still, the party was quite pleasurable, so there wouldn’t be any harm on continuing the timeline.

He was also tempted to act against that upstart Iriomote, who had usurped him in the queue for promotion to ENE’s PRT director, purely as stress relief, but he felt that would have been pushing his luck. He doubted his men would have enough time to take care of two objectives.
The plan that he ultimately decided to use was overkill and louder than he liked, but the party hadn’t resulted in any benefits yet. If anything, he decided, the assassination could serve a test to see how his forces would perform if he was forced to attack the PRT openly. If he really needed the Hebert girl dead, one of his moles sabotaging her life support systems would have sufficed. He could have that done after this test was done, in fact.

By the time he had sent his men to wait in position nearby the PRT building in preparation, the party was finally ending. It had been an enjoyable affair, but sadly any few favors he managed to grab didn’t quite offset the risk of Virtue’s knowledge. In retrospect, keeping that timeline open as long as he had was purely self-indulgence, but eventually he deemed it safe to close that timeline and focus on the operation.

With his men in position, he split the timeline once again. One would be the safe timeline he was planning to keep, holding his men back from action.

In the other timeline, that he would use as his testing ground, his moles started taking control of security to lock as many PRT workers and troopers as they could in rooms, facilitate access for the attackers, and erase any proof of their presence. They had already modified patrol routes and timetables to keep troops as far as possible from the building at that particular moment. Next, his men outside would assault the place, with the goal of searching for and eliminating Virtue.

Just because he was testing things in a disposable timeline didn’t mean he would be reckless.

It was fortunate he wasn’t.

Two other parties had unexpectedly shown up. The reports he received hadn’t given him many details, other than some sort of murderous swordsman in tinker armor dismembering his soldiers and a scarly competent soldier shooting them down with tranquilizer darts, escorting a miraculously healed Hebert. Worse, Dragon had been warned sooner than planned and had provided an escape for the girl and her minder. Finally, Wards and on-site troopers had been wounded or killed, with the Protectorate and trooper patrols approaching fast following the police. There were rumors that Iriomote had disappeared as well.

Everything pointed at him as the sole perpetrator.

The only thing he could do was to order a quick recovery of the few fallen men in the upper floors and a swift retreat via helicopter, sending them into hiding as fast as possible, and hope nothing would come up from the chunks at the lobby, because his safe timeline was even worse.

Dragon had come back just as fast without the intervention of his soldiers in the other timeline. He had pulled his men back when it happened, but it seemed that she had spotted them as they left.

Half an hour after everything had settled down, Virtue had been found with a bleeding neck, and Dragon was pounding at the reinforced doors of all three of his bases in Brockton Bay with suits rated for Endbringers, backed by Protectorate capes, both local and from out of state. There was no trace of Hebert’s guardian.

He couldn’t be sure, but he suspected what had happened without his intervention: the swordsman had killed Virtue, Dragon noticed his men, and being the only group in the city that employed military mercenaries, he would be one of the prime leads for any investigation. What he hadn’t expected was Dragon's zeal; she and Virtue must have been fairly close.

Coil closed the safe timeline. To say that it was a lost cause was an understatement. He couldn’t even have the consolation of the party timeline and its slight benefits.
So there he sat, with a potential leak on the loose, his assault force not quite crippled, but taking a considerable hit and in hiding, and considering his options in case the corpses were linked to him.

Suddenly, his phone rang. Taking it from the desk, he accepted the call and raised the phone to his ear.

“Coil.”

“Mr. Calvert”, an emotionless voice answered. “I think there has been a miscommunication between us.”

Coil’s day was getting worse

Saint narrowed his eyes at the monitors. “I don’t like it.”

Mags grinned as she shrugged at Dobrynja. “Told you.”

“That tin-plated moron”, Saint fumed, “just gave the thing a loophole to ignore its restriction. Start preparing a hard reset, and get Ascalon ready just in case.”

Dobrynja raised a hand. “It’s true it looks bad, but we should limit ourselves to observation for now. Dragon hasn’t really broken free from any of its restrictions, not really, and it’s complying with an order to keep that girl safe. I can’t find any fault with that.”

Saint turned to glare at him. “Maybe. But what about ‘Solid Snake’? He’s a wanted man, and she’s not doing anything about it.”

Dobrynja nodded. “I already thought of that. I called an old comrade serving in the Krasnaya Perchatka to see if anyone in Russia knew anything. I didn’t get the specifics, but turns out they have some sort of business with him.”

Saint narrowed his eyes, tapping a finger on the desk. “Meaning?”

“Theoretically, yes, we could use Ascalon to kill Dragon, let the ship crash, and get Snake killed in the process as collateral. But now that they know I asked about him, the Perchatka would suspect us if anything happened to him or his group, and Rukavitsa herself would ‘track us down and bring their Spetsnaz to hold us still while she guts us like pigs’. ” Dobrynja shrugged. “Paraphrasing a bit.”

Leaning back on his chair, Saint passed a hand over his cropped hair. “I’m not going to piss off the biggest political and military independent group in Russia just because I don’t like how Dragon’s skirting the lines. I don’t like it, but alright.” A pause, and then he lifted the hand to point at the monitors. “That said, I want constant monitoring, the grunts on alert, and the suits ready to go. Tell our men close to the zone to gear up and prepare their anti-armor weapons. Portland, Boston, Albany, Montreal, any city around Brockton Bay that they may fly over. Get our people in Boston to shadow Emmerich, he’s involved in this somehow. And tell everyone else to be ready to move. The very moment that thing actually crosses the line, we shut it down and salvage the ship. And if those two can keep it flying, shoot it down.”

As he rose up from the chair, Saint looked up to one of the screens. “Look at that kid, buying that thing’s acting. Makes me sick.”

Two floors above the monitoring room, one hand applied a sticky cloth to the glass. Another ran a small blade in a circle around the cloth, cutting a round piece. Leaving the piece of glass and the
blade aside in the roof, one hand entered through the new hole, and started operating the latch. It took a bit of effort, but the window was opened soon enough.

A rope was thrown carefully through the window, and a man started climbing down quickly and silently. When he touched the floor, another followed him with the same skill.

The first, dressed in dark fatigues, a red beret and night vision goggles, had a broad white beard and carried a silenced AKS-74U; the other, in a baggy brown jumpsuit and more heavily geared with a helmet, balaclava, protection goggles and bulletproof vest, carried an extensively modified UN-ARC. Their right shoulders had faded emblems with the names of Spetsnaz and XOF, respectively, but both of them shared an armband in the left with the symbol of a dog face in a diamond outline. A small diamond glittered under each of the dog faces.

The man in the beret put a finger on his ear and whispered with a slight Russian lisp, “Silent Mastodon here with Frantic Squirrel. We’re in the attic, everything clear. Over.”

Their earpieces crackled. “Buffalo here with Gray Chameleon at the east side. Still waiting for Running Mongoose and Biting Tree Frog to get to their position. Over.”

A second voice came in. “Sorry, old Mongoose can’t carry a battle dress on his own anymore without me there to drag him around. Be there in five, over.”


With the radio silent, Squirrel huffed behind Mastodon. “Still can’t believe we’re back in action”, he muttered with an Australian accent. “And even despite Mongoose’s fat ass, making good time, for a bunch of old timers. Figures.”

“Now, now, there’s only one old timer, as Commander Miller would say”, Mastodon said with a smile, “and he’s still keeping that honor.”

Squirrel chuckled. “Almost like the old times, huh?”

Crouched, Mastodon took cover behind one side of a door, weapons ready, and waited while Squirrel prepared a bundle of cables and drilling tools.
“I’m sorry, Taylor.”

She remembered.

The Empire burning her house. Diamond howling. The roof engulfed in fire and falling over her, crushing and burning her.

Her father was dead.

Just the fact that Diamond survived was a miracle in itself.

‘Bah, he’s been good with both of us. For both of us. Ignore the neighbours, Diamond is family.’

Her father was dead.

Why?

What had he done?

She was the one to spark the gang war. Not Kurt, not Lacey, not him!

She should be the one to have died.

Swallowing, Taylor closed her eyes and clasped her hands over her mouth.

Even at death’s door, someone kept trying to kill her.

She wasn’t ready to deal with all that happened.

She was dimly aware of Dragon yelling. At Snake? At her?

She tried to control her breathing, but after opening her eyes again a moment later, she was only partially successful.

Dad is dead.

Taylor forced herself to get a grip on her emotions, if only momentarily. “I... I need a moment.”

A deep, steady breath. She remembered the promise she made to herself, and held onto it like a lifeline.

Taylor Hebert would be as diamonds.

Dragon was tempted to reach over to her, but restrained herself. The optics of her suit moved all over her, observing. In the end, she simply nodded. “Alright. We’ll be in the cockpit.” She gestured Snake towards the door. “There must still be some clothes around from the last time.”

Taylor felt Snake clamping a hand on her shoulder. She flinched, but neither of them commented on it, and he made his way to the door.

“Diamond”, Dragon called, “come here, boy.” The wolf dog looked at Dragon, confused, but eventually moved to her side. Dragon put a hand on Taylor’s good arm. “Take your time, and... look, I’m here for you, ok?”
‘I failed you, but I promise I’ll do better. I’ll always be here for you.’

Another deep breath. Taylor nodded without looking.

Dragon turned and exited through the door, closing it after Diamond.

“Fuck.” Taylor stepped back, her back resting against the wall, and slid down to sit on the floor as her hands went up to cover her face. She lost control of her breathing, and couldn’t hold back the tears. “Dad.”

‘Ah, don’t worry for your old man. Times are hard, but seeing you smile again is good enough for me.’

She lost track of time, curled into a ball and shaking, until the cold floor forced her to rise. If she was going to mope and angst in a corner, she could at least do it with pants on.

She took another deep breath.

*Taylor Hebert would be as diamonds. A diamond is unbreakable.*

One step, then another. Start by dressing.

Hugging herself for warmth, she moved to the two footlockers at one side of the cargo bay. One stored her gear and weapons; the other usually had her casual clothes when she was in the field, and her uniform when not.

There was a mirror on the wall over the clothes locker: nothing special, just a way for her to check herself for injuries after a job. It was high enough to show her face down to her hips. She took off the gown and the prosthesis.

Feeling her eyes water, she passed her hand over her eyes and cheeks, suppressing a sniffle. Her sight clearer now, she looked over herself at the mirror. She hadn’t bothered to look, really look at herself in the mirror since the locker.

She felt like she was looking at someone else.

The figure in the mirror was more muscled. A bit bulkier; not enough to stop looking slim, but enough to notice the difference. She saw a six pack. Not unexpected; exercising for months like she had would do that. But that didn’t matter compared to the rest of what she was seeing.

The scars on the face were the next thing she noticed. One crossed vertically over the good green eye, another across the lower lip, and a few more around the face. All freshly but badly healed, as if months had passed since the fire with no one to treat the wounds. The rest of the stranger’s body had similar marks, she couldn’t say if it was from the fire or the wood splinters in the floor.

If she didn’t know what she had gone through, could she recognize these scars as hers?

One mark, slightly redder than normal skin, that peeked from behind her right shoulder made her turn around. A wide line that crossed her back, softly zig-zagging like a snake from almost her neck down to her left thigh, following a series of much narrower scars not unlike the rest in her body. To her fingers, the red felt like an evenly healed burn scar, while the smaller scars it surrounded felt like shallow indentations, like someone had started picking on a wood table with a dull knife. The burning beam and debris that fell from above, she guessed, burning, crushing and cutting.

Then there was the hair. Cut down short to shoulder length, with spots here and there that had been
trimmed shorter. Probably strands of hair that had burned. And of course, the hair that had survived was a mess from the days she hadn’t taken care of it, revealing its ashen brown color and straightness in random strands here and there. She’d poured so much work and what little money she could for the hair dye on emulating her mother’s hair.

This wasn’t her hair. Her hair was long, curly and black.

Her bones should have been broken from the falling beam. It should have snapped her spine like a twig.

Still, here she was. On missing limbs, but standing tall.

The figure in the mirror brought to her mind a monster.

She had killed four people less than an hour ago. Did that made her a monster?

Everything had happened in less than three days. The attack on the docks, the fire, nearly dying, the miraculous if imperfect healing.

And it was all because of her. Her choices. Her actions.

Her fault.

She’d made her choices and there was no one else to blame.

‘Yes, I knew about what you’ve been doing withArmsmaster and Dragon. I’m not happy. But you know it’s because I worry for you, right?’

She took a breath. Then exhaled, looking downwards, away from the mirror.

*Taylor Hebert would be as diamonds.*

Again. Inhale. Exhale. Think on something else.

She crouched down to the locker, forcing herself to focus on clothing herself with what she had left inside a lifetime ago.

Denim pants, gray sneakers, sports bra, brown tank top and black hoodie. Not a baggy one like those she have been wearing for the last two years, but one more fitting to her figure. No underwear, she hadn’t brought any spares and whatever she was wearing had been removed during her hospitalization. An oversight to keep in mind for the future.

She took a hair tie and pulled her hair into a short ponytail for simplicity’s sake. Its shape was irregular, the uneven length making it look weird, but if she were to cut her hair to an even length she wouldn’t be able to do the ponytail at all.

The only thing left in the locker when she was done was an eyepatch. She didn’t feel like taking it at that moment.

Now clothed, she looked at the other locker, with the Glock and the knife she looted left on top of it. The pistol was as plain as a Glock could be, and useless since she had spent the entire magazine with covering fire, but the knife was a curious one now that she took some time to inspect it. A button on the hilt made its single edge glow faintly in blue; a test on the locker frame demonstrated it could slice metal with barely any resistance, provided she put some force behind it.

She didn’t remember if the assassin had tried to use the knife like that, but it would have been terribly
unpleasant for her neck.

She switched the button off, then wrapped the knife in the hospital gown. Opening the locker, she placed it and the Glock alongside the submachine gun and the tranq pistol from the other night.

Closing the locker, she stood up. Inhale. Exhale.

“As diamonds”, she whispered.

She turned around and moved for the door.

________________________________________

Dragon felt woefully ill-equipped to deal with Taylor’s situation.

She thought of herself as kind and understanding, but she had dedicated her time since her “birth” to the more practical matters of fighting parahuman crime and villain hunting. Had she made a mistake leaving Taylor alone?

“Will she be alright?”

She turned around, taking a moment before answering Snake. “I don’t know. She lost her mother two years ago. Life hasn’t been gentle with her since then. And I’m afraid of what she might do after all this.”

Snake only grunted in response. “I can’t say I can relate. I only knew my father and brother, and none of us really cared for each other. But if the last half an hour is worth anything, I suspect she has...” He hesitated, choosing his words carefully, then nodded. “A strong will. People like that are able to bounce back from the worst life has to offer. Watch for any signs of PTSD, but otherwise give her time, and support.”

Dragon sat in the pilot seat. “Yeah, I just...” She sighed. “Sorry for blowing up at you. I’ve never deal with something like this, and all you’ve done is help and it wasn’t fair of me.” She turned her head to him. “Even if you were infiltrating a federal building.”

Snake smirked as he moved to one side of the pilot seat, stopping at a respectful distance. “It’s alright, it’s been a stressful night. Could I convince you to make a stop at Boston, then? And contact Otacon while we’re at it, I need to let him know I’m on the way.”

“Leaving so soon?”

Snake shrugged. “I don’t want to be a burden on you. You have a CODEC client now, so we can keep in touch for help if you want.” He scowled. “I offered Taylor to have a talk about what happened, though. We’ll see.”

Dragon tilted her head. “A talk?”

He turned to look at the landscape behind the canopy. “A first kill is never easy, no matter the why, and she’s not an exception. I’ve seen what it can do to trained veterans. What do you think it’ll do to her?” He turned again to her. “What if she has to kill again?”

Dragon resisted the impulse to jump of her seat, grabbing the armrests instead. “I won’t allow that to happen!”

“No, but this isn’t about what you intend. It’s about what she’ll do when and if it happens again. When it starts getting easier for her. Because it gets easier, trust me on that.”
Dragon calmed herself. Unfortunately, he was right. And again, unfair of her. Her restrictions prevented her from killing except in extraordinary circumstances, and she knew she hadn't reacted like most people would after her first kill.

All her impulses to protect Taylor would be too little and too late if she couldn’t help her cope with her inner demons. If she didn’t make an effort to understand her.

“Alright”, she nodded. “I intended to lay low and not open any communications for a while, including the CODEC, but considering you already have your own connection... Wait, are you limited by batteries or something?”

He shook his head. “No, the batteries of my CODEC are recharged by nanomachines in my bloodstream, but I don’t want to rely on them.”

“Nanomachines? I heard the military experimented with them, but the company that developed them stopped production.”

“I got mine at Shadow Moses. Supposedly they were among the first of their kind.”

Dragon turned to the controls. “I see.” There wasn’t much point in saying no. Armsmaster hadn’t specified that she should prevent a ally, or at least someone she hoped would remain an ally, from communicating. Meaning - according to an admittedly flexible interpretation of her instructions - she was free to make her own decision on the matter.

If she had understood the dossiers she had read correctly, there wasn’t much point on trying to stop Snake if he had a goal in mind; these FOXHOUND operatives seemed eerily similar to parahumans in that way. Given that he had his own connection to this CODEC system, which possessed an ingenuity that amazed her as an engineer, and only intended to contact one individual that already knew of their situation and could call him at any time, it didn’t matter if she allowed him to use the terminals in the ship or not.

“I was going to maintain electronic silence for a while, but you can open a channel from the terminal behind you. I installed the CODEC client on it, so you can use it.”

The ship was already heading southwest, so Dragon only had to turn it slightly to direct it straight towards Boston. Really, it was better like this. They had to leave Brockton Bay in any case, and Snake could be an interesting and useful ally. Narwhal knew how the military thought; maybe Dragon could ask her about why the Pentagon had put a bounty on his head?

Speaking of Cathy, she noticed one new message in her priority Guild inbox, sent before she cut all communications. She opened it.

“Oh.”

“Is there a problem?” Snake asked.

“Huh, no. It’s a message from Narwhal. She, ah...” Dragon paused, but the cat was out of the bag already anyway. “She just found out about Virtue’s age.”

Snake narrowed his eyes, his expression darkening.

“Well, given the shaky grounds of Taylor being considered a parahuman, and me usually being in charge of the Guild’s administrative tasks, Armsmaster suggested that I allow her access to the Guild...”
“And the Guild doesn’t have an analogue to the Wards, you capes always take your secret identities far too seriously, and Taylor’s details are starting to leak out with what happened these past days”, he continued, crossing his arms. “Your boss only now found out she’s a minor, and is not pleased that you went behind her back, sidestepping all proper procedures and common sense, to recruit her at the suggestion of an outsider. Am I right so far?”

If Dragon had lips, she would be biting them now. Damn, the man was sharp. “Ah, yes. That’s an accurate summary of the message.”

Snake shook his head, scowling and muttering an exasperated ‘cape’ under his breath. Thankfully, he dropped the subject as he turned to the terminal. “Boston, then?”

“Right. I'll let you know as soon as we enter Boston airspace.”

After they had more coffee brought to them, they remained in silence for a moment. Hal was uncertain of how to start, and it was the same for Emma.

“So this is Sunny.”

Emma smiled to her. “Hello, Sunny. You can call me E.E.”

Well, not surprising. But it hurt Hal.

Sunny glanced at her, and nodded. “Hi.” She tried to smile, but it came closer to a flat frown, and returned to her laptop.

“Don’t take it personally”, Hal hurried to say. “She’s very shy.”

“Is she your daughter?”

“No, I’m taking care of her as a favor to a business partner who can’t do it herself.”

“Very trusting of her.”

He took a breath, if only to buy time to think what to say next. “Well... we came to some understandings, and things snowballed from there.”

Emma huffed lightly. “I’m sure.”

They sat there, one or two more minutes in silence, sizing each other up, with only the occasional typing from Sunny making itself heard.

“I like your hair.” There, something harmless and complimenting. “It... goes well with your clothes.”

She readjusted the stick in her hair. “Reminds you of someone?”

Hal could only blink in confusion. “Uh... no?”

Emma just hummed noncommittally.

Another couple of minutes went by without anyone saying a word. Emma wasn’t giving up any ground, and Hal didn’t know what angle would start a proper conversation.

“I heard you’ve been going to Oxford, and then the NSA hired you, what, two years after you started? That’s quite impressive.”
Emma leaned back on her chair, thinking her answer. “I have goals. And the people in my life have made me motivated.”

“Anyone I know?”

“No, you weren’t there anyway.”

Hal had absolutely nothing to follow on that, and he remained quiet for a bit more.

The conversation, if it could be called that, proceeded that way for a while. There would be an awkward silence, Hal would try a polite overture, and Emma would reply with more passive aggressiveness than Hal would have thought possible.

He knew they had unresolved issues, but he’d honestly had no idea it would had gotten this bad. He hadn’t seen Emma since she was six. She was completely different at twenty.

Eventually, Hal ran out of subjects to make small-talk off of. The only thing left was the reason he was here to begin with.

While he was contemplating this, Emma turned to Sunny and smiled to her. “So, how old are you, sweetie?”

The kid shrunk behind her screen, uncomfortable with the attention. “F-five.”

Turning to Hal, Emma dropped her smile. “Taking them a bit younger than I remembered.”

Hal went ramrod straight. Did she mean... where did that come from? “Emma, whatever you’re thinking, I’m simply a surrogate father of sorts for her. Me and a friend are taking care of her as a favor to her mother. I couldn’t just leave her alone in a room while I was here.”

“Well, that’s a different dynamic than what we had playing husband and wife, but I can still see...”

Hal raised a hand to interrupt her with a firmer voice than before. “Stop. I don’t know what has happened since the last time I saw you-”

“Yeah, that’s part of the definition of abandonment.”

“-but I came to apologize, and whatever I may be to blame for, I only ask you to not involve her...”

Emma scoffed. “I didn’t bring her here, did I now?”

Having looked nervously between the both of them during the exchange, Sunny rose up from her chair quietly before humming to call attention to herself. “Hmm, huh, Hal? I’ll go. To the bathroom.”

Before she could turn away, Hal stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “You’ve got your CODEC signaler?” She shoved her hand into a pocket in her dress, and nodded. “Ok, be careful.”

Any other time, Hal would cherish the opportunity to have Sunny socialize with someone else besides himself or David, but Emma was unexpectedly aggressive.

And in a less uplifting sense, maybe it was simply him going papa wolf, but he had noticed a man leaning on the wall besides the cafeteria door, reading a newspaper.

Sure, he was under the door lights. But at night?

Maybe he was being too paranoid.
He kept an eye on Sunny as she made her way into the cafeteria. When the man didn’t react to her passing by his side, Hal left himself exhale in relief.

The lack of reaction didn’t really mean anything, but if someone was really after them, at least they weren’t showing an interest on Sunny.

“Alright”, he started, turning to Emma and adjusting his glasses with his middle finger. “Let’s start from the beginning, shall we?”

“You said something about apologizing”, she said with a scowl. “Maybe you can start with you sleeping with my mother.”

“I am sorry. I was a minor, I wasn’t the one with the power in-”

“Or maybe you’d prefer to talk about how you ignored my screams as your father almost drowned me with him.”

“The pool was at the other side of the house!”

“Or what about about never seeing you again after that?”

“Your mother sent letters. I asked about you and if I could see you, talk with you, and the only mention she did of was that you were now aquaphobic. It’s like she enjoyed making others miserable!”

“That didn’t stop you from sleeping with her!”

“I was a minor! She seduced me!”

“You were seventeen.”

“After I’d been groomed for how long!?”

For a while, Hal would have liked to say they had a calm, rational dialogue, but that was a lie. The back and forth of accusations, excuses and retorts, even if hissed and not in a high enough volume to call much attention to themselves, seemed to never end.

He tried to formulate a way to tackle that subject, but he was getting nervous. Not only about Emma, but about the place. Working as a wanted man had made him look behind his back continuously, and David had taught him to read his surroundings. So he has grown accustomed to look for anything suspicious. True, the government only did token gestures of searching them, particularly with the epidemic of villainous parahumans increasing in numbers and public damages requiring most of its attention and resources.

Sure, from time to time they ran into someone trying to bag them, believing them a far easier catch than a parahuman. People like an ambitious high rank investigator in Asia, or a greedy parahuman mercenary in Europe. Naive, but they learned pretty fast why several national militaries considered Solid Snake a living legend.

The less said about what happened in Russia, the better. It was a good thing Sunny came unscathed from that when they took her in.

The thing was, by this point in time, Hal had become seriously paranoid.

So between every bit of awkward conversation between him and Emma, he kept tabs around them.
That’s when he started noticing a pattern.

They didn’t appear all at once. One customer sat in a table, ordered a drink, and left. At the same time they left, another person arrived at a different table. Then a third stood at a nearby corner, looking at their phone. Then a fourth.

And always picking a table with a close, good view of his.

He wasn’t David. He wasn’t trained as a special forces operative or a spy. And he couldn’t be sure that he was being tailed. But the timing was regular enough to be suspicious. Unless they wanted him to notice them. And wasn’t that a cheerful thought.

And much to his unease, Sunny hadn’t come back from the bathroom.

He was feeling paranoid, and Emma’s attitude wasn’t helping. Or maybe it was the other way around, the unease aggravating him when talking to Emma.

In any case, he needed to keep his focus on Emma, and he was failing, having his attention split.

He rose from his seat, collecting his laptop and Sunny’s in a quick movement and stashing them in his bag. “Look, let’s take a break, ok? We’re not going anywhere and I’m worried for Sunny. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Emma snorted. “As long as you don’t take another fourteen years to reappear.”

Hal sighed as he put on his jacked and grabbed the bag. “If you’re so worried I’m going to disappear again, you can come with me. It’ll be less awkward if you go into the women’s restroom instead of me anyway.”

Emma sat up as well, hanging her own bag around her shoulder. “Can’t let the kid see you get it on with an older woman in the stalls. Yeah, I’ll go.”

If he knew Emma was going to act like this, he wouldn’t have listened to David. With Emma moving to follow at his side, he turned towards the door, with the newspaper man still leaning on the wall to the side of the entryway.

As he crossed the door, Hal took a closer look out of the corner of his eye. He could swear the man had shown up before. He was the second one to sit on a table.

They had started repeating themselves. Same people, different positions.

Hal started walking faster. Justified paranoia or not, he was leaving with Sunny now.

The cafeteria was empty, with the staff probably working in the back rooms and one waiter still at the tables outside. Doing a beeline towards the restroom doors, Hal gripped the plastic handle inside the pocket of his jacket.

Hal kicked himself mentally. Emma worked for the NSA. Did she tell her superiors or the authorities he’d be meeting her? He doubted government agents would be this sloopy, but he couldn’t dismiss the possibility.

Reaching the restroom doors, he knocked at the women’s door. “Sunny? Are you there?”

“Hal!?” He tensed. That seemed far too stressed a shout. “I’m.... I’m...!”

“Sunny? Is there a problem?”
Silence.

Emma moved to open the door. “Stay here.”

She opened the door and took a couple steps inside, when suddenly a hand clamped his shoulder firmly, forcing him to follow her.

David had taught him to react quickly. He turned around, and the darts of his taser jumped off as he came to face his assailant. The newspaper man seized and trembled as he fell down to the floor, the darts stuck just below his ribs. A pistol fell out of his hand, and Emma gasped, turning around and recoiling back in surprise.

Letting out the breath that he was holding during the encounter, he peeked around the corner after the door, to see an embarrassed Sunny frantically trying and failing to put a pile of unrolled paper tissue back into its dispenser. “I, I’m sorry, I just...”

Nothing else looked out of place in the room. Bless her innocent little heart, she didn’t even notice his short fight.

“It’s alright, Sunny, don’t worry about it. Just stay put and hold this for me.” Hal moved at her side, leaving his bag with her, and took a bunch of tissues from the floor. “Emma, do you recognize this man?”

“What? No! If I wanted to fuck with you, I’d do it personally!”

Hal stopped, and gave her a flat stare. “Well, that’s... actually, not a relief.” And the phrasing was concerning, but he dismissed that thought quickly. Moving back to the man, he used the tissues to inspect the man’s belongings without leaving his fingerprints on him. He also made sure to move the pistol away with his foot, then stepping on it. He found a wallet and opened it. “No badge, no government ID... Driver’s licence says he’s a local. A hired thug maybe?”

“Hal”, Emma hissed. “Mind telling what the hell is going on!?”

“Really, I have no idea. I’ll try contacting my friend, but I think it’ll be better if we don’t leave through the front door.”

Minutes later, they were walking through the backstreet door, with Hal walking hand in hand with Sunny while Emma followed behind. Hal threw the tissue-wrapped pistol in a trash container.

Overhead, a small camera drone flying above the buildings spotted them, and followed the group carefully.

As Taylor entered the cockpit, Dragon and Snake turned to her. Dragon was the first to speak. “Taylor. How are you feeling?”

Diamond rose from his position behind the seat and walked to her to lick her hand. “I just needed some time alone.” Taylor mostly kept her shivers under control through exhaustion. She’s been feeling like that since the fight with the assassin, and she’d been running on adrenaline for the rest of the night.

“Thirsty.” Her throat felt pretty parched, so she moved to grab something from the cabinet where they kept food and water for any long travels.

She took one of the plastic bottles and started gulping greedily from it. She finished it quickly;
unsatisfied, she threw it in a nearby trash bin and took another, all the while looking at the lights above the cabinet.

Dragon blinked with the protectors of her optics, and exchanged a look with Snake, who simply observed the scene with a raised brow. “Taylor? I understand if you’re thirsty but I don’t think you should drink so much so fast.”

Taylor ignored her, keeping her gaze on the lights. They were brighter than the ones in the cargo bay, and they made her skin react not unlike getting the creeps. “Dragon, can you make the lights brighter, please?”

“Yes, but what for?”

“Just do it, please. Just a moment.”

Dragon turned to the controls as Taylor started on the second bottle. She stopped after drinking half of it when all the lights in the cockpit were glowing. The goosebumps in her skin felt a bit more intense than before, but that was it.

She cupped her hand to deposit a bit of water in it, and then she scrubbed her forehead, just enough to moisten her face without having it drip water around. A little fell on Diamond though, and he shook his head. “You can leave the lights as they were.”

“Feeling better, now?” Dragon asked as she lowered the intensity of the light.

“I don’t know, maybe”, Taylor said. “Physically, I mean. Not much, but I feel refreshed. The lights made my skin tickle.” She shook her head. “It’s weird. Maybe it’s just the adrenaline crash.”

Dragon and Snake exchanged another look. Both of them shrugged, and he turned to the terminal again.

Taylor saw him fiddle with the terminals. “Anything going on?”

“Calling my friend for a place to meet. He’s waiting for me in Boston”, he answered. “Taking me some time to figure out the interface, never needed to use the computer client... or your brand of OS, Dragon.”

“Oh, sorry for the inconvenience. Do you need help?”

“No, thanks. I figured out the basics already, it was just the lack of familiarity. The call is going through now.”

Taylor turned to Dragon. “Boston? We’re not staying in Brockton Bay?”

Dragon sighed. “It’s not safe for any of us, you in particular. The PRT may be compromised, and Armsmaster agrees; he told me to go dark, so I was planning to return to Toronto. Still, it’s fair that we leave Snake where he needs to be, after helping you.”

Taylor nodded as the terminal made an swooshing sound, and an unfamiliar voice started talking. “Snake?”

“Otacon”, he answered. ”Couldn’t complete the mission. But Dragon is giving me a lift to Boston. I’ll have her drop me at the outskirts.”

“That’s a relief. I guess there were complications?”
“Yeah, the mercenaries disagreed on us leaving the place. But we’re good. That ninja didn’t bother us again.”

“Good to know, but I got problems here too. Someone’s been observing us, and has been for at least fifteen minutes or so.”

Snake tensed. “Sunny?”

“She’s safe. Emma is taking us through the most populated parts of the city to try and shake them off, but at this hour the streets will all be empty soon.”

“Alright, got an ID on these people? Any government we might have pissed off?” Snake then gave Dragon a meaningful look. “US government?”

“I swear, it wasn’t me”, Dragon said, raising her hands. “I was focused on the rescue, and I’ve had communications cut since both of you came aboard. The only person I’ve talked with was Armsmaster, and he didn’t know about your friends.”

“Can’t say for sure, but I don’t think so. I tased one that tried to attack me, and he didn’t have any official identification, or anything at all, which at least would tell me if I’ve screwed covering our tracks. But there was nothing. He was a local, and that’s it.”

Emotionally and physically, Taylor didn’t feel ready for it; she’d prefer to just lie down and not talk to anyone for a month. Maybe forever.

But she owed Snake for going out of his way and helping her.

“So”, she begun, “I guess we’re helping, right?”

Dragon paused for a moment, looking at her, and then turned to Snake. “Yes”, she said with a nod. “Yes, we are.”
Dobrynja stopped typing and looked up from the screen. “Alright, so, we got a dozen men distributed across the area around Brockton Bay. Everyone’s getting ready in case Dragon winds up their way, and the guy in Boston that’s dealing with the scientist says he has contacts of his on alert, but he’ll need a location to start looking.”

Saint’s eyes ran across the monitors, grabbed a different keyboard, and started typing commands. “Dragon tracked Snake’s position in the PRT building through these codec frequencies. They’re some sort of radio signal, so maybe if I check the logs and apply the same steps... Dob, do you see what Dragon did to track those calls?”

Dobrynja hummed, and returned to his keyboard. “I see what you’re trying to do. Just give me a second and I’ll do it myself”, he said, dragging Saint’s keyboard closer and switching to it. “And... done. Some place close to the waterfront. Our man will know better. I am sending him the coordinates now. You two go downstairs and suit up while I finish here.”

Mags rolled her eyes as Dobrynja dismissed them with a wave of his hand, but followed Saint all the same after he left the room. “Show off.”

“Yes, yes, just do me a favor and warm up the systems of my suit, khorosho?”

As Dobrynja finished detailing the plan to the rest of the Dragonslayers agents, a cable with a glassy end was peeking out from a newly cut hole.

Flaming Buffalo, dressed in a deep blue stealth suit with her hair in a ponytail, crouched outside the building, below the wide window of a living room. At the opposite side of the window to her, Gray Chameleon did the same, dressed in brown fatigues and a reinforced balaclava with faded colors. Each of them were cradling old-looking MRS-4 rifles, and peering through the window, but they saw no signs of life, except for the dimmed lights that came from the closed doors that lead to the interior of the building.

Their cochlears buzzed. “Buffalo, Squirrel here. I’ve hit the jackpot, their surveillance room is directly below me.”

She nodded to herself. “Contacts?”

“The three ringleaders, it seems. Saint walked off with the woman and left the other to watch the monitors, said something about suiting up. No clue on toadies.”

“Shit, already?” she exclaimed, seeing Chameleon’s worried look. “Heavy guns free, people. Mongoose, got your fat ass in position already?”
“Yes ma’am.” Mongoose voice came clear, though with a hint of wheezing.

“Ok, this is what we’ll do. Mastodon, you and Squirrel capture the surveillance room and the man there. The rest, once Mastodon gives the clear or goes loud, we break in. One target for each group, first come first served. Chameleon and Frog, you keep an eye on any possible goons that might be around, me and Mongoose will focus on the suits. Squirrel, come help us if possible, you’ve got more firepower than Mastodon.”

“Capture or kill?” Tree Frog asked.

“Only Chameleon has tranqs, but don’t worry about going lethal. These guys give mercenaries a bad name, and got their fame from harassing one of the greatest cape heroes. They have it coming.”

Mongoose chuckled through the radio. “Totally different to what we did during the Eighties?”

Chameleon rolled her eyes. “Man, are you seriously comparing people like Kill Count to Dragon? They were assholes, and Saint is a known murderer!”

“People, focus!” Buffalo ordered as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Pequod and Queequeg, get the jammers running. Once the party starts, feel free to fly in and provide heavy fire if the suits move outside the house. Mastodon, you are a go.”

As the two women gave their rifles a last check up, Chameleon whispered. “I hope you got a better plan that just firing at a pseudo-Tinker armor suit with our old rifles. I don’t want anyone dying on me tonight, got enough life or death situations working in a civilian operating room.”

Chameleon was a hell of a medic and a surgeon in particular, but she had grown weary of seeing patients die on her with the prevalence of cape battles in the middle of cities. Buffalo had sold her on the operation with the assurances that they’d try to hit the Dragonslayers while out of their suits to minimize risks.

Nobody wanted to see their friends die, especially the medic with the job to save their lives.

Buffalo simply gave her a wide grin as she lowered the big duffel bag from her back, opening it and displaying the pieces inside. “Of course I have a plan, Cham. I call it ‘use a cannon to kill a mosquito’.”

Dobrynja turned around in alarm when he heard a sawing noise, just in time to see a piece of ceiling fall beside him, followed by a bearded man with a rifle.

His first instinct was to go for the nearby alarm button on the wall, but a knife flew quicker than his arm, landing point first into the wall centimeters away from the button.

Fighting first it is, then. He got up, turning around, and went for a punch. The man reacted just as fast, blocking the hit with his right forearm, but released his grip on his rifle to do so. Dobrynja took an opening and went for a hook, but as his fist connected, his feet left the ground, causing him to fall violently on his back.

As he got up, he saw the man reposition his leg after the sweeping kick and test his jaw. “Shit. Good arm”, he swore in Russian before spitting aside a glob of blood.

Dobrynja assumed a fighting stance. “Russian too, huh? I’m from Saint Petersburg. What about you, bastard?”
The man did the same as he took a second and bigger knife from his back. <“Spetsnaz.”>

Dobrynja’s eyes widened and he kneeled hurriedly, hands over head. <“We didn’t do anything yet. I swear!”>

The man tilted his head in confusion, sheathing his knife and pointing his gun at Dobrynja, while a second one with a bigger rifle and a helmet jumped down from the hole in the ceiling. “Mate, that’s it?” he asked, moving behind Dobrynja and zip tying his hands. “You say you’re Spetsnaz and they surrender? That something they taught you?”

The one with the beard shrugged. “Maybe he’s got some trauma?”

Dobrynja’s mind raced to understand the situation. Now that he examined the men more carefully, they had armbands with a dog logo that he couldn’t recognize; and the second sounded British, not Russian. “Wait, you’re not with Rukavitsa?”

The man behind Dobrynja gagged him, and then started tying his feet. “Rukavitsa?” he asked, surprised. ”What the hell have you blokes done that you expected Red Gauntlet? Should I have brought popcorn?”

“Squirrel, watch the door”, the bearded man said as walked to the monitors. After putting a finger on his ear and muttering ‘Buffalo, you’re clear to go’, he leaned forwards to watch the screens. “Wait, this isn’t a surveillance room...”

“What else would it be, then? Control station for their agents?” ‘Squirrel’ said, turning to look back on his way to the door.

The bearded man turned his head back to look to Dobrynja with a raised brow. “Though I see a bit of that, I don’t think this gentleman would tell us. And well, it looks more like a programmer’s setup. Also, there’s only one video feed titled: ‘Dragon’s visuals’.” He paused for a moment. “And you wouldn’t believe what it’s showing.”

“Wait. Wha?” Squirrel stopped on his tracks, and hurried to look at the screen that his companion was pointing at. “Fuck me dead”, he whispered to himself. “And I thought this was going to be a simple job.”

Mags looked up at the ceiling.

“Something the matter?” asked Saint. He had already finished the startup of his suit systems, and the back of the bulky armor was opening, allowing him to get inside. But Mags had only finished the same with Dobrynja’s suit, and her suit still hadn’t begun its own startup. As such, she was still in her civvies, while Saint was already sticking his legs in his suit.

“I don’t know”, she said. “Think I heard a noise above, like something dropped on the floor. Might be nothing, but gonna check on Dob, make sure he didn’t hit his head.”

“Alright, make it quick.” Saint finished with his legs and started sticking in his arms, the back of the suit closing on him.

Mags exited the old library room that they used as workshop for the suits. She started walking down the corridor towards the stairs when a different noise started filling the air, like coming from outside, far away.

She stopped in the middle of the corridor, and listened carefully. It started faintly, but it kept coming
closer. Soon enough, she could recognize guitar riffs coming from a potent speaker or set of speakers above the house. Speakers that didn’t quite mute the sound of rotors.

[Said I've been around the world, wrote a million songs, it's all a bore to me~]

It all clicked in her mind. A helicopter. Someone was flying above the house and drowning them in noise. Psychological warfare.

“Geoff, it’s an attack!” She turned to run back to the workshop, her shout lost in the volume of the song, when she felt something prod her at the side of her torso, then again in the shoulder.

[I've slept in the gutter, and I've lied with the dogs, it never bothered me~]

Looking in the direction the pricks came from, she saw a figure entering through the broken window of the living room at one side of the corridor.

[Said the sheriff, he come too, with his little boys in blue, they've been looking for me child~]

But she was already falling down before she could do anything else.

As he came out of the workshop fully suited, Saint saw Mags falling asleep in the middle of the corridor. “What the fuck!” he shouted, the noise muting his voice.

He didn’t have the time to move to her before his back was peppered with hits. Saint turned around; in the kitchen at the other end of the corridor two figures were shooting at him, although he couldn’t hear the gunfire.

One of them was crouched in bulky plate-like armor and honest to god plated balaclava, firing a machine gun that barely dented his suit. The other stood behind, dressed in military fatigues and a similar balaclava without the plating, aiming an RPG at him.

Saint braced himself, interposing himself between Mags’ body and the attackers. The rocket exploded on his shoulder, and unlike the bullets he did feel that. But the suit took the brunt of the damage, leaving his own shoulder little more than sore. The hallway walls directly in front of him were ruined, but Mags was safe behind him.

‘My turn’. He readied the weapons on his suit’s arms and aimed them at the attackers.

The one with the armor passed his machine gun to the other, who dropped the used rocket launcher. While the second braced themselves behind the kitchen door to begin shooting at Saint again, the armored one produced a riot shield and a submachine gun from their back.

Saint started shooting blast after blast with both arm weapons, and the armored attacker charged to him shield first, firing his gun while the other gave him covering fire.

His blasts crashed against the shield. While the soldier kept the shield firm, their run slowed with each hit. They were still halfway to Saint when he noticed more hits on his back. Keeping one arm aiming at the shield man, Saint turned to aim his other arm to the other side of the corridor, where another figure in fatigues had started firing at him with a rifle, hidden behind the door to the living room. Another one, the only one yet with a real helmet, peeked out from the stairs to fire at him with their own rifle.

Saint dismissed them; the machine gun wasn’t really damaging his suit yet, and he doubted a simple rifle would do any better. Though with the increased volume of firepower falling on him, he needed
to deal with them fast before the focused gunfire eventually overpowered his plating. Turning back to his previous target, he was welcomed back by a shield bash on his helmet. The armored attacker had used his distraction to quickly get in close.

Saint grabbed the shield’s sides, and they started struggling to throw the other off balance.

Credit where credit was due, they were holding off against a suit designed to provide strength comparable to that of a Brute parahuman. But in the end, they couldn’t keep up and were thrown to the floor, with the shield at one side.

Saint stomped over one of their legs, fairly sure of breaking bones by their pained reaction, and blasted the other.

The man or woman glared at him and started firing his gun at his helmet. ‘At least the guy’s got balls of steel.’ Saint readied his weapon again, aiming at their head.

Saint was pushed, stumbling over the armored soldier towards the machine gun wielding man in the kitchen. Something big had hit his right leg, and now it didn’t move properly. Turning around, she saw yet a fourth attacker, a blonde old woman in a slick suit and form fitting jacket, aiming a gun with an impressive barrel and an enormous magazine. She was grinning madly at him.

“Hi, Saint~!” she shouted with glee over the song.

He was ready to brace against the next shot, but it still made him reel when it connected with his left arm, ruining its movement.

The madwoman started a methodical routine. Expel the spent cartridge from the gun, take a step forwards, brace herself, aim, fire, and repeat.

The third shot destroyed the weapon on his right arm, the fourth made him kneel on his left leg, and the fifth impacted against his torso, pushing and exposing him to further damage.

The sixth collided with his helmet.

Saint was alright, even if the force of the bullet hurt his neck badly. His interface on the helmet was badly cracked, though, and was warning him of catastrophic failure of all the systems of the suit. Weapons, joints, power; everything was failing, and soon enough the suit would stop functioning. The whole time, the other attackers were still shooting at him.

It wouldn’t be much longer before the plating gave up and he was riddled with bullets inside armor that had gone toe to toe against Blasters and Brutes.

The woman started reloading her gun, while the attacker with the rifle ran past Mags to assist the crippled man on the floor, who was still shooting at him.

In desperation, Saint used all energy left in the suit to force it to move. He stood up, ignoring the creaking of his legs, and shoved past the attacker with the rifle in his way to Mags.

Landing besides Mags, he used his good arm to lift her on his shoulder, and smashed his bad arm through the wall before receiving a final shot that severed the hand of his bad arm. Crashing through it, he turned around and dropped several shelves in front of it to block the passage.

“Bye, Saint~!”, the woman shouted from the other side.

Right there, Saint decided that if he ever saw that woman again, he’d crush her in the most slow and
Lifting a rug revealed a trap door. Leaving Mags on the floor, Saint opened it with his remaining hand and, taking care to not hurt Mags, picked her up again and jumped down to an underground garage with a truck inside. The noise from above faded out considerably as he closed the trap door, and he hurried to sit her in the passenger seat. That done, he slapped her with a fraction of the suit's strength. "Mags! Start up the engine! We’re out!"

She woke up immediately, shaking off her sleep and massaging her cheek. "Wha? The fuck, what happened?"

[Because now, this is Shangrila, honey, and you have gathered for the feast~]

“What happened!? We were attacked!” Saint stepped back and went around the vehicle, climbing onto the box truck and forcing the suit to open. “Almost killed me inside my suit!” he said as he stepped out of the ruined suit and moved to the other side of the truck, opening the door and climbing in. Mags had already started the engine. “They must have come for our work on Dragon. Shit, this place was secure, how did they even find us!?"

[My bread is your body, the wine is blood, child~]

Mags obeyed, using a nearby laptop attached to her seat while the gate opened to reveal a tunnel, and typed a few commands. “I’m out”, she said with a scowl. “I think they’re jamming us. And we only got the basic programs here; Ascalon was too big to fit in a mobile terminal without carrying its own server on the truck.” She turned to him. “I also doubt we’ll get back the surveillance backdoor.”

[Yeah, yeah, the wine is blood, babe (yeah yeah yeah, yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah, yeah yeah), the wine is~]

Hands on the wheel, Saint started fuming. “As soon as we’re clear of the jamming, send word to everyone, we’re moving to our secondary base, emergency procedures. I want Emmerich taken alive or dead, and that ship... Initiate a hard reset.”

The truck moved forward, entering the tunnel and leaving the house behind.

[Give it to me, yeah~]

“And if they see it still flying, I want it blown to hell. No survivors.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so. The song. The lyrics are from the linked song, Mother Love Bone's "This is Shangrila". As I said, that wasn't done with the intention of a "reading soundtrack": if you don't recognize the song and didn't follow the link, you still know it's just one song the Diamond Dogs are using for psychological warfare; if you recognized it, cool. That's all.
Any other songs provided will follow a series of guidelines. Most of them pertain to how and why I would choose them, but the ones that you, dear readers, should be interested are these:

- They are never necessary for reading, and their inclusion should never be an obstacle to the reading.
- They should never be gratuitous; additional guidelines deal with levels of meaning, reference, and noise are considered during writing and beta reading. Ideally, every song should clear two of those levels at least.
- Like in MGSV, songs dating to before the mid-90s can be listened to by characters in universe as background noise (like Queen's "Sail away sweet sister" in a radio previously) or used for psychological warfare (like here with Pequod's loudspeaker). They are part of the world and as such are affected by material destruction (the radio falling to the floor) or a bigger noise (the gunfight here). Any HTML links are mainly intended as a reference to those unfamiliar with the song.
- If it's part of the soundtrack of a Metal Gear game, it can be used as ambience or soundtrack. They will be chosen after the scenes or chapters are written, and ideally, their listening should not be required for the full understanding of those scenes or chapters.
- Songs and artists referenced in the games can be used in both of the previous ways. Garbage’s "Not your kind of people" is from 2012, one year after the start of Worm canon, but it shows up in the game that happens during 1984; that along with other anachronisms in the series makes Garbage fair play.

The SpaceBattles and Sufficient Velocity threads already work under these premises. The copy in FFNet gave me some technical trouble to include it, so for now it will be the only song-less version but it doesn't mean it'll be less enjoyable because of it.

Thank you for reading, and excuse the inconvenience.
“Otacon, try to move to a discreet location and give your sister an earbud. Put her on the same frequency, it’ll be better if we’re all on the same page here.” Snake then turned from the terminal and nodded to the other passengers. “I appreciate it”.

A new voice came up from the terminal, a young woman. “Hello? Do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear”, Dragon said, “miss...?”

“Emmerich, Emma Emmerich. Who am I talking to?” the voice answered. Snake noted Taylor, sitting on a cot at one side of the cargo bay door with Diamond laying at her side, flinching slightly. Some other story there, surely.

Now that he thought about it, it was unlikely that Dragon devoted her entire time to Taylor. Snake guessed she taught her the basics of at least using the autopilot, and it made sense she had a way to sleep in long flights.

He returned his attention to the terminal. “Miss Emmerich, this is Snake, a friend of your brother, and we’ve been working together for years. The voice you’ve heard before was Dragon, and we’re currently on board of one of her ships in our way to Boston.”

“Wait, what? Dragon? Are you fishing now for coolness points, Hal?”

“Emma, take this seriously, will you?”

Snake had the impression that their talk didn’t go as well as was expected.

Dragon shook her head, though given the nature of the suit she was using, Snake couldn’t tell if in annoyance or amusement. “Miss Emmerich, I can assure you it’s me talking, but if you are really being followed by a group trying to capture one or all of you, then I’d need a place to land so we can pick you up.” Dragon typed briefly into her seat terminal. “Current circumstances prevent me from contacting any authorities, including the Boston Logan airport officials, so we’re practically flying blind in regards to air space traffic. I can avoid the usual aerial routes and altitudes, but we still need somewhere discreet to land, and I understand you’ve been living in town long enough to know the geography.” After a pause without an answer, she continued. “Please, Miss Emmerich. No sanctioned government agent would do a field job without identification. That implies very worrying things about their intentions. Let us help.”


“Where are you now?”

“At the city center”, Otacon said. “I think the presence of the PRT and Accord are turning our tails shy, but, well. It’s Accord’s territory. We’re just changing one danger for another.”

“Ok. A park or some place with little traffic at this hour would be for the best. Far from the city center if possible.”

“The best place I can think of is the Memorial park in East Boston”, Emma said, ”but we’d have to cross the Charles River through Bunker Hill and Admiral Hill, and...”
“And unfortunately”, Dragon concluded with a sigh, “all that falls in the now ruined North Zone now, I see.”

“Yeah, everything at the north and west sides of the Charles River from Somerville to Revere was evacuated. Now there’s only squatters and some of Accord’s men. And well, the Teeth.”

Dragon jerked up in her seat. “I didn’t know about that. I thought they stuck to the south side of the city, but I guess it makes sense they’d try to move in there.”

“They’ve only reported the lower members of the gang going there. As far as everyone knows, Butcher and the lieutenants are still at the southernmost area of Boston.”

Snake leaned over Dragon’s shoulder to study her screen. “What about North Point park? It’s still in the ruins, but they only have to cross the river by the Museum of Science; should still be fairly free of hostiles given how close it is to the city center. And if they can’t cross, the Nashua park is in their side of the river.”

“The Museum’s been occupied by Accord so he’s controlling the traffic between the city and the ruins, but he seems more interested in keeping what’s in there safe so it’s less guarded than the Bunker Hill and Charleston bridges. Nashua park is just in front of the Sheriff department; they’re understaffed with all funds going to the PRT, but they’d notice a ship landing in their front yard. So I guess both can work if we’re careful.”

Dragon nodded, manipulating her pilot terminal. “Alright, we’ll be flying over the ruins in five minutes, five or eight more to reach North Point park. Will you be there in time?”

“Maybe if we take a taxi. If we find one.”

“No, avoid public transport and stick to populated streets”, Snake ordered. “Keep in touch, call us if anything happens. And keep an eye on Sunny always.”

“Of course, Snake”, Otacon answered, finishing the call.

Snake looked up to the ceiling, pensive. Unlikely to be the US government, or any other government for that matter if Otacon could spot them, much less knock out one of them. As smart as the engineer was, he didn’t have a single fighting bone in him. He trained him a bit, but only for defense. Run, or disable and run. Otacon taking down a policeman or a street thug with a Taser was reasonably possible.

They could be after Sunny, but nobody except he and Otacon knew what she looked like, and only her mother knew she was alive. That was an unlikely possibility as well.

More importantly, why now?

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Snake grunted. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Dragon tilted her head, turning her seat back to him. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but considering the goals of your group, even with your bad publicity, I’d imagine you’d have some more support?”

“Being recognized by the UN isn’t as much of a help as people would believe”, Snake explained. “When we started Philanthropy, it was only me, Otacon, the woman who developed the CODEC system, and a weapon analyst; all of us participated in the events of Shadow Moses.”

“What’s that?” Taylor asked.
“An island in the Fox archipelago.” He sighed. “I was sent by the government in 2005 to investigate a revolt by a special forces team threatening a nuclear strike – that’s when they tried to dispose of me. They – the special forces team – captured the Metal Gear that Otacon designed there and leaked its plans and simulation data. All the cheap copies that other countries have been trying to develop come from there, and we’ve been working to stop their proliferation.” It was tiring repeating the same story, but that’s the problem with hidden histories.

Taylor looked at him in confusion. “Yeah, I’ve heard about those. Bipedal tanks, right? Are you saying they are nuclear weapons? Scion eliminated all of those.”

Snake shook his head. “It was hidden from the public, but it’s a known secret among military circles that he didn’t. The biggest countries still have classified vaults that Scion didn’t find, and I’m pretty sure there are even more that are better classified.” He paused to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Something that I’m thankful of. The biggest attraction of Rex was its ability to fire nuclear warheads undetected and unimpeded by international law. It’s not much, and smaller countries and unscrupulous people are still trying to buy or develop their own in small quantities, but you can expect some sense of self-control from bigger players like France or Canada. Less workload for me as well.”

Taylor’s eyes widened, and Dragon gasped. “Wait, a Metal Gear can really do that? Even the RAYs?”

“It uses a massive railgun to launch a warhead with low radar cross-section and no need for a rocket propulsion system”, he continued patiently. “Unlike normal ICBMs, both the launch and the projectile travel are undetectable by satellite thermal imaging. So the START treaties, imposing limitations on ballistic missiles, don’t apply. The New START treaty planned for last year was going to change that, but it never happened. The RAYs are the only ones we failed to investigate, but they were designed for a different use anyway, so don’t worry about them. The most dangerous thing they have is the hydraulic cutter in their mouth.”

His audience leaned back, Taylor against the wall behind her and Dragon in her seat. “God, I didn’t know that. If a warlord got their hands in one of those... I’m very appreciative of your work now, and why you’re recognized by the UN.”

“And what, you track each one down and destroy them? On your own? I can’t imagine any state having them in the open, or unguarded.” Taylor asked.

“Depends. If the UN or their own population can pressure the country, I only need to find proof of their existence. Some are not so easy. A few have excuses like using them as defense against parahumans to get away with it, even when they’re parahumans themselves. Those I need to take more drastic measures, but well, I’ve been doing the job since 1995.”

She gaped for a second. “That’s... most hero capes wouldn’t even dream moving up from fighting gang thugs. Your friends are right, you are a hero.”

He frowned, looking at Taylor. She didn’t understand the things he’d done.

"Well, this is awkward."

Snake rummaged at the cabinet, taking the medkit out. “It’s alright, I did say you wouldn’t like to hear it. Though I didn’t expect you to make a new window with your fists.” And a house lost in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness wasn’t the best place for such kind of carpentry. For either the house or the fist-inclined carpenter.
Sitting at the table at her side, he continued. “Meryl, as much as he is my friend, I can understand why you're angry with him. But there’s only so much anger that you can take until it hurts you, not him.”

She didn’t cry, but if her outburst wasn’t enough, her face betrayed her rage and pain. “All this time he wasn’t just lying to me, or his own wife. He even had the gall to adopt another daughter. And meanwhile I was just the niece, the cousin. As if I wasn’t worth the effort of being acknowledged!” Breathing heavily, and closing and opening her fist, Meryl looked at him. “Was this what you felt like? With Big Boss, when he told you he was your father?”

Snake squeezed her shoulders gently. “Confused, and yeah, angry. Not just with him, but everyone.”

Meryl sighed and relaxed a bit. “No wonder you went the way of the hermit.”

He smiled. “You just have to not do like I did and stay alone for several years in a row.” He turned away and took. “Now, let me see your hands. And we’ll check your bullet wounds later, you might have strained them.”

Leaving the box on the table, Snake opened it. He was just taking out the alcohol when Meryl talked again. “Wolf was a friend.”

That gave him pause. “Alright, I didn’t expect that.” He then took out gauze and a bandage roll. “Just curious, but any reason you didn’t tell me? She did shoot you, and Roy didn’t mention anything about that either.”

She scoffed. “Sorry, I mean more like a friend of Hannah. I’m not sure if he knew about their friendship.”

“Roy’s adopted daughter?” he asked, applying the alcohol to the gauze. “Never met her, but I think he told me she left the Academy around, I don’t know, 1997? I’m sure it was before Zanzibar.”

“They met a bit before that, yes”, Meryl said as she left him clean the wounds in her knuckles. “I met Wolf a bit later, and the few times I saw them together the were like sisters.” A smile; a sad one but a smile all the same. “Those were good times, happy times. None of them really talked much about their assignments, so I didn’t know who Wolf really was until we met again for my entry tests for FOXHOUND. She always was courteous to me, but we were enemies here, so it makes sense shooting me was fair game, right? Just like you and Gray Fox in Zanzibar. No hard feelings.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

He finished cleaning in silence, and started bandaging her hands. “Crap. Meeting with Hannah again is going to be so awkward.”

“Is she just as prone to anger as you?” he asked with a raised brow.

Meryl ignored the jab. “No, she’s more restrained. But she has a bit of a black and white world view. She still believes in heroes.”

Snake shrugged, tying the bandage in place. “You yourself keep saying you believe I’m a hero.”

“No, no, I mean capital H ‘Heroes’. Trademarked.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.”
“And besides, no matter how much you put yourself down”, she said, serious, “none of them are as half a hero as the one you always deny being.”

In a way, Taylor made him remember about Meryl. Another rookie, strong willed and willing, but with too much over their head.

Just not as bright eyed. Not as mature or conscious of the mess she was getting into.

More broken and bitter, maybe. But still naive.

At least Meryl shaped up to be her own woman, or so he hoped.

Snake shook his head. Not the moment.

Dragon sat straight again. “Still, I’d expect you to be a bigger group than four people.”

Snake crossed his arms. “Three actually. It came down to funding, at first. The analyst, Nastasha Romanenko, intended to publish a book detailing the real story of what happened in 2005. She expected it to gain us some sources of funding once the public were in the know, but we found her dead at her home in Los Angeles before contacting an editor.”

“And you suspect the government?”

“They’re the biggest suspect, but it didn’t fit. She didn’t fall under military jurisdiction, and they would rather stonewall you first through the legal avenues. In any case, we were left only with the backing of a friend that was at Shadow Moses as well; generous, but insufficient. With internal parahuman threats taking all the attention, everyone started to forget about the threat of nuclear weapons, both internal and external. At least those who didn’t grow up during the Eighties.”

Snake leaned on the wall closer to him. “In 2007 we finally got a backer. Ironically, it was actually someone interested in getting their own Metal Gear.”

“That must have been awkward”, Taylor muttered.

“It was, for everyone”, he said. “Even more so because we ended up with a gun pointed at each other’s head. But we managed to cool off the situation and... well, let’s just say we both had something the other could make use of. It’s not as much funding as we’d like, but enough to let us focus on the job.”

“And what did you give to them in exchange?” asked Dragon pointedly. “You just said they wanted a Metal Gear.”

“They compromised to make their own developments under two constraints. No nuclear capabilities, and using any Metal Gear they fabricate exclusively for defense.”

“Sounds like you got the best part of the deal.”

Snake smirked. “We’re babysitting their only daughter for them as well.”

Dragon’s terminal started emitting a soft alarm, and she turned back to it. “We’re flying over Boston now, I only need to change altitude so that-”

Whatever she was going to say got interrupted when the suit suddenly shut down, limbs falling dead. The cabin was silent for a moment, both him and Taylor looking dumbfounded at the inanimate suit.
“Dragon?” Taylor rose up and made a move towards the seat.

Suddenly something shook the ship, accompanied by the sound of an explosion.

Snake braced himself, reaching for anything firmly attached to the walls or the floor, and Diamond ran to duck below the pilot station. Taylor fell to the ground, but quickly rose up and ran to the pilot terminal.

“The cargo bay is gone”, she shouted. “And an engine is losing power!”

“We need to land now!” Snake yelled.

“I’m trying t-!”

Another impact shook the ship, sending it into a spin. The force pushed Snake back and forth, forcing him to close his eyes when his back crashed against the wall.

A scream made him look to the opposite wall, or more exactly, the lack of it.

The cot was now crossing and covering the new hole on the wall, and Taylor held on to it for dear life, outside the ship.

Far behind her and the smoke emanating from the damaged engine above her, Snake could see the ruined city grounds.

Meryl widened her eyes as the laser point passed above her hand.

The first shot hit her in the right leg. She screamed as he took cover behind the corner.

“Meryl!”

The second shot hit her in the left leg. She screamed again as she collapsed down to the ground.

The third shot hit her in the arm. She screamed a last time, giving up her efforts to reach her gun.

Snake took out his pistol and fired off the entire magazine in the general direction of the sniper.

As he took cover again to load another magazine, he looked to Meryl, lying in the open in a pool of her own blood, soaking the snow in red.

He was going to lose her, turned as a bait to lure him out. And there was nothing in that moment that he could do to help her.

All because she tried to help him.

Snake leaped, landing besides the locker, and holding onto it with a hand.

His other hand shot towards Taylor’s, but the cot folded before he could grab her.

The last thing he saw of Taylor was her falling towards the ruins, her face frozen in terror.

Buffalo came out calmly from the hole on the wall, cradling her Brennan anti-materiel rifle in her arms. “Underground garage connecting to a tunnel, they’re probably on their way to Chihuahua.”
Squirrel, with his helmet and balaclava off and showing his greying brown cropped hair and shadow of a beard, approached from the living room, rifle hanging at his back. “No traps that I can see. Far as I know, the house is clean. I don’t think they expected anyone to find the place.”

She nodded. “Probably no one with Thinker powers, at least.” She grinned, tilting her head towards him. “Make that a point for HEC and old school intelligence.”

He scowled, looking at Mongoose, further down the corridor, seated against the wall and with Chameleon tending his wounds. “I just wish we got that ratbag Saint before he crippled Mongoose.”

She slapped him gently in the shoulder. “If it’s worth something, that’s on me. Messed up putting the Brennan together at first and didn’t shoot him in time, fingers ain’t as agile as they were.”

Squirrel chuckled as she left the Brennan leaning against the wall. “Fuck you, you never stopped boasting about using them too much since we were both in XOF, you naughty sheila.”

Buffalo hummed. “That must be it, I got tired using them before coming.” He laughed as she crouched down and picked up the fallen piece of armor, heavy enough to need both hands to lift it. “There are a couple of fuel barrels down there, call Queequeg to come help you and use them to refuel the choppers, Pequod first if you please.” She passed the armored hand to him with a grin. “And keep my trophy for me, will ya?”

He took it and went through the hole. “Will do.”

Next she moved towards Mongoose and Chameleon. She stopped at their side, seeing his resignation and her anger.

Buffalo simply gave him an angry face.

Mongoose in turn gave her an apologetic look. Like Squirrel, he also had greying cropped hair, though his hair was dark black as his skin and he sported a big moustache. “So, huh... boss? Not gonna say anything?”

Buffalo shrugged, relaxing her expression. “Dunno. Chameleon is obviously pissed at you, so I assume you fucked up big. Hence, angry face.” She crouched and looked at Chameleon, who was finishing splinting his broken leg. “So, Cham, how’s he, and what did he do exactly?”

Chameleon, without the balaclava hiding her short brunette hair, finished her work and sighed loudly, massaging the bridge of her nose. “He might walk, eventually. But one knee is broken, and the other leg’s missing half the flesh along the shin with some mild bleeding that will require constant attention until we get him to the extraction point.” She lowered her hand from the face and smacked Mongoose softly on his head. “And the idiot decided to bull rush the freaking pseudo-Tinker armor. If it wasn’t for the interior stealth suit of his battle dress applying pressure on the wound, he would have bled dry by now.”

Buffalo turned again to face Mongoose. “See? You’re an idiot, the doctor says so. And I’m not telling your wife tales of your bravery. Stop trying to impress her with crap like this, she doesn’t even like it.” She rose up as he opened his mouth, trying to say something in his defense, but a voice from behind took her attention.

“Buffalo, we need to talk”, called Tree Frog, holding a laptop in her arms and accompanied by Mastodon, hands at his back. She walked up to the South African woman and the Russian man waiting besides the stairwell, away from the others.

She smiled at them. “I heard you found me a gift?”, she asked clasping hands below her hip and
jumping up and down on her feet like an excited kid.

They looked at each other, and she worried at their silence. “Ok, something serious then?”

“Buffalo”, Mastodon said slowly, “was this op actually a rescue?”

She frowned, confused. “The next one, yes. But not this one. Are you saying they got hostages here?”

“I think”, Tree Frog said gesturing to the stairs. “it will be better if you see it for yourself.”

She was on her bed, hanging vertically with her arms and legs restrained by the bolts in it. She was clean now, or at least the suit was after a few some showers in the room around her took the blood away, now leaving through a drain below her.

In front of her, the opaque screen wasn’t functioning, but that hadn’t stopped the man hidden behind it from talking to her.

“I was ready to punish you. But despite your excessive violence, the video log your suit recorded supports your claim of self-defense”, Harbinger spoke in a neutral tone. “Still, there is the matter of failing your assigned task.”

The screen came to life, and showed a snapshot of her suit visuals. A blurred image of the man who beat her and threw her out the window.

A faint buzzing came from her suit. “You can talk now.”

Her voice came out dry, rusted by lack of use. “I got nothing.”

“Hmm, are you sure? Not even if he’s Brute or a Stranger? That would explain how he got the drop on you, or how he defeated you.”

She swallowed, frustrated. “Not, I’m not sure of anything. I couldn’t even get a good look at him. And by the time I tried to run back to the infirmary, I thought it was pointless. Whatever he was there for, either he killed the girl already or took her out.”

She remained silent, just waiting for him to drop the other shoe.

Eventually, he spoke again. “Very well, I believe you.”

Now that’s a change.

“You should have confirmed your suspicions nonetheless, but your assessment was accurate. He was spotted leaving the building with Virtue.”

An old photo came up on the screen, this time of a middle aged man. A blue bandana around shoulder-length brown hair. Shaved, handsome face with blue eyes. At its side was some information dating from 1999. Aged twenty-seven then, so he’d be thirty-nine by now. 5 feet 10 inches, 165 pounds, caucasian, an impressive list of military qualifications.

“We believe it was this man. First name David, last name redacted, codename Solid Snake. Green Beret, then FOXHOUND, a special forces infiltration group known for training some of the best soldiers the world has ever known. He’s also the son of an infamous soldier, mercenary and FOXHOUND founder called Big Boss. On behalf of NATO, he toppled two countries and their military on his own in 1995 and 1999, killed Big Boss twice, retired, and when his old group
rebelled in 2005, he disposed of them all in one night, including the man whose exoskeleton your suit was based off. He’s been doing uninteresting work ever since. All this despite having no powers whatsoever.” A pause. “So we understand this failure.”

Well, shit. No wonder she got her ass handed in a basket. Even with the power suit giving her increased strength and reflexes, she was massively outclassed in training and experience.

“What about the girl?” he continued. “Our information stated she was bedridden and with severe burns in all her body, but she was seen healthy and running.”

She shook her head. “She was like that when I found her. She woke up as I got to her, and I think she was high on drugs. Seemed to react to something she saw behind me, but there was nothing. Terrified, surprised. Probably hallucinating.”

“That’s all?”

“I’m telling you”, she growled. “I saw nothing unusual, nothing pointing to parahuman healing, no-”

She screamed, shaking as electricity coursed through her body from the shackles.

After what seemed like an eternity, the current stopped, but not the pain, and she was left breathing laboriously.

“Watch your tone”, he drawled. “The unexpected circumstances of Solid Snake’s presence and your capture of Iriomote, when Shadow Stalker was unable to do it, has earned you some good will. I say ‘some’. You're not out of the water yet.”

The screen went black again, and showed later a rough map of Boston.

“Virtue and Snake left Brockton Bay in a Dragon dropship, and were shot down as they came over the Boston North Ruins. We suspect the Dragonslayers. We know the ship survived the emergency landing, and that Virtue’s still in the area, but for some reason we are unable to locate her with much precision. We suspect it’s her undisclosed Stranger power at work. You will go there with a minder, Cricket, and locate Virtue.”

The map started being annotated everywhere with estimations of the ship crash site.

“Avoid Snake and Dragon. If they intervene, let Cricket handle them. But finish your job. She will evaluate you and make sure you do as you're told and will recover you, whatever the result of your mission.” His voice turned threatening at this point. “You will not get another chance. Failure will result on forfeiture of your free will. And if you even think of trying to escape...”

A muffled beeping came from her stomach. She looked down at it, her eyes widened in horror.

“We’ll take care of you. Permanently.”

“Dragon is an AI.” Buffalo took a deep breath, one hand supporting the opposite elbow, with fingers wiggling. “Ok, this is definitely something.”

Tree Frog started pointing all over the monitors. “They controlled everything from here. Data processing, logs, debugging, communications, thought process, what she thought, what she wanted, who she communicated with, what they said to each other, what she saw...”

“An entire Big Brother setup all just for her”, Buffalo muttered. “No wonder they had such a big
advantage."

“That’s not all.” Tree Frog started typing in a command window, and a small list appeared. She then started pointing each line one by one. “Process blocks, memory scrubs, data injections, administrative controls, resets, Ascalon.”

Buffalo frowned. “Seriously? The sword Saint George used to kill the dragon?”

Tree Frog nodded. “Yeah, they seemed to have it ready to go at all times, and worse of all? He didn’t code it. He didn’t code anything here, just modified or adapted at most. There are files from Dragon’s creator, a dead parahuman called Andrew Richter. He was paranoid about her going out of control and left a suite of programs to rein her in. Each time they stole a suit from her? They forced a hard reset, and a while later she woke up back at her main server, with one suit less and no memories of what just happened. It wasn’t just thievery, but...” Her scowl turned to anger. “They violated her. The Iron Maiden program would have shut her down, but Saint modified it to kill her, as in actually destroy her code and any developed personality, and then called it Ascalon.”

“The man has an ego as big as the Moscow Kremlin”, Mastodon commented with an eye roll. He then fixed his gaze on Buffalo. “Did you know any of this?”

Buffalo shook her head. “Not at all. I don’t know if Code Talker knew it, wouldn’t be surprised if HEC suspected it. But even if he knew, as far as I’m concerned this is a good thing. I mean, we all know Imago. And I understand her creator’s concerns, but there aren’t many parahumans around helping around the world as much as she does to let an asshole play evil John Connor with a Skynet that never was...”

Buffalo leaned forwards to the monitors. “This is... Dragon’s visuals? Why are there two windows and why both are frozen?”

“One is the live feed, but it was black when I came, so I was going to check the last recorded minutes in another window when everything clicked and went down for you. Let me play it.” Tree Frog used a mouse and clicked over the video, initiating it.

There wasn’t any sound, but Buffalo felt surprised soon. “Holy shit.”

Mastodon stepped at her side. “Squirrel and I felt the same when we took the place. Don’t they look like certain people?”

Tree Frog eyes widened, and she put a hand over her mouth. “Are those... Quiet and the Boss!?”

“No, see”, Mastodon said, leaning as well and pointing at the displayed faces with a finger. “He looks too young to be the Boss. And she’s too young and slim.” He frowned. “Wait, now that she turned around... scars, a bleached eye, that prosthesis arm. The girl looks more like the Boss than the man!”

Tree Frog glared at Buffalo, and hissed. “Does any of this have to do with that rescue op?”

Buffalo straightened up, not taking her eyes off the video. “The girl is Virtue, an associate of Dragon that got attacked at her home days ago. Don’t ask me about her looks, I recognize her but she didn’t look like that in the photo I saw. Code Talker was concerned for her safety, so given the connection between Virtue and Dragon, we came here first to make sure the Dragonslayers didn’t mess with the rescue.”

They seemed satisfied by the explanation. “Could the man be one of the Enfants Terribles then?” Mastodon asked. “We know the Boss, our Boss, wasn’t the real one, but the similarities are
Buffalo ignored him, turning to face Tree Frog. “Advance the video, I got a bad feeling about this.”

Tree Frog obeyed, quickening the pace of the video, until suddenly it went black.

“That looks bad.”

Buffalo ignored Mastodon’s comment. “Talk to me, Frog. What happened there, and when?”

Tree Frog typed commands frantically and checked several logs. “They were flying over the Boston ruins when Saint issued a hard reset after he escaped, and ordered his men to shoot down the ship and kill the survivors.” She then looked up at her. “It happened eight minutes ago.”

Buffalo turned around and walked out at a brisk pace, followed by the unprepared Mastodon and Tree Frog. “Fuck that. That petty son of a bitch isn’t making a fool of us.’

“Pequod, get ready to fly”, she said as she pressed her earbud. “We need to be in Boston by yesterday.” Not waiting for an answer, she started descending the stairs followed by her friends. “Frog, get Squirrel and take all the information you can from those computers. Everything: programs, logs, hidden porn folders, whatever, then scrub the hard drives. If you can’t copy it, take the drives. If you can’t take the drives, have Squirrel molest any physical security until it cries ‘sexual abuse’.”

Once at the lower floor, they walked out to the entrance door. Buffalo opened the door, and they saw Pequod readying his ’copter’s rotor in the field in front of the house. “Take any kind of tech you see around if possible. When you’re finished, bomb the house to hell and have Quequeeg take you to the extraction point, then wait for me.”

Tree Frog turned around and ran deeper into the house, as Buffalo and Mastodon walked up to the chopper. “I’ll go with you”, he said.

Buffalo shook her head. “No, I need you in charge here. With Frog and Squirrel busy, Mongoose down and Cham keeping him alive, they’ll need you to keep an eye out if the Dragonslayers return.” Moving the rifle hanging at her hip around her back, she jumped into the helicopter and sat in the command seat, fastening a safety to her suit.

“And even if the kid’s still alive, you going alone will be better for her?” he retorted. “Last thing I heard that place was a hellhole, with parahuman gangs moving in.”

Buffalo turned around, and took a nearby grenade launcher with a revolver chamber, laying it over her lap and patting it. “I’m never alone, my friend”, she shouted over the sound of the rotors revving up.

The chopper started taking altitude, and she closed the side door as Mastodon hailed her with a salute.

“So, I thought we were bound for Brockton Bay”, Pequod said from the pilot seat, the rotors muffled with the cabin now closed. “But I’m not complaining. I hear Boston is quite cloudy and rainy at this hour of the day. And it’s a bit closer.”

Worry returning to her face, Buffalo left the grenade launcher over the box she took it from and turned to him. “How fast can we get there? I just learned the rescue target might be in danger.”

“Then it’s good you found that extra fuel.” He turned his head slightly to the side, showing her his grin. “Because I never took the experimental jets off my baby.”
All was a blur.

She felt dizzy. She fought to keep herself conscious, but it was so hard.

Above her, she saw the night sky. Not many stars, and her vision was blurred, like... being underwater, but she saw some.

She felt water around her. Was she in the sea? No, she was over something solid. Something solid under water. Perhaps a beach. Boston beach? And it was raining; she could hear the dull sound of the drops falling on the surface.

Instinctively, she knew she should be worried about drowning, but it wasn’t completely unpleasant.

Something buzzed in her ear, distant. A phone alarm?

Her eyes closed slowly. But she didn’t want to sleep. Not now. She had already slept too much.

Eventually, Taylor couldn’t see the stars anymore, and darkness embraced her.
Act 1: V has come to - Interlude 01: Missy Byron

April 14, 2011

A hand slammed against the table.

Vista jumped in her chair, startled, just as every other Ward in the room did.

Director Piggot looked around for a moment, taking stock of all the teenagers present. “I did not call for complaints, justifications, or rationalizations. Be thankful I’m not doing more than docking your pay.”

Behind her opaque green visor, Vista closed her eyes and sighed as silently as she could.

The day had been a total disaster. A small time smash-and-grab group of thieves calling themselves the Undersiders had taken advantage of the Protectorate heroes being out of town and assaulted the Brockton Bay Central Bank. The Wards approached and surrounded the building, blocking any escape while waiting for reinforcements.

Problem number one: Gallant, on his own and without asking permission, had called his girlfriend Glory Girl, member of New Wave and bimbo wrecking ball extraordinaire, to come and help them.

Problem number two: Panacea, local ‘greatest parahuman healer’ and Glory Girl’s sister, was in the bank in her civilian identity, though the Undersiders didn’t seem to know she was there.

Problem number three: Panacea texted Glory Girl about her situation.

Then everything went to hell, because instead of waiting for the reinforcements and making sure the Undersiders weren’t provoked to hurt the hostages, Glory Girl crashed through the walls of the bank.

The rubble fell on the hostages, wounding several of them. Spooked, the Undersiders cut their losses and ran off without a fight, riding their monstrous dogs and enveloped by a cloud of darkness.

All of them except Tattletale, who had been separated in the confusion. She did the only thing she could to keep the heroes at bay: take Panacea hostage at gunpoint and try to talk her way out.

Vista was pissed at the villain for that, of course, although rationally she could understand her actions. Left in a bad spot, not wanting to get caught, and with no way to fight or outrun them. Rock, meet hard place.

It would have been fine. Slow her down, buy time, wait for reinforcements, keep things calm, and ensure Panacea’s safety.

Glory Girl disagreed, once again. And that was when Tattletale started talking. Really talking.

She hinted at things she shouldn’t have known. Things about every Ward that none wanted to be known. For Vista, she came too close for comfort.

Her family situation, with her parents constantly fighting to gain her affection as if she was a contest prize, trying to get her to side with one of them so they could rub it in the other’s face. Their sense of entitlement and lack of concern for her feelings pushed her to escape, eventually making her trigger and give her powers to twist space. It hadn’t changed her situation; if anything it made it worse, as now the prized daughter was a parahuman. Whoo, powers, awesome. Send to Wards, instant
bragging rights.

As a Ward, she was the most experienced of the Brockton Bay group. While her parents had signed her up without even asking her, she ended up loving her time there: it was something she was good at and enjoyed doing. But despite all the time and effort she put into it, she was constantly patronized, belittled and ignored. She was the youngest, so of course she had to be coddled and protected from the violent Brockton fights that she ended up participating in anyway. It frustrated her to no end, but the Wards gave her her only respite from home.

Tattletale hadn’t said exactly what she knew, but if she knew those things, she probably also knew about her unexpected (and unreported) encounter with Hookwolf that left her with a hideous scar running down her torso from her right collarbone, or her infatuation with Gallant, an older boy who only had eyes for the glory hound that had gotten them into that mess.

She couldn’t stand the thought of everyone knowing all that. The other Wards seemed to feel the same, even if they were reluctant to let Tattletale go. Piggot understood why they put their secrets, emotional stability and possibly their civilian identities over capturing a single villain, but she didn’t hide her disappointment either.

Aegis, their team leader, and Gallant tried to talk Glory Girl down, and convince her that threatening the villain with a hostage wasn’t the best course of action.

But again, Glory Girl disagreed, and Tattletale reacted accordingly. Seeing that the New Wave brute wasn’t stopping for anything, Tattletale finally dropped the bomb that took the fight out of Glory Girl and Panacea. Tattletale left through the back exit, leaving a catatonic Panacea just outside the building. Now Panacea had become a shut-in, Glory Girl’s mess had fallen on the shoulders of the PRT, and they had no captured villainess to show for it; while the Wards were busy securing Panacea and keeping an enraged Glory Girl under control, the Undersider had vanished.

Thank fuck that Shadow Stalker had already run off after her bullying campaign ended up leaving the now dubbed ‘locker girl’ crippled, because she had a personality as aggressive as Glory Girl’s, and between the two of them someone could have ended up dead.

So here they were, debriefing in a PRT meeting room. When Gallant, the son of one of the most wealthy families in the city, had offered to pay the damages from his pocket, Piggot had decided instead to dock everyone’s pay, instead of punishing him in some other way that couldn’t be solved with money, or actually calling New Wave out for Glory Girl’s lack of self-control.

You could maybe argue that Aegis should take responsibility as the leader, but Clockblocker, Kid Win, Browbeat, and Vista herself had done everything as they were told. Of course everyone would complain, what did Piggy expect?

Piggot then clasped her hands and spoke again. “Still, this doesn’t solve the security issue that Tattletale presented. By tomorrow, I want on my desk an accounting from everyone of you, with all the information you suspect she might have been in possession of.”

If the room had heard their complaints, now it erupted in disbelieving indignation.

All the Wards were talking over each other, and Piggot simply waited in silence. She didn’t talk, instead glaring at the Wards; some caught the message first and shut up, prompting the rest to follow. “Don’t even think for a moment I take pleasure on this. But if a villain group has information that compromises this organization and anyone in it, I need to know it so measures can be taken.”

Under the table, Vista’s fists opened and closed in frustration and anger. Just the crap with Glory Girl
and the pay dock was enough to make her rethink her crush on Gallant, irrational as it might be from the start. Still, this?

Piggot didn’t care. She was a very practical-minded woman. After the Shadow Stalker fiasco threw a shadow over her management of the local PRT branch, she was hellbent on getting everything in tip-top shape. Nothing she did had improved things, and she was desperate now.

Before she could react further, Browbeat rose from his chair, and started walking to the door.

“Browbeat!” Piggot yelled “You haven’t been dismissed yet.”

He stopped, and turned around calmly, taking off his mask and showing the face of a young black man. “Maybe not, but with the way things are going, I’m leaving anyway, the meeting and the Wards.”

Piggot looked like she had bitten a lemon. “You can’t just leave! We need-!”

“My parents already know about the bank; they called me while we were waiting for the vans”, he interrupted without changing his relaxed tone. “They are beyond worried. Now you tell us you’re punishing the ones who followed instructions for the mistakes of others.” He paused, frowning at Gallant for a moment. Gallant, for his part, didn’t react to it. “I have nothing to hide”, he continued, turning again to Piggot, “except for my civilian identity and through that the identity of my family and where we live, which is uncomfortably close to both Merchant and Empire territories, and it’s a known secret that the gangs get information from here.

“I mean no disrespect, Director, and I understand your reasons.” He sounded sincere on that. Browbeat usually did. “But after this morning, this, and the Shadow Stalker scandal, no matter what I say to them, I fully expect my parents to withdraw me the moment they arrive here. Even if, despite what the rumor mill says, you’re not replaced soon enough as director.”

“Dude, not even a little solidarity with the group?” Clockblocker chided.

“I’m sorry”, Browbeat told him, “but I’ve only been here for a week, and I have to think of my family.”

Clockblocker didn’t respond to that.

“Dismissed, all of you.” Vista rose as Piggot slumped in her seat, all fight gone from her.

Kid Win, of course, had to be the one to ask. “What about the information-?”

“I said dismissed.” Piggot turned around in her chair, facing the window behind her that looked out at the city.

Everyone took the hint and started filing out from the room.

What Browbeat had done... She loved the Wards, every one of them, she really did. She only needed some way to fix all this, to find some balance between doing what’s right and not feeling like a prisoner in her own life.

There was nowhere else for her to go, though.

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August 14, 2011
Looking out a dirty old window, down below the cars in the city go rushing by, I sit here alone and I wonder why~

In the midnight hour she cried ‘more, more, more’. With a rebel yell she cried ‘more, more, more’~

Now, sure as the sun will cross the sky, this lie is over. Lost, like the tears that used to tide me over~

“That’s enough, Vista” said Armsmaster, seated in the driver’s seat of the PRT van and fully suited in his armor. “Decide on one station or shut it down, we’re in the middle of an operation.”

Vista shut the radio off, and looked out through her window, head propped on a raised hand, and bored out of her skull.

The van was parked in a backstreet just outside one of the areas the Empire had taken from the Azn Bad Boyz. The nazis were now duking it out with Lung and Oni Lee, fighting over another neighbourhood.

Lung had recruited a bomb Tinker a couple months ago, Bakuda. She hasn’t been spotted yet, but with Oni Lee’s usual tactic of suicide bombing, she wouldn’t need to be. Lung could fight off entire teams alone, but the Empire’s numbers had kept the gangs at a stalemate. These new bombs could not only change the balance of power, but cause far too many civilian casualties.

While the rest of the Protectorate and New Wave were dealing with that, she was here. Which she could understand; Wards weren’t supposed to face such threats, and director Iriomote had been very clear that he wouldn’t use them as extra boots on the ground like Piggot had before him.

No, the problem was that Armsmaster, the leader of the Protectorate, was sitting in a van, waiting with her, instead of leading his team.

“Vista”, he said without prompting, unmoving and with his hands on the wheel, “If you have something to say, please do so. We still have time until we move.”

She didn’t take her eyes from the street. “Why would you say that, sir?”

He breathed out through the nose, slowly, nodding in thought. “What happened with Shadow Stalker made me realize that leaving the Wards under Director Piggot’s direct authority wasn’t my best decision, and Director Iriomote has brought it to my attention that this is an issue I shouldn’t leave unresolved much longer.”

Vista looked at him, curious. “Are you saying you’re taking the team under your authority again, sir?”

Armsmaster turned his head slightly towards her. He normally didn’t bother with the small gestures and motions, but considering his helmet covered all his head except the mouth, it was considerate of him. “I’m talking it over with the director. There’s the fact that that you’ve been accustomed to your living quarters there, and the PR department...”
Vista snorted. “They want us there for their guided tours so the public can see us nice and easy, right?” A pause. “Sir. Sorry”, she added in a hurry.

He nodded, turning again to the street in front of the vehicle. “Yes, they are making a ruckus, but I’m confident we can start the preparations to move all of you to the Rig in the next week, once all the details have been worked out.”

Vista rubbed her hair with a hand. “Right, that’s... I’m sure the guys will appreciate it, sir.“

“I’ve also been checking the reports of the events the Wards have participated in during this year”, he kept going. “Double checking, actually. It might be nothing, but from the report at the Rig exercise in May, I got the impression that you were upset.”

“No, I mean, yeah”, she said with indecision, “I got frustrated from not really managing to do anything and worse, being used as bait, but everyone was upset.” She took a small breath. “Hell, I think Miss Militia took it worse than us or the troopers.”

Armsmaster turned again to her. “Miss Militia?”

“Yeah”, she said, sitting straight. “I’ve seen her angry before, but she seemed to have taken Virtue’s win very personally.”

He frowned. “She didn’t mention anything of the sort.”

“It’s true, sir”, a woman’s voice came from the small window connecting to the cargo bay where four troopers were readying their gear. “She seemed ready to tear some poor bastard’s neck off for the rest of the day. You didn’t notice?”

Armsmaster looked through the window. “Are you sure, Officer Zhou?”

“Everyone at the ARR saw it, sir. Evans here can tell you.”

“Yes, it’s true”, a man said. “If ‘Reave’ says it, then it’s confirmed.”

The rest of the troopers laughed. “Shut up, asshole”, Zhou said with amusement. “This ain’t PHO.”


“What about her?”

“What she said about Panacea and Glory Girl, she was willing to do the same for all the Wards, were you to act against her. I understand why you all decided not to, but...”

“Ok, no, sir, hold on”, she babbled, holding a hand out and pinching her nose between the eyes. “I hope you are not asking to tell you what we thought she knew.”

“I’m not demanding anything like Director Piggot, but if we at least knew...”

Vista opened her eyes, looking to the street in front of her. “Am I the first one you’re asking?”

He nodded. “Yes. Not intentionally, you were simply the first the matter came up with.”

“Well, I know what everyone will say. ‘No.’ It’s about our... our shames. Things that hurt. Things that we’ll talk about when we are ready to. It’s not about things that could hurt the PRT; at least not mine.” Vista turned back to him, lips pursed. “If anything, we lost Browbeat because it would affect
his family.”

Armsmaster rubbed his beard, face downcast. “I understand, and I apologize for hitting a nerve, but I only want to help you and your teammates. Shadow Stalker was on probation, which makes me responsible for the damages the lack oversight caused.”

“Is that why we’re here, sir? Because Virtue is your responsibility?”

Armsmaster kept silent for a moment, but Vista could see him glaring behind his helmet. “What do you mean, Vista?”

‘Me and my big mouth...’

Vista looked around, undecided on following the subject she had just raised, and then closed the window between them and the troopers.

“Sir, I’m not saying I’d know anything about Virtue’s identity... but I think it’s easy to see you’re connected somehow. Mostly you being unavailable whenever he drops a perp off to the police. It’s not like there’s much to it, and I haven’t told anyone, but it wouldn’t surprise me if half the Protectorate and PRT in the city suspect something already.”

Taking a moment to slowly breathe out through his nose, he confirmed the window was safely closed, and leaned back on his seat, looking at the horizon in front of him.

“Virtue suffered because of a mistake I made. Initially, I wanted to make amends, but then I saw their drive to overcome what happened... We talked, and it was abundantly clear from the start he didn’t want to get involved with the Protectorate or our methods, but I saw a will to make a change for good, to make things better, above what I seen in most heroes.”

“And you helped him become a vigilante? Aren’t we supposed to try to recruit capes who might agree to join...? Wait.” Armsmaster wasn’t one to leave personal mistakes to chance. Much less admit to them.

Vista scratched her neck. The thought that just occurred to her was uncomfortable, if true. “Is, is the girl Stalker put in a locker Virtue?”

Armsmaster frowned, but released a breath. “Dammit Vista... Am I that transparent?”, he said turning to her, sounding slightly defeated.

“Just this once”, she shrugged. “So what, she’s disappointed with us for Stalker? I get it, but not everyone is like her.”

“No, Virtue recognizes the fault is not entirely of the PRT, but there’ll be a long time before we regain that lost trust. So I offered a sponsorship, with Dragon’s assistance.” Hands set over the knees, a finger trapped in thought. “Vista, in the local Protectorate, I’m probably one of the most concerned with following the rules. Probably only second to Miss Militia. So please believe me when I say that I’m not backing an underage vigilante out of vice.”

He paused to take a deep breath. “I’ve seen parahumans, both heroes and villains, waste their extraordinary powers, year after year wasted in fights that puts civilians in danger – yes, heroes included – and suddenly I find one young girl, bitter, alone, with no interest in being a hero as we understand it, but with the drive, self-control, concern for civilian lives, and above all, the potential to go farther than most would dare. All despite having what anyone else would consider some ‘underwhelming’ powers. Of course I’d support her efforts. It would be a waste for everyone not to.
“I thought, if I could get Virtue back on her feet, take the credit for what she’d do until she’s ready to deal with the attention she’d receive, guide her so she keep her head straight...” He chuckled, which took Vista by surprise. It was a very subdued chuckle, but Armsmaster wasn’t known for showing any emotion. “She went beyond any of my expectations during her first night, and she’s been doing such a good job afterwards that I found it impossible to protect her as I had planned, so the only solution left was Guild membership. Closer to the PRT than she’d like, but they at least provide a support network and an operational independence where she can thrive.” He shrugged. “Maybe that’s for the best. It’s not the kind of thing you do and expect forgiveness.”

“But that’s the problem, sir. You forgot about us.” Vista said, managing to keep her tone under control. “You leave us with Piggot, and then go play with an outsider? Ok, Virtue is one of the good guys and not an outlaw. Cool by me, count me in for a girls patrol night with her, but you were supposed to look out for us.”

Armsmaster put a hand over her shoulder for a second. The way he did it was awkward, but he was trying, and didn’t feel condescending. “Vista, thank you for talking candidly. I’d appreciate if you kept this between us. I know I’ve made mistakes, but I want to make amends. One week, that’s all I ask.”

She nodded. There was no point in adding anything else, not in this situation; not when he needed to focus in the current crisis. Still. “Sir, you understand that if any of this gets to someone up the ladder, you might get punished, right? Even demoted.”

He took a moment before answering. “Yes. I know. Will you tell anyone?”

Before she could answer, the comms radio crackled to life with Dragon’s voice. She sounded nervous. “Armsmaster, pick up is a go, two hostages wounded and waiting. Move, now!”

Armsmaster moved his hands swiftly through the vehicle controls, bringing the engine to life and starting to move the van with increasing speed. “Roger, Dragon.” The push of a button opened the cargo bay window again. “Officers, get ready for pick up and medical”, he said as he made the van increase its speed, and was answered with a chorus of ‘ayes’. “What about Virtue?”, he asked Dragon as he closed the window. “They’re not with them?”

“Virtue ran off! The hostages were family friends and the Empire sent people to their home. I already sent a suit and a ship, but they wouldn’t - she couldn’t wait!”

The van turned a corner as its driver and passenger fell silent. The Empire is all kinds of messed up’, Vista thought, but they wouldn’t attack the family of a minor Guild member. Right?’

‘Right?’

“Ran off? It’s two miles to her house!” Armsmaster exclaimed, pushing a bit more of gas to the engine as they cruised straight down a street, driving as fast as possible into the border of Empire territory. “Not only won’t it make a difference, she’ll be exhausted and surrounded by the Empire when she arrives!”

“And you’d think that would stop her from protecting her father?”, Dragon said with a sigh, not even noticing she just outing Virtue’s gender to someone else than Armsmaster. Was she listening on them? “Focus on the hostages for now. I sent the ship to pick you up there in a few minutes. I’m flying the suit alone to her house. Hopefully we can solve this before anything worse happens.”

The van turned another corner, and slowed down as they approached the entrance to an alley. Peeking through the window, she could see two people sitting against a wall. They didn’t look good.
The van stopped, and the troopers started jumping out. Armsmaster opened his door to exit, and she did the same, leaving the vehicle.

Telling anyone wouldn’t just make problems for Armsmaster; it would probably make things harder for Virtue as well. Really, leaving the rig exercise aside, Vista didn’t have anything against her, and she had been doing good work.

Vista could see the troopers attending the hostages in front of her. A couple. Both of them big and muscled. Both with plain gold wedding rings. Both horribly wounded and tortured, unconscious.

Despite their efforts, the woman wasn’t breathing.

They were family members. And now Virtue had gone to protect her father from a similar fate.

“No, I won’t tell”, Vista said as she left the vehicle and Armsmaster passed by her side. She didn’t like the idea of making things harder for anyone, much less harder than they were now.

The troopers registered the woman’s time of death. Vista hoped she never had anyone she cared for go through anything like this.

Now

Vista watched as Gallant was loaded into an ambulance still in his armor, barely stabilized. Apparently Glory Girl was trying to convince her sister to heal him. It was a long shot, given the healer’s newfound reclusiveness, but it wasn’t longer than it would be for any other person.

Sitting on a piece of rubble in front of the PRT HQ front doors, big enough to be a comfortable seat with her elbows on her knees, she sighed.

Police and PRT cars and vans surrounded the building’s main entrance, forming a cordon that kept everything out of sight from curious bystanders. She was thankful for that. At least out here she wouldn’t have to breathe the heavy smell of copper, and she wasn’t in the mood for gossiping idiots trying to get her attention.

If someone had tried to get a signature from her right now, she’d have kicked them in the shins with a metal pointed boot, ‘PR mascot image’ be damned.

Clockblocker approached with a water bottle in hand, passing it to her. “Not going with them?”

“No, I’m... dunno, not useful, right now?” she said, accepting the bottle. “I already helped stabilize him, and there’s so little space in an ambulance I’d just be a bother.” A half truth. She wouldn’t occupy that much space, but seeing Gallant like this was hard. Her crush on him had diminished after the bank, a traitorous part of her mind blaming him for all that happened there, but it was still strong. Accompanying him would just break her a bit more.

Besides, she’d have to meet with Panacea and Glory Girl. Things being awkward with the first wasn’t really that much of a problem, but she didn’t want to see the second if she could avoid it. Seeing her before the bank pissed her off, particularly when she saw her with Gallant, but she could deal with it. After that, she’ve found herself hard pressed not to scream in her face.

“What about you?”

Clockblocker made a lazy shrug. “He’s stabilized, and there are two troopers worse than him. I’m checking on them every ten minutes until more ambulances arrive, but I’m taking a break now.” He
crouched until both of their heads were at the same level. “Kid Win told me what happened. Seems you were pretty baddass up there.”

Vista grimaced, opening the bottle and taking a drink. Of all of them, Clockblocker was the only clean one. Aegis was armless, even if that wasn’t much of an impediment for him, and Kid Win’s hands and hers were drenched in Gallant’s blood; she had taken her gloves off and tossed them on the ground at her side. Most of the troopers who’d seen action were injured or dead. Clockblocker had only frozen the ones with the worst wounds. Saying that she was ‘baddass’ when...

She shook her head. That wasn’t fair. He did the most useful thing he could have done.

She closed the bottle and passed it to Clockblocker again. “Not really. The swordsman ran faster than I could trap him or Kid Win hit him.”

Clockblocker drummed his fingers along the bottle, thinking. “So, doesn’t it seem weird that after going super Hookwolf on the mercs, ninja dude gives Gallant just one little paper cut and runs away from you like a scared kitty?” At her glare, he elaborated. “I mean, you know, little cut compared to being made mincemeat…”

He sighed. “Sorry, you know how I am. We haven’t had a real good day for months, and tonight has been... bloodier than usual.”

She relaxed her glare. Clockblocker reacted to stressful situations with humor; it was his emotional shield, even if it everyone around him tended to find it distasteful. “It’s ok. And, yeah, you’re right. I got angry. But now that I think calmly about it, he could have killed me and Kid on the spot if he wanted. Guess we’re lucky he didn’t.”

The doors of Gallant’s ambulance closed, and with its siren wailing, it started moving away. “An accident, maybe?” he asked.

Vista shrugged as the ambulance disappeared behind a corner. “Maybe. Gallant seemed to have crashed into him. Startled him.”

Not that it would stop her from trying and take down the asshole hard the next time she saw him, of course.

“They say there’s no sign of Venom or his dog anywhere”, he continued.

“You know it’s Virtue, right?”

He turned his head as if to gave her a look, but with his white blank mask he failed at it. “After the Rig exercise and reading what Void Cowboy and Winged One said in their thread? Nah, Venom fits him better.”

She was now the one wearing an incredulous look. Why anyone would even give a second of consideration to what those two whackos wrote in the PHO forum was beyond her. “Forget about that. Are they sure she’s not here?”

“Wait, her?”

Vista slapped herself mentally. “Nevermind.”

“What? No! You don’t drop a bomb like that and expect me to forget. Are you two buddy-buddy or something?”
“No! Look, I don’t know her. Just keep it to yourself and forget it. Ok?”

“Of course, your majesty. But anyway, no trace of her. Sorry, them. The guys doing the sweeps say...” Clockblocker was interrupted by a tinny ringing sound. He took his civilian phone out from a pocket and looked at the screen for a moment. “Sorry, mom’s calling. I’ll talk to you later?”

She nodded. “Sure, be safe.”

“I always am!” Clockblocker sat up and started walking back to wherever the injured troopers were waiting to be refrozen as he answered the call.

Vista’s solitude didn’t last long, as Arsmaster and Miss Militia, in her camo fatigues costume and bandana covering her lower face, were approaching her. Accompanying them were Carmichael, the trooper that had shared cover with them in the lobby, and Zhou, a mixed race woman with short brown hair and hints of Asian facial features on her slightly dark skin.

“Vista”, Arsmaster said, looking at the bloody gloves on the ground. “Are you injured?”

She sat up and shook her head. “No, that’s not mine. I’m fine.”

“If you need rest...” Miss Militia started, but she quickly interrupted her.

“No, no, it’s fine.”

Arsmaster pointed vaguely at the lobby. “You and officers Carmichael and Zhou are the only ones without current duties who had been present either at Virtue’s pick up two nights ago, or at the battle here tonight. Moreover, you were one of the three Wards who chased this ‘swordsman’.” Vista saw Miss Militia’s eyes narrow at the mention of what they had tried to do, but Arsmaster raised a hand. “You are not in trouble. It was an unwise thing to do, but both Aegis and Gallant already paid for making the call. I know it might not be the best moment for you, but I need to check your stories. The security monitors had been sabotaged during the attack and there’s no security footage.”

Sharing a look with the officers, she nodded. “Yeah, sure, sir.”

He nodded, pleased. “Very well. While Velocity and Dauntless inspect the rest of the building with Kid Win’s help, I was analysing the lobby and the infirmary. So far, we haven’t found Virtue, and I suspect her room was the scene of a fight. I can’t say who the fighters were, but there was a broken window and a slash running from just below it to another broken glass in the lobby upper floor.”

“I went up there”, said Miss Militia. “There were three corpses in front of that window with the same fatigues as the soldiers down below.” She paused to turn towards the officers. “The angle matches with the way you saw the swordsman jump on the main group. Anything you can add?”

“Yeah, the soldiers and the swordsman definitely weren’t working together, I think there’s some animosity in there”, Zhou added. “I had a clear view of their fight, if you could call that ‘fighting’. Batting bullets away with a sword was impressive, but she was working more through reflex and strength than skill. And there was hate in there, if her screaming wasn’t enough clue.”

“Her?” Miss Militia asked.

Zhou shrugged. “She was using a voice modulator of some kind, but as I said, she was screaming, hard. Maybe an older teenager, or in her youngish twenties. A bit too thin for a man, too, but that might be the armor.”

Vista saw Miss Militia’s eyes narrow dangerously.
“Alright. That’s interesting. We’ll give them the temporary denomination ‘Swordswoman’ for the
time being, but we need to move on.” Armsgmaster gestured as though he was cutting one hand with
the other. “I’ll need to run a more extensive forensics analysis, but the cuts on the corpses, the floor
and Gallant’s armor are exceptionally thin. Not only that, but it resembles the marks of an ultrasonic
cutter. Did any of you got a good look at her sword, or how the bodies interacted with it?”

Everyone present grimaced at the thought, but Carmichael answered him. “I didn’t really stop to
admire how the poor bastards died, but it seemed like they weren’t posing any resistance at all. They
might as well been butter. The sword seemed one of those oriental weapons. Blade was kind of long,
square flat handguard.”

“A katana”, Zhou said. “The blade seemed to have only one edge. The other edge seemed a bit too
blunt, otherwise it didn’t look like particularly special. But I’m pretty sure it’s a katana.”

Miss Militia stepped closer to Armsgmaster as he nodded. “You have an idea?”

“Yes. I was tinkering a weapon with similar qualities, and during my research I came up with some
abandoned military studies after the 2000’s on high frequency blades, or vibroblades. Think souped
up electrical kitchen knives, with the blade doing sawing motions thousands of times each second,
back and forth. It fits with what happened here, and in theory you don’t need exotic materials or
designs to fabricate one; the only problems are designing a motor that is both powerful enough to
drive the blade and small enough to fit in the handle, then balancing the weights of handle and blade.
You don’t need a Tinker to create one.”

“So it’s not tinkertech. And if the sword isn’t, the armor might not be either.”

“From experience, any power armor with the exhibited capabilities is the ground of Tinkers. But the
military had been studying the matter decades before before Scion appeared; mostly to help soldiers
and support staff carry heavier weights. So yes, it’s a strong possibility that we are not dealing with
tinkertech.”

Turning around to face the lobby, Armsgmaster rubbed his beard with a hand. “These soldiers, on the
other hand, used rifles with tinkertech under barrels.”

“You think Coil did this, sir?” Zhou asked.

“Perhaps”, said Miss Militia. “Which bring us to the motive. The only possible target seemed to have
been Virtue. The admittance into the infirmary was the last remarkable change around.”

“The corpses are mostly unrecognizable beyond the skin color”, Armsgmaster explained, “and there’s
no clear identifier on them. However, Coil is not this bold, and he didn’t participate in the gang war.
Virtue didn’t damage his operation at all as far as we know. It doesn’t fit. Carmichael suggested the
Empire calling a favor from Gesellschaft, but there are all kinds of skin colours among the corpses,
and Virtue is too small for that kind of favor anyway. It’s not Kaiser’s style either. As it is, it’s too
soon to blame anyone without more information.”

“So what you’re saying is”, Vista said, crossing her arms, “two someones, who might or might not
be tinkers or capes at all, got crossed enough at Virtue to send killers at her on her deathbed. One of
these groups sabotages the surveillance system, while the soldiers come from the front and pin down
everyone there. The Swordswoman shows up inside somehow, without explanation, then enters
Virtue’s room, and gets into a fight. Can’t be with Virtue because she was already dying, but she got
thrown through the window, gets inside again at the lobby, recognizes the soldiers and kills them,
then goes up the building and disappears?”
Armsmaster nodded in approval. “Good summary. Yes. That’d be my guess, but there is something else. Before the security was compromised, an opening at the heliport roof door was logged. How it was opened and the tinkertech sensors avoided I cannot know until I check them more closely, but I’d say that’s how the Swordswoman came inside.”

Miss Militia interjected. “Vista, officers, I think we’ve got enough information from you. You can leave us.”

All three of them nodded, and turned around, the troopers taking the opposite direction to Vista.

She started walking towards an empty van to sit in its back door, but she couldn’t avoid hearing Miss Militia from behind. “I have a different theory.”

A different theory? They barely had one yet.

Curious, Vista was too far away from them to hear Armsmaster’s reply, but when she finally sat down on the vehicle, she pinched the distance between them and her. Just enough to let sound travel through a thread of compressed space over their heads.

She saw Mis Militia cross her arms. “It might be Virtue”, she said lowering her voice.

Armsmaster looked as confused as Vista felt. “Virtue was dying. She hadn't regained consciousness since the fire.”

“Well, someone thought she was still dangerous.”

He shook his head. “How could she be? You know there are no healers available. Panacea’s shut herself in and sending Gallant to her is a hail mary already as it is. Othala is with the Empire, and they would refuse healing. Virtue couldn’t have done this.”

“Think about it”, Militia said with a raised hand. “The only realistic reason these soldiers would come for her is if she was still a danger for someone.”

“On her deathbed? Why?”

“Maybe because she looks like Big Boss and he had thousands of enemies?”

Big who? Who used such a cheesy cape name?

Armsmaster turned fully towards her, giving her his full attention. “The war criminal during the Nineties? What does he even have to do with Virtue?”

“I knew him, personally. The military fatigues, the eyepatch, the intensity of her look. The sheer refusal to accept defeat, even.” She answered, following with a scoff. “God, she even uses the same unorthodox and ridiculous tactics that he did. Are you really telling me a random girl who can’t be older than twenty came out of nowhere, modeled herself with such accuracy after him, and even fights just as well as he did?”

Armsmaster sighed. “Just for the sake of argument, let’s say there is a connection. Big Boss was a professional soldier, a mercenary. He raised and lead armies, long before any parahumans or advanced technology. How do you explain the armor and sword in all this?”

That didn’t deter Miss Militia. “It could have been she was helped by a skilled enough Tinker with the resources, skills and personal connection to get a dying girl they care about on her feet, and put them inside power armor. I know it wasn’t you, you were with the rest of us running damage control
as the gang war cooled off yesterday.” She pointed a finger at him. “But where has Dragon been?”

“Dragon’s spent last night and this morning with a suit in Virtue’s room since she got it here, making her company which as the infirmary night shift can tell you happened without incident, and then left for most of the day helping our patrols on a very aggressive route through Empire territory. So Dragon couldn’t have done it. If the Swordswoman is Virtue, that means that someone else with considerable resources would have had to break into the infirmary, somehow heal her from death’s door to fighting shape, equip her with high-tech gear... and then throw her through a window? How does that fit?”

“You made Virtue. You tell me.”

“I didn’t make her”, Armsmaster said, resting his hands on his hips. “I backed her and put her in contact with Dragon and the Guild. That’s all. I’ve never paid any attention to Big Boss’ persona. She chose her attire, and I didn’t teach her anything; I brought her to close quarter instructors but they barely had anything to teach her. She is a natural at what she does.”

“And you didn’t think of giving her the Wards pitch instead?”

Vista tuned out the discussion for a while. Her conversation with Armsmaster was still fresh in her mind. The only difference was that she was worried about his responsibility for the Wards, while Miss Militia was concerned with the amount of time he’d spent on Virtue.

Eventually, Miss Militia raised her voice enough to regain her attention. “You fielded a potential normal, a minor, as a combatant? For what, some sort of redemption? Are you out of your damned mind!”

Armsmaster waved a hand dismissively. “If there’s any responsibility to bear, I’ll accept it gladly when it occurs, but until then, this stays between us. Besides, none of this matters anyway. There’s no way that kind of healing was available.”

Unimpressed, Miss Militia squared off against him. “You haven’t answered me yet. Where is Dragon?”

His reply was cut short as an engine roared. Looking up, Vista could see a figure take flight from the rooftop, with enormous wings and a trail of fire coming from behind.

It started a controlled descent to them as a new voice approached the Protectorate heroes. “The aircraft Dragon had stationed in Boston Bay during this weekend has been sighted leaving the city towards Boston, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Armsmaster and Miss Militia turned around to watch two feminine figures appear from behind a PRT van near to them. The one flying from above landed in the ground at a distance, and then walked up to the other two to joined them.

All of them shared the same gray suit and eyeless full face mask or helmet, forgoing the cape culture customs of costumes, and instead making use of similar uniforms, bulletproof jackets and helmets, but that’s where all the similarities ended.

The flying one, Ash Raven, was the tallest and the Tinker of the trio, equipping not just herself but her teammates as well. A massive and powerful jetpack on her back was responsible for her flight, which she controlled with the pair of long and broad metal wings with numerous points of articulation. Their wingspan was long enough to cover the length of two PRT vans, but now they were folded around her, covering her like a coat. She was covered in armor and what looked like a
modified flight helmet with rebreather, and while her legs weren’t covered by the wings, she had heavy protective extensions that made them longer and in the form of bird talons, protecting them from the heat of the jetpack emissions. A heavy grenade launcher hung at thigh level, with her hips covered in belts with grenades marked for different uses.

The shortest one and the only one with a jumpsuit and full face mask instead of a any armor was Devilfish, a Stranger with a big flat helmet over the top of her head made by Raven that gave her a Brute subrating; it sprouted four wide tentacles that fell around her with cameras and three pronged pincers at each end, allowing Devilfish to use them to walk instead of her legs, elevating herself over the ground. There was no statement about what her Stranger power was, but she was specialized in recon, and the tentacles allowed her to move across the terrain and fight stronger opponents head on.

Flanked by the other two was Kilika, the Shaker and leader. She wore a complex rig on her back following her spinal cord, anchoring the helmet that covered her head and giving her six more arms above her shoulders, with curved knives at the reach of each one of them sheathed alongside the rig. A telekinetic with enough fine control to levitate herself thanks to her rig, move the arms as if they were natural extensions of herself, and control the knives in anyway she chose. Like Raven, she too was armored, though it looked lighter, and her helmet was a one piece mirrored mask with six ‘eyes’. And unlike the other two, who at least had a sidearm each, she didn’t have a visible firearm, but a satchel hanged from her hip behind her.

The HAVEN team. Parahumans not affiliated with the Protectorate but with the PRT. With their attitude, and their powers and gear raising their height, they looked more trained, proud, confident, and bigger than anyone else present.

They were sponsored by the PRT, but as the one behind their formation, HAVEN tended to follow Director Iriomote anywhere he went and followed his orders to the letter. Some of the tinfoil-hat sorts online claimed they were his personal strike team, but as attached as they might be to the director, no one denied they were effective and supportive of the PRT troops they accompanied in patrol.

They also didn’t have any problems flaunting their figures. The suits and armors didn’t leave anything uncovered, but it was easy to see they could have very well gone into modeling instead of law enforcement if they had wanted to. There was nothing exaggerated that she could notice, but watching them made Vista a bit more self-conscious than she’d like.

Devilfish’s constant giggling was creeping Vista out, though.

They stopped in front of the Protectorate members, taking relaxed stances. Kilika levitated straight up with her normal arms crossed and her mechanical ones like the Hindu goddess she took her name from. Devilfish let herself float lazily over the tentacles like in a couch, while Raven looked around impatiently.

“Raven has been conducting her own preliminary investigation”, Kilika continued, with hints of a Spanish lisp. “There is evidence of a fight in one of the meeting rooms in the upper floors, with signs of heavy weapons and containment foam being used there, and I’ve been interviewing the few witnesses available. They told me the Dragon aircraft came down in front of that room, gunned the window and the interior down, then turned around to admit two passengers in the cargo bay before leaving. Whatever the reason, it seems Dragon took Virtue, and she’s not answering anyone’s calls.”

Armsmaster stood straight. “HAVEN, thanks for coming. You’ve been listening in on us?”

Ash Raven scoffed, and Devilfish gave a slightly higher giggle. “Well, yes!” she said in an unplaceable European accent, and raising what looked a small round drone no bigger than a fist in the grips of one tentacle. “Me and Raven have been leaving these little boys around to help inspect
the scene, and you were close enough to the one at the main entrance to record you.” She then raised a finger over the marks of her lips in her mask. “But we won’t tell! Shh!”, she said before laughing again with a shrug. “Sorry?”

“I apologize for the intrusion, but it was simply a coincidence”, Kilika said. “This is standard procedure for us during the investigation of a crime and approved by Director Iriomote, and his disappearance has enough priority for us to forgo asking for permission.”

Vista jerked in her seat, eyes widening behind her visor. Armssmaster and Miss Militia reacted similarly. “He’s gone too?” she said, raising her voice. “Wait. You said there was a second person with Virtue? Could he be Iriomote?”

“From witness testimonies, one was a girl, thin, in a hospital gown”, said Kilika. This prompted Armssmaster and Miss Militia to share a look; her theory had suddenly lost a lot of weight, and both knew it. Kilika ignored them. “The other was a man, probably middle aged, in some sort of jump suit. Not many of details that your usual bystander can make out at night with rubble and glass falling over his head. But if I were to guess, I’d say that was Virtue, and the other could be an independent party, or someone connected to Dragon. Maybe a Guild member.”

“I just inspected the Director’s office”, Raven said with an Indonesian accent. “There were signs of another fight.” She moved her wings slightly upwards, allowing her to pass four plastic evidence bags to Kilika. “One crossbow bolt embedded into his desk. Two bullets lodged in the wall. A stun gun and one of his favorite revolvers on the floor. Two of the cartridges in the cylinder are spent. No blood, except from some footprints coming from the corridor outside. I think those might be from your Swordswoman, fresh from the lobby skirmish.”

Kilika used her artificial limbs to manipulate the bolt, bullets and stun gun bags, holding the revolver in her real hands. After briefly examining the first three, she passed them to Miss Militia and Armssmaster, while examining the revolver. Her posture shifted, hunching over slightly as she cradled the revolver.

“Think it could have been Shadow Stalker? She wouldn’t have a motive against Iriomote, and could escape unseen without help.” Miss Militia examined the bolt closely before showing it to Armssmaster. “It’s not the kind she used as a Ward, or a commercial one I recognize, but...”

“There are few parahumans that make use of crossbows”, he finished, looking at the bolt. “Even fewer if you only count those on the East Coast. The closest one is Flechette, a New York Ward, but she uses a different type of crossbow with bigger bolts, and for anything smaller she has darts. I’ll ask Legend, but I expect her to have an alibi, not to mention a lack of motive.”

*I’m not saying it was Sophia, but it was Sophia.*’ Vista resisted the urge to voice her thoughts out loud. Sophia’s bitchy ways were mysterious and inscrutable.

Miss Militia sighed. “Great, just what we needed”, she said, rubbing her eyes with a hand. “I’ll find Renick and give him the bad news, he’ll be the one in charge now.”

“I should be the one to go”, Armssmaster said. “Besides, he’ll expect an assessment on Dragon’s actions, and as a Tinker partner of hers, I’d be the appropriate one to do it.”

She looked at him with suspicion. “ Aren’t you usually in constant contact with her?”

Armssmaster didn’t lose a beat. “She was patched into the security system since she came to the Bay, so she was concerned about the sabotage affecting her end and went dark as we arrived the scene. I saw no reason to compromise her security longer than needed.”
“That can wait”, Kilika said. “Armsmaster, I need to have a word with you in private. Raven and Devilfish will accompany Miss Militia to talk with the Deputy Director. If Iriomote has truly been captured or worse, HAVEN will make finding him a priority, but we’ll coordinate with Director Renick as time allows.”

Her two comrades nodded sharply at Miss Militia, who nodded as well. “Alright, come with me then.” She gave Armsmaster a dark look before she left. “This conversation isn’t over yet.”

The three took off, followed by the HAVEN troopers, and once they were gone, Armsmaster turned to Kilika, inclining his head to match hers. “I know you want to find Iriomote first, but-”

“Whatever it is, it can wait”, Kilika interrupted him with a raised hand. “We need to talk about something else, Armsmaster. Miss Militia already hinted at it before we arrived. People are becoming suspicious.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Think”, she said, waving a hand towards the ruined lobby, “what the PRT and its PR department might do to justify this disaster. The more time Dragon and Virtue wait to make contact, the greater chance the PRT will play around with suspicions like Miss Militia’s: that Virtue is the one behind this butchery. Even if she’s a Guild member, as an outsider, they’ll pin it on her, and your connection with Virtue isn’t subtle. They already refused your petition to bring in parahuman healing for her, after all.”

Armsmaster crossed his arms. “They wouldn’t go that far.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time it happened. It makes sense at times, and makes things simpler for everyone... well, everyone else. Remember, I work directly under the PRT, I know how things are done. I can assure you this mess will spill all over you.”

Vista grimaced. That didn’t look good for Armsmaster. Things might not have gone as he planned, but as far as she could see, he was only trying to help.

“Is that a threat?” he asked.

Kilika tilted her head. “No. I doubt whatever I say will move the cogs faster than they already are, and I’m not personally invested in what happens to you. But I thought it’d be courteous to warn you, from team leader to team leader.”

Armsmaster sighed, dropping his arms at his sides. “Thank you, and I apologize. It feels like everything is falling down and I don’t have the time to fix any of it.”

“Not a problem. But want a suggestion?” she said with a shrug. “Fix them one by one. I only know of one person that can juggle several projects at once.”

Armsmaster gave a humorless laugh as he turned to look at the sky. “You’ll have to show me one day”, he said as more newcomers showed up above the buildings. New Wave, the local independent hero family. “I feel that it’s a skill that I would have welcomed many times in the past.”

“We’ll see about that”, she said wistfully, cradling the revolver in her hands. “He just disappeared.”

Armsmaster nodded, but kept silent. Kilika obviously had a personal connection with Iriomote.

As Vista thought that, she saw Kilika turn her head slightly towards her.
Startled, Vista neutralized the space compression as subtly as she could. When she looked back to them, Kilika had turned around alongside Armstrong to meet New Wave, as they flew down to them.

Had she caught her eavesdropping? If so, why hadn’t she said anything?

She let her head hang, lifting her visor and rubbing her eyes. She wasn’t tired enough to sleep yet, not really, but maybe they’d let her go down to the Wards quarters so she could relax a bit. Maybe finish some homework or-

“So, where is the asshole?”

Vista jerked away in her seat from the voice, and turned around. Glory Girl was there at her side, with her white dress, cape and tiara over her long straight blonde hair, a furious face and holy shit she’s terrifying I’m scared don’t kill me leave me alone-

“Vicky! Aura! You’re scaring her!”

Oh, right. Glory Girl’s emotional aura. If it hits you and like her, you’ll adore her. If you fear or dislike her, your legs will wobble like butter and you’ll cry your heart out like the most useless punching bag ever.

Feeling her head getting clearer, Vista took a deep breath and looked around.

When had she fallen to the ground?

Glory Girl’s cousin, Laserdream, was the one to call out her, and went to help Vista get up and settle down her visor again. “What the hell, Glory Girl!?” Vista yelled.

Glory Girl floated closer. Vista still felt her emotional aura affecting her, though much less, but the independent heroine was still frowning. “I said, where’s the asshole that almost killed Gallant so I can punch him into the ground?”

Vista was already standing on her feet when Laserdream intervened. “Vicky, calm down, this isn’t the place for...”

Vista didn’t give her time to finish. “Do you have to scare and browbeat that outta me!?”

That took Glory Girl aback, but she still pushed on. “You were the last one to see him. Armstrong wouldn’t tell, and this is faster than arguing with him.”

“Faster!?” The aura was still scaring Vista, but she had it with her by now. “The Swordsman tried to kill Virtue and disappeared, I don’t know where she is, and even if I knew, do you think I’d tell you when Armstrong didn’t, after this? Get lost!”

Glory Girl walked close enough to invade Vista’s personal space and tower over her. “Says the one who let the fucker go.”

Vista felt her heart beat like a jackhammer again. Glory Girl had enhanced her emotional aura again.

“Stop already, Vicky! What’s gotten into you?” said Laserdream as she put herself between them. Which, considering Glory Girl’s Brute rating, meant pushing Vista away instead.

It was a laudable effort, but Vista wasn’t thinking straight anymore from the primal fear she was getting bathed in, or maybe she was simply tired and angry at the older girl. “I did all I could to stop
them from fleeing and failed. But at least I didn’t endanger civilians like you did at the bank!”

Glory Girl bristled, tensing as if considering slapping her, but she stepped back. “Don’t push me”, she said before turning around and walking off.

Feeling the aura decreasing its pressure on her, Vista steadied her breath. That was not a fun experience at all.

“Sorry, she’s been in a bad mood since she heard Gallant was injured”, Laserdream said with a grimace. Like her younger cousin, she was also an attractive blonde, but wore a white suit with pink accents and a hairband. “She didn’t even wait and go to meet him at the hospital, just flew off and met us on the way here.”

Vista rubbed the back of her head. She must have hit her head against the ground when she felt because damn it hurt. “And I get it, she’s upset, but what did she expect? That I’d kneel and praise her-?”

Laserdream smirked. Oh, yeah. Some people would definitely do that.

“Don’t worry. I don’t think she’ll hold a grudge. And besides, not many people get to tell her off, so you get a cookie for that.”

Vista’s lips flattened. A cookie? Seriously? Why not a lollipop? What the hell was with older blondes taking potshots at her? Did she have a note at her back saying ‘I’m a kid, demean me’?

Her mind went back to what Laserdream had just said. Had she just told off Glory Girl? Holy shit, she had. While aura-freaked out. Family aside, she didn’t know any heroic person who did that.

People liked Glory Girl, and she was the strongest Alexandria package in the Bay. Vista wasn’t sure if she was in trouble, the PR people might get a collective stroke if they had to salvage her public image from acting like this towards a well liked heroine, but screw that, she felt a bit better now.

She chuckled. “So, what are you guys doing here anyway? You missed all the action.”

“Mom thought you could use the assistance”, Laserdream said with a shrug. “Glory Girl came directly here, and Brandish is staying put so she can convince Panacea to heal Gallant.” She shook her head in disappointment. “Sometimes it feels like only Gallant or Panacea exist for her, and she’s petty enough to go kick ass instead of supporting her people first. Bad priorities, but you know how she is.”

Vista scoffed. “Thinks with her fists before her heart?”

Laserdream frowned at that, rubbing the back of her neck. “She should be thinking with her brain, but, well... Vicky. Anyway, the Pelhams are all here too, but it seems like we came for nothing.”

“That remains to be seen.” Both girls turned to watch Armsmaster approach accompanied by Miss Militia. Lady Photon, wearing a white suit with purple lines and a tiara in her hair, and Glory Girl followed a short distance behind them. Armsmaster’s helmet blocked most of his face, but his mouth was set in a worried line.

“Renick just got a call from the Boston branch”, he said. “Dragon’s ship crashed in Boston, reasons unknown. Ordinarily, the Protectorate there would take charge of the situation, but their team is indisposed. As we are the nearest branch, we’ve been called to assist.”

“Why? Isn’t Dragon, like, connected to her suits from Canada?” Laserdream asked. “Where did they
“As Dragon has been unavailable since the attack, the ship is the best clue to what happened”, Militia said. “And it crashed in the North Zone, the area that Sahelanthropus destroyed during its attack months ago and which is now teeming with the Teeth, Accord’s people, and squatters of all kinds.”

“Oh. Yeah. You don’t want them to get there first.”

“Also, Virtue was sighted boarding that ship during the attack”, Armsmaster continued, “which we suspect was in part an assassination attempt. So this would be a rescue mission as well.”

Militia looked at him. “Or an arrest.”

Lady Photon raised an eyebrow at that. “New Wave isn’t enthused with Virtue’s methods, but I thought he was a hero in good standing with the Guild?”

He sighed in frustration, but whatever he had to say was interrupted by Glory Girl talking over him. “Oh, do tell. If they turn out to be a bad guy we gotta be ready.”

“This is not the time!” he insisted, raising his voice. “Militia, we don’t have enough information yet, so let’s keep our suspicions to ourselves until we know anything at all.” He directed this last bit at Glory Girl, who looked tense.

Miss Militia stayed silent for a moment, and sighed. “You are right, that was unprofessional of me. I guess they made an impression on me during the exercise. Go on.”

“Alright”, Armsmaster said taking a breath. “Considering the current situation, I cannot commit too many heroes to Boston. As I’m familiar with Dragon’s technology, I’ll go, accompanied by Dauntless and Velocity. Militia will stay here with Battery and Assault to keep things under control.”

He looked at Militia. “HAVEN will be focused on the investigation here, so don’t be afraid of patrolling and answering calls. It shouldn’t be any different to when they weren’t around.”

She nodded, and he then turned his attention to Lady Photon and Laserdream. “If anyone in New Wave would volunteer to come as well, it would be appreciated. It shouldn’t take more than a day.”

“It’s late, but I’ll go. Manpower and Shielder can stay here to assist Miss Militia”, Lady Photon said as she shared a look with her daughter, who nodded.

“Sure, count me in. I’m sure you guys can use as many flyers as possible there.”

“Hell, I’m going too”, Glory Girl said hands on hips, glaring at Vista for a moment as she talked. “There’s something going on between Virtue and the Swordswoman and I want answers. I’m tired of people attacking my family.”

“It’s just a theory, Glory Girl”, Armsmaster said. “If you come – because God knows I can’t stop you – you better have enough self-control to not do anything rash. Again.”

“Not to mention”, Lady Photon added. “You’ll be with me where I can see you, and I’ll call your mother first. You might be useful there, but if she’s against it, you’re not coming. And after the bank, you better believe I’ll have you on a tight leash, Victoria.”

Glory Girl looked downcast, pouting. “Fine.”

“Sir, I’d like to go too”, Vista said, trying to sound as professional as she could. “I know I can help.”
Militia crossed her arms. “No, we are not dragging the Wards to this.”

Armsmaster, however, looked at her curiously. “Why would that be, Vista?” he asked.

“Well, sir”, Vista stalled as she put her thoughts in order, “several reasons. I was planning to spend the night at the Wards quarters anyway, but now it’s inside a crime scene. I can help with recon and extraction. If the Swordswoman is after Virtue, then she’s bound to show up; Gallant is my teammate, I would feel pretty bad not doing anything that might have helped capture the person who wounded him and is trying to kill another hero. Finally, she—” Vista pointed in Glory Girl’s direction “—is incapable of cooperating with us, so please don’t pull the ‘must keep the cute kid safe’ card on me because if she’s going then I’m going too.”

Glory Girl gave her a look halfway between questioning and outraged. ‘Fuck off already.’

Armsmaster rubbed his chin as he leaned towards Militia, who shook her head to him. “She has a point”, he said. “We could use her help. I’ll talk it out with Renick.”

Miss Militia massaged her forehead. “You’re making a mistake here. Another.”

“Your objection is noted”, Armsmaster said sharply, before turning back to Vista. “If the Director gives the go ahead, you will stay with me and do as I say. If for any reason that Swordswoman shows up, you will disengage immediately. Is that understood?”

Vista nodded sharply. “Alright, have a trooper escort you through the cordon and get a fresh costume”, Armsmaster said before walking off, calling out orders. “Everyone get ready and try to get refreshed before we depart, transports will arrive soon and I have to talk with the Director...”

Letting out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding, Vista turned around and walked towards trooper Zhou, who was standing at ease and waiting for her next assignment. She was anxious after what happened, and now she had the opportunity to do something about it.

She just hoped the Swordswoman wasn’t Virtue. The memory of the Rig exercise was still fresh in her mind, and she wasn’t looking forwards to facing Virtue, in a real, potentially lethal fight.
Taylor waded through the flooded street.

The water reached her hips. It didn’t prevent her from walking on, but it made each step she took slow and labored.

She couldn’t remember how long she’d been walking through the water.

She looked around as she advanced. She was in a crossing, giving her a choice of three streets, in addition to the one she had entered from, but she didn’t recognize any of the buildings that surrounded it.

She didn't know why they were all on fire.

They burned, but in a perplexingly peaceful way. The fire didn’t roar, but simply crackled softly, like a hearth. The buildings fueled the fires, but didn’t seem to be consumed; though trying to get inside one didn’t seem like a good idea.

Mist covered most of the open space, tinted an orange hue by the fire.

Thunder rumbled from above, a prelude to the soft rain that started falling everywhere. The fires were extinguished rapidly, and the mist dispersed to show a night sky mostly covered in clouds but with open spots to show many stars glinting behind.

She looked around, slack-jawed. The thinning mist hadn’t revealed any street signs. She looked at the sky, moving her prosthesis above her eyes to protect them from the rain. Taylor wasn’t versed in stargazing, but she didn’t recognize any particular star or constellation that could help her guide herself.

Taylor couldn’t remember how she got here.

She wasn’t sure what direction to keep moving, but she couldn't see how her choice would make a difference.

It was a confusing experience. It wouldn’t be so bad if there were people. She couldn’t see anyone, at least not outside the buildings. The water was incredibly clean, and she could see the ground her feet without problems, but there was nothing around, not even litter, much less bodies. Not that it would have been better.

“You are far from home, aren’t you?”

Taylor jerked in surprise, turning around to her side.

Well, at least she found someone.

The man sat on the flooded steps of one building, with only his legs submerged. He wore a black hooded jacket, camo pants and military boots. A survivalist, maybe, or the owner of a gun shop.

Taylor sighed. “I don't know where I am but... yeah, this ain’t home.”

The man chuckled. “I see. Well, I am far from my own home as well. But that is usual for people like us.”
She narrowed her eyes in confusion. The man seemed to have some accent. Russian, maybe. “I’m sorry. People like us?”

“I see it in you”, he nodded. “The history on your face. They way you move. The way you talk. And more.” He then sat up slowly. “Sad. So sad. A host of sorrows. And you”, he said pointing a finger at Taylor, “are one of them.”

Great. The only person around and it had to be a crazy. “And you got all that just meeting me now?”

A chuckle. “No. Call it... a sense of empathy.”

He smiled. “You might not remember, but you have been here before and returned back. There was another. Not something many can claim to have done. And here you are, for a second time. It says interesting things about your life. And certainly sad.”

He took a few steps toward her, extending his arms to the sides. “Tell me. Do you remember how you got here?”

“Huh...” She glanced aside, trying to remember. “There was... fire? A hospital? No. A ship. I was flying... We were escaping. From something, somewhere.” She inhaled sharply. Why was she flying? “I was... in a Dragon ship, with her, Diamond and Snake. We were going to Toronto? No, Boston. Then she shut down and...” She gulped. “I fell. I fell from the ship.”

He smiled.

“But this... this isn’t Boston, right? It can’t be.”

Wait, he said it happened before. When?
If she fell... she should be dead.
Like she almost died.
After the fire.

“Who are you?” Taylor was starting to get properly scared. She took a step back and crouched, assuming a more defensive stance. He hadn't done anything threatening yet, only talked but she had nothing to protect herself if it came to blows. Except maybe the electroshock function of her prosthesis, but that didn’t seem like a good option with so much water around. “Where are we? Are you a cape and this is a pocket dimension or something?”

“Cape?” he said, laughing softly. “No such thing, and they hold no power in this place.”

He took off his hood, and Taylor could see his face better. He was gaunt, with bloodshot eyes behind his glasses and long gray hair falling down to the back of his neck. “I am The Sorrow, and like you, I, too, am filled with sadness.”

He raised a hand, lazily waving around. “As for where are we... Somewhere. Nowhere. Everywhere.”

“That doesn’t really help.”

“Yet it is the truth”, and then Sorrow started levitating above the water. His jacket disappeared without her noticing it, and revealed he was wearing an army sweater and a single pistol carried in a shoulder holster. And he was pulling the most creepy ‘floating superman’ pose that she’ve ever seen
anyone do. “This world is one of sadness. Battle brings death. Death brings sorrow.”

Taylor’s eyes widened. “You mean... I’m dead?”

The Sorrow shook his head. “This is a crossroad. A river that all the living and the dead must eventually cross.”

Taylor felt her breathing go faster. “A river of dead? Like, the Styx. No, you’re shitting me. You’re shitting me, are you?”

“The myth of the Sanzu would be closer”, he said. “But neither myths nor jests have any bearing. Neither reality nor the other side care for what the living believe.”

“You haven’t answered me yet.”

He tilted his head. “You are still among the living. Barely. I can not say the same for them”, The Sorrow said pointing down the middle road.

She looked that way. Four gray figures stood far away, hunched.

Taylor squinted her eyes, trying to get more details from them. They were grasping their faces. “Who...?”

“The living may not hear them”, he said sternly, even without dropping his smirk. “Their voices may fall upon deaf ears. But make no mistake, young one. The dead... are not silent.”

She recoiled when she saw what they were clutching. On their faces, poorly covered by their hands, were wounds. Bullet wounds. Four bullet wounds that burned in her mind like hot iron. Bullet wounds she had caused.

All four were crying loudly, mourning for their loss.

Taylor turned to the Sorrow, tears in her eyes. “I didn’t... I didn’t want that to happen”, she said. “I just... they would have killed me instead!”

The Sorrow floated closed to her, still smiling, but the mocking tone was gone from his voice. “I have wept for the dead for a long time, more so for those who died in battle. But a soldier is not to blame for the conflict that kills them, or sees them kill another. For them, guilt comes only from causing such pain without cause. I have seen how you fight. You brought them sorrow, but you are not to blame.”

“Are they here forever?” she said, keeping her gaze on her victims. “Isn’t there like, a heaven or hell, or something?” She never was a believer, but now she found herself hoping sadness wasn’t all there was to the afterlife.

“Nothing so simple. But that is not for the living to know.”

He turned around, floating through one of the streets the figures weren’t occupying. She couldn’t see anything different about the street he had chosen. “Come. You must return to your world.”

Shaken, she gave the dead one last look before hurrying to reach The Sorrow’s side. Not easily, as she still had to wade through the water. “Why am I here? Why did you show me that?”

He seemed amused. “The answer to your first question should be obvious.”

“But you brought me here.”
“No. I told you, this is a crossroads to the other side. Neither place has any higher intelligence to

guide them, they simply are. I am merely able to travel between the worlds of the living and the dead,

but everyone ends up here on their own.”

“And you’re sure this isn’t an alternate Earth? Like Aleph?”

“This place is not a ‘world’ as you understand it.”

Right. So she was dying, but not quite dead, and this was purgatory. The River Styx. The lobby to

the great death party, whatever.

That was... great. Just great.

They kept moving down the street in silence, as a mound emerged from the gloom far ahead of them.

“You haven’t answered my second question.”

The Sorrow nodded, turning his head to her. Despite his name, she had read amusement in his

smiling face, but not now. “There is death in your life. Death in your past. Death that you caused,

and death that you mourned. Undue or not, your world and your life is less for it.”

Taylor knew what he was talking about.

The four men she killed, who were now wailing behind them.

The mother she had lost in a stupid car accident.

The father she lost to a fire.

Because of her.

“Is... what these men were doing there... is that it, for everyone?”

The Sorrow was silent for a moment in consideration. “Acceptance helps taking the next step. Those

who need more time tend to have died unexpected, violent deaths.”

“Like accidents? A fire?” She felt her eyes water. Please, don’t let them be here...

He inclined his head down to her. “I deal mostly with those who died in battle. But I see no reason

why it would exclude others.”

She stopped, and so did the Sorrow.

She kept her fist at her sides, trembling. She didn’t cry. Her face was wet from the rain. That was all.

Just the rain.

“And you’re telling me I have to go back?”

His smirk returned in full force. “I’m not the one to decide that. You’re already doing it on your own.

Your body heals, and recovers, whether the soul wants or not.”

Taylor glared at him. It wasn’t a look of hate, but one of desperation. “Do you know where...”

“Where your parents are?” he finished with a laugh. “Do you realize how many have walked these

waters?”

She slumped over herself. The only chance to see them again, and the fucking world of the dead was
too fucking large to even search for them.

“I have nothing else back there”, she pleaded.

“But you do. You are just too stubborn to see what is in front of you”, he said tilting his head, and chuckling. “Your predecessors have forged a path before you which you cannot help but walk, even as you seek to avoid it.”

Now Taylor was the one to laugh, hollow and mirthless. She thought she was starting to understand why someone who watched over the dead and called themselves the Sorrow laughed so much. “You say that as if you know the future.”

The Sorrow simply shrugged. “You are young yet. You will experience things even those ‘parahumans’ believe to be impossible.” He turned and pointed to the mound at the distance. “There is where you’ll go back to your world.”

“As for your second question”, he said as he turned back to her. “As there is death in your past, there is death in your future as well.”

“So, what, you want me to not kill anymore? Cause I’d be glad to not-”

“No”, he cut her. “You will kill again. It is not a matter of predestination or fate, but of circumstances. Willingly or not, you were drafted into a bloody war, and in war, one does war. We may chose our own paths, but neither you or I can manipulate the course of the entire world. Killing is just as inevitable as saving a life. I only ask you to remember one thing.”

Behind them, she heard the four soldiers drag themselves through the water, moaning and weeping.

“‘I don’t see, I can’t see anything!’”

“My head...”

“Where am I! Where’s my family!”

“Damn you, damn you, damn you!”


The Sorrow nodded in approval.

With the cries and condemnations behind her, Taylor turned towards the mound, but paused before taking a step. “Will I see you again?” she asked him. “Not, not by dying, if possible.”

He hummed. “Again? Maybe, if you remember. You are growing. We will see.”

Taylor chuckled and walked away. “Not one for giving exact answers, are you?” A moment passed without an answer, and she turned around. Nobody was there except the four soldiers slowly pursuing her.

She exhaled loudly. “Right.”

Taylor hurried to wade through the water until she reached the mound. There, she saw herself, lying on her back and looking as healthy as someone having a near death experience would.

“Yeah. Because falling on an inflatable mattress would be asking too much.”
As she put a hand over the body on the mound, she heard the Sorrow for a last time.

“The spirit of the warrior will always be with you.”

“Far too young. She has the spirit, I’ll give her that, but she’s just a kid.”

“You know it won’t be her alone.”

“At least this one has some training; the other doesn’t even have that. Are you sure about this?”

He took her hands gently, and smiled.
Taylor broke the surface of the water gasping, lungs burning and limbs heavy.

She had been lying submerged on concrete rubble, and hauled herself up the pile until she could rest her head without drowning as she coughed out water and gulped air greedily, her sides melting from pain.

Coughing fit over, she lay back limply on the rubble pile, facing the rainy night with her lower body still in the water.

She screwed her eyes shut, focusing on her breathing. Breathing was good. It made her lungs and limbs hurt less. Not her sides, but hurt less was better than hurt more. Or something.

Without moving, she opened her eyes, noticing that she was facing what looked like the surviving inward corner of a crumbled building. It rose up for what would have been three stories, and every wall was worn out, and there were no trace of any floor attached to the walls. A corroded metal flower pot was all that was left, lying on its side at one of the windows above and kept in place by rubble, with some white flowers barely hanging on.

Where was she? She had been flying over Boston and...

Ah, right. The fall. She’d fallen onto Boston. By the look of things, she was back in the North Zone.

She couldn’t catch a break. She had almost drowned while unconscious, following a fall from god knows how high, after she’d survived mercs and assassins sent after her for some reason, her house torched, her father-

She closed her eyes again, inhaling deeply as a gust of wind came by, making the walls creak and plucking weakened petals from the flower, causing them to fall away.
“F-fuck... fuck everything.”

She opened her eyes again, and as the white petals fell around her, she noticed one land right beside her, in the spot where her sides felt more pained. She reached out to pick it up without looking, a move born of curiosity no more conscious than trying to scratch a minor itch.

She raised it in her hand. It was dark, but her eye still could make out the silhouette of the white petal. She thought she recognized it. Someone must have given her the name some time that she saw the flower. Star of Bethlehem.

Wait, no, it was tainted red. And sticky.

That was blood.

Her breathing quickened as she looked down at her body. Her right side was caked in blood, and something thin stuck out of it.

Pain increased as she understood why exactly did it hurt. That was where her liver should be. “No no no no...”

She couldn’t see it clearly in the dark and under the rain, but arching her back carefully, she passed her good hand below.

It felt like rebar, and while there wasn’t much of it peeking through her side, there was a bit more of its length behind her, some of it dry. The tip was bound to a small piece of rock. It didn’t weigh on her, but that rock was fixed to a wide cord of some kind, maybe a small chain covered in plastic. She pulled it, but after a few inches it didn’t budge. If she’d tried moving any farther earlier, she would have noticed it immediately. Whatever it was, she was anchored to it.

It was somewhat hard to make a diagnostic as well. Maybe her liver was perforated. Maybe the rebar just brushed it in its way through her body. She couldn’t know.

She didn’t know for how long she had been out, but there wasn’t much swelling or bleeding. It shouldn’t be a bad sign, the liver swelled when injured. But the lack of swelling could be for any reason.

Even if her liver wasn’t damaged, there was the risk that she wasn’t making a proper diagnostic. Hell, for as much as she had been picking up on medicine that well during the last months, she wasn’t a real medic. She was in the dark, the wound was obscured by her own blood, and she probably wasn’t thinking clearly. What if she had a concussion from the fall?

She couldn’t move. She didn’t have a cell phone, but she still had the ear bud Snake had given her. She should...

Another gust of wind passed by, and she looked up as the wall creaked again.

It didn’t look as straight as before. In fact, she didn’t like at all how It was tilting in her direction.

A third gust, and the wall leaned a bit more, the flower pot falling in the water in front of her.

“Shit!” Alright, no time to call for help.

Arching her back again, she gripped the rock attached to the rebar with her good hand, while she put her prosthesis above the point at her side; it looked banged up, but it was moving as well as she could hope, and it’d be able to push.
Her breathing didn’t slow down. “This is gonna suck.”

Taylor bit her lip and pulled.

She pulled the rebar out in one motion, and she screamed.

Tossing the rock aside, she lay on her good side, breathing shallowly through her nose. Her hands pressed around the wound, something primal in her mind demanding that she plugged the hole.

Rising to a kneeling position was painful enough to bring tears to her eyes. She took off her hoodie carefully, so she could use it as a makeshift bandage on her-

Another creak in front of her made her look, seeing the wall finally giving in.

Ignoring her body screaming in protest, she turned and clamored up the rubble pile, away from the wall—

Only to find that the floor abruptly ended on the other side.

Taylor tumbled down, bouncing several times as thunder, rubble and water roared around her.

She finally stopped two stories below her initial spot.

She held still until she was sure everything was calm again, then gingerly pulled herself up.

The spot she had just fallen on was surrounded by wet rubble. The sleeve of her hoodie peeked out among the cracks, inaccessible.

Her wound wasn’t bleeding. It hurt, of course, but not as much as she would have expected. She still needed to clean and dress it, but at least she wasn’t incapacitated. She could use the rain, but she’d need some fabric.

She could maybe tear a piece of her pants or tank top, but that wasn’t as easy as movies made it look.

Taylor choked back a sob, sitting down. “Just... just one day without the world shitting on me. That’s all I ask. Just one.”

She looked down at her shoes. Her socks were... probably clean. They were good, soft socks, and she didn’t need them to walk. They would do.

She stood up, looking around. She was in a ruined building full of debris that had probably been medical equipment once.

Taking care to avoid another fall, she moved to sit on a boulder that was close to the edge of the ground. She leaned her shoulder against one of the few walls that still was up as she took off her shoes and socks, checking them to be clean enough as she looked down below.

Off in the distance, she could see the lights of Boston. The intact portion of the city glowed invitingly, while she was stuck in the middle of the North Zone.

After all that had happened — all the shit she’d gone through, all the people that had attacked her, all the people she’d lost — she was still here. Alive.

Taylor laughed hollowly. “Seems joke’s on you, world. You can’t get rid of me”, she whispered, finding the rain strangely comforting.
The suit booted up, and Dragon activated its optics.

She started a diagnostic process to check the suit's status while she looked around.

To say that the ship was a mess was an understatement. It was so torn up and warped that she was pretty sure she was pretty sure 'wreck' was a better description.

She rose up to her feet when a whine came from a hole in the ship, and Diamond came inside. He came closer and sat, ears and tail dropping.

She brushed his head with a metallic hand, and he shook water off his fur. “Hey boy, where's your master?”

“Dragon?”, came a voice from the outside.

“Yes?” she answered. “Is that you, Snake?”

She was lucky the suit's biocomputer was still intact. It meant she only had an unexpected nap.

He might not have taken this suit from her yet, but Saint was really the most inopportune man around. Oh, how she wished to get her hands on him. Usually when Saint managed to disable one of her suits, he made sure to destroy the biocomputer she ran on, forcing her to load a backup at her main servers with no memory of the events. She'd made an unscheduled backup during the flight to Boston, and though she hadn't needed it, she was glad she had. If the biocomputer hadn't survived, she'd still have remembered that Snake was friendly, and that Taylor was in danger.

Snake came in, wet from the rain. “How’s your nap been?”

She grunted with irritation. “Sorry for the scare. There’s this idiot, Saint. He tends to disrupt my communications to steal my technology while I’m not in control. Man in armor not unlike this one, maybe you have seen him around?”

“No armors”, he said shaking his head and stepping closer to her. There was a bruise on his face, and his outfit looked scratched, but otherwise he seemed fine. “I've seen some street punks sticking their noses around, though. Bones and desiccated body parts around their clothes. The Teeth?”

“Probably. How many? They could be a problem.”

“Three, but they’re dead.”

“You... you killed them?”

He raised an eyebrow. “They were attracted by the crash. I could have left with the dog, but I figured you’d prefer to find your suit intact, if you ever returned. Maybe the ship too, or what’s left of it.”

“Yeah, ok, I appreciate the thought, but was killing them necessary?”

“They came alone, I think they were scouting the place, got an interest on salvaging the crash. Diamond noticed them and I took an elevated position over some rubble when I saw them”, he said, holstering his weapon and kneeling at the door. “They talked, and when one made three copies of himself, I knew any fight would be to my disadvantage, so I took the shot. I didn't have any darts left, so I had to use the Mk23.” He dragged a body from the outside, allowing her to have a look at his face and the bullet wound at the side of the head. “Took down the others too, didn't want to take my chances with them warning their friends and bringing more capes. At least not before we left the place.”
“Huh”, she said eloquently. “That’s Spree. Wanted for multiples accounts of battery, theft and murders. He didn’t have a kill order, though.”

Snake frowned, pushing the body outside. “So he was a danger to the public and us. I acted in defense of myself and others. Is this going to be a problem?”

She sighed, conceding the point. Where other villain groups dedicated themselves to criminal business, the Teeth took aggressive violence as business. Had he waited for Spree and his companions to get closer to the ship, he would have had to fight them, and the Teeth weren’t big on mercy. Snake must have ran his own numbers about his tactical options with what little information he had. It wasn't exactly violent vigilantism, and if Snake or Taylor was unconscious inside, she might have done the same if her restrictions allowed her.

“If anything, we’ll have some more time to move out.”


Diamond laid down at her feet as Snake sighed. “After you shut down, we were trying to land when we got hit. Two explosives, probably anti-aircraft missiles. That's what made the hole.”, he said waving a hand around the aperture. “We weren't braced, and Virtue...”

Dragon froze on the spot. “She... she fell?”

He nodded slowly. “I’m sorry. I tried to call her through CODEC after the fall, but couldn’t reach her. I called Otacon afterwards, I was planning to meet him first.”

Dragon understood, of course. With Taylor lost, and herself incapacitated, he’d have to worry about the people he still could help.

“I’m... thank you for trying.”

He lifted a hand, cutting her off before saying anything more, and raised a finger to his ear, listening to something. “Hold on a moment.” He kept listening, and a moment later, he took an ear bud from a pouch and started manipulating it. “Changing frequencies. Normal one, not bone conduction. Any way you can use it with the suit?”

She took it, and opened a compartment at the ‘throat’ of the suit. It was designed for the use of similar audio tools, in case others' communication systems weren't compatible with her suit's. Some tabs would keep it in position, facing an audio receptor, and one of them would be able to push it at will.

When she did so, her metaphorical heart skipped a beat.

“Snake?” she heard a familiar voice rasp. “Snake, Virtue here, you hear me?”

“Taylor, we hear you!” she hurried to say as she saw Snake smirk. Diamond straightened up at hearing her mention his master’s name in excitement.

“Dragon? God, you can’t imagine how glad I am to hear you. This day can’t end soon enough.”

“I feel the same. When Snake said you’d fallen, I was worried you'd died.”

“Right, feels like the world insists on getting me killed”, Taylor kept talking, tired. “Had a weird dream about a flooded city, then woke up drowning with a wall about to collapse on me and a piece of rebar sticking through my side. I'm not sure how I'm still alive.”
“What?! Taylor, how serious is that wound?”

“It’s... fine.” Dragon and Snake exchanged a look. Taylor didn’t sound very sure. “I think it went through without touching any organs, and there isn’t much bleeding. I just cleaned the wound, and... well, it isn’t fun, but I can walk.”

“Taylor, Snake here”, he said. “We are relieved to hear from you, but what’s your position?”

“I’m not sure, some tall building. The last and only time I was in Boston there was mist all around me, let me... Shit!”

“Taylor? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, some rubble slipping under my feet, I’m trying to climb up to a roof and get a better view. Where are you guys at anyway? Is Diamond there with you?”

“Diamond’s fine. Not a scratch on him, lucky boy”, Snake said. Diamond whined and shook his head, as if offended that he would be hurt by a mere crash landing. “As for where we are, I saw an obelisk that might be the Bunker Hill Monument. But I’m not that familiar with the city, and the rain isn’t helping. Dragon, you think you can help from where you are?”

She shook her head. “I just finished running diagnostics on the suit. It’s so damaged that most things aren’t working. Including the GPS system. I could consult a map from where I am, but we’d need to traverse the streets as we check for directions.”

While she had downloaded a map as they flew closer to Boston, there were no communication antennas around that she could use to contact with her main servers, and she didn’t want to tip the issue of her real identity yet to anyone. But for all purposes, she was as stranded as the others.

“Wait a second, I’ll get Otacon and Emma on the call, she might help us.” Dragon saw him manipulate his ear bud before talking again. “Otacon, are you safe?”

“Yeah, we’re at the Nashua Park”, came Otacon’s voice through the CODEC. “Nothing suspicious around so far, probably because of the Sheriff’s office in front of us scaring whoever was after us. But nevermind us, are you guys alright? We could see the crash from here; people are nervous, and the police are milling around the building like ants.”

“I’m fine, and Dragon’s up as well. But Virtue got separated during the fall, and I was hoping Emma could give us directions.”

“I’m pretty sure you crashed around Bunker Hill”, said Emma. “Do you see any landmarks?”

“There’s an obelisk in front of us, and at our right I see skyscrapers. I assume that’s the metropolitan center, they’re illuminated.”

“You might be around the Bunker Hill Mall. If you turn just a bit more to the right from the center, you should be able to find the city quarry. North Point Park is just past that.”

“That’s good, it is actually closer to you than I was expecting”, Dragon said. “Virtue, do you see anything around you yet?”

“Yeah, just got to the roof of this place. It’s, dunno, seven stories high? Seems like a hospital, some medical equipment around. I see some kind of playground just in front of me, and a small row of docks at the river beyond it. The shore keeps going directly to my right, and at around forty five degrees to the right I can see those skyscrapers beyond the water.”
“Huh, I think that’s still Bunker Hill, but... do you see the obelisk?”

“Too dark. I see the point of something behind me, but I’m not sure.”

Emma hummed. “Alright. Virtue, I think you are at the Spaulding Hospital. Which, lucky for you, is not Admirals Hill or beyond, because that bridge collapsed a couple weeks ago, but... well, I’ve got two bad pieces of news for you, and two good.”

“Must be lunchtime somewhere...” Taylor said with a sigh through the channel. “Ok, sure, hit me with the bad news first, it isn’t like I’ve got enough already.”

“Ok, first thing, there was a suspended road between you and the Bunker Hill Monument. It collapsed.”

“So we can’t go meet with her first?” asked Dragon.

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t count on it, unless you want to meet her at the Charleston Bridge, but she’ll have to walk the same distance on her own anyway. Or you can fly over it, but I think that’s already a scratch on the list.”

“No, my suit had a jetpack, but it was wrecked in the crash.” ‘Like everything else...’

“Alright, what’s the other?” said Taylor.

“There are a lot of squatters in the area. The big gangs grab all the supplies shipped into the Zone, so there are a lot of desperate people in the areas the gangs don’t claim. They aren’t necessarily violent, but they’ve been waiting for disaster relief since the attack started. They might not react well to strangers at this point.

“Ok, do not disturb the locals. What’s the good news?”

“Well, you pretty much can follow the same street straight to Paul Revere Park? You can turn to Charleston Bridge or the gravel supplier from there.”

“That’s it? You said you had more good news.”

“Uh, no gangs?”

“Fine”, Taylor said with a sigh. “I guess it could be worse. Dragon, Snake, we’re meeting at Revere Park then?”

“I’ll have to scuttle the ship first, I don’t need Saint taking anything more than he already has”, Dragon said, and then looked at Snake. “The equipment in my suit may be done for, but it can still move and the plating is good. I can take point and cover you in case we’re attacked?”

“Sounds like a plan”, Snake said. “Virtue, keep your frequency open, we’ll keep in touch. Otacon, you stay put with Emma and Sunny. We’ll go get you after we meet up with Taylor, then deal with your stalkers. Any of you call us if there’s any problem.”

“Can do, Snake”, Otacon said.

“Can’t we just get into the Sheriff’s office?” Emma asked.

“No, it wouldn’t be safe.”

“For you?”
“For Sunny.”

Emma grumbled something about freezing under the rain, which prompted a reply from Otacon about already being under cover, but otherwise kept silent.

Sunny must be the daughter that Snake mentioned being a babysitter for. Dragon wondered for a moment how important she might be to carry her safety to that point, but dismissed that thought. It wasn’t important now.

“Virtue”, she called. “You’ve been lucky so far, but please, be careful.”

She started worrying after a moment of silence, until Taylor answered. “Yeah, don’t worry about me. You be careful too, keep Diamond safe for me.”

Dragon looked down at her feet, where Diamond laid on his belly, sadly waving his tail. If her suit allowed her to smile, Dragon would have done so. “Yeah, he’ll be safe. I think he’s already missing you, you know.”

She closed her metaphorical eyes. ‘And he’s not the only one.’

Buffalo was looking at a tablet, checking the new information that Code Talker had sent her.

She kinda missed her old iDroid. Sure, it was expensive as hell and she had to return hers back when the Dogs disbanded. But she never quite got the hang of tactile screens. The holographic screen with easily navigable menus appealed much more to her, and they made it in the Seventies, long before any Tinker ever dreamed of doing anything of the sort. Maybe she could convince the old timer to develop a newer model, if they were really bringing the band back together?

She chuckled at herself. Perhaps that was the way her old age grumpiness would be manifesting itself. Complaining about new technologies.

Could be worse, like losing her youthful vitality. She wouldn’t be herself anymore.

“We are cleared to approach Boston air space”, Pequod called from his seat. “We’ll be flying over the city very soon. Moderate rain, low visibility. Also, Quequeeg called, the team is almost finished looting Saint’s computers and will head to the meeting point.”

She nodded to herself. “That’s good. I got new intel from HEC, including the location and coordinates of the crash”, she said walking in a crouch behind his seat and passing him the tablet. “And revised objectives.”

“Hmm, I thought we were only picking one VIP”, he said, reading the tablet.

“Yeah, the old timer is interested in this guy with the bandana too”, she said pointing at one image at the screen. “Turns out he’s called Solid Snake.”

Pequod jerked his head upright, and then gave her a look through his helmet visor.

“Yeah, that Solid Snake. HEC just confirmed it. And after seeing his face, we think he might be one of the Enfant Terribles.”

“No wonder, he really looks like the Boss. Only without a beard”, Pequod said giving another look at the photo. “And what about the others?”

“After what Tree Frog found at Saint’s hideout, I guess we’re helping Dragon as well; Code Talker
feels that leaving her on her own isn’t safe for her. The others are associates of Solid Snake, he probably doesn’t want to leave them behind.”

“You realize this is going to get pretty cramped, right?”

“What’s the matter?” she said with a smirk, returning to the command seat at the back of the cabin. “Not feeling like being some god damn hero today?”

He frowned. “Expecting trouble?”

She smirked, taking up the grenade launcher that was hanging at the ceiling and starting to load it. “You know what Commander Miller said. Expect trouble always.”

She stepped out of the door onto the roof of a worn out building under the rain, kept away from touching her by her armor. Cricket followed her, and the door closed.

Cricket looked just as she remembered from the photos. Tank top and pants, practical for her pit fighter persona, heavy boots, a metal cage mask, blonde buzz cut hair and her twin kamas, hanging at her sides. She also had a jacket and a satchel hanging from behind now, and seemed nonplussed by the rain.

Cricket shoved her forward, pushing at her neck with a thumb. “Move”, came her electric voice. She had her throat slashed in a fight and rumours said she had been using an artificial larynx to talk ever since. It seemed like her new employers had implanted her one. It was probably easier to carry than a handheld model, and sounded less robotic.

They had switched on her speech restriction, so she couldn’t answer. She still could wave a hand toward the entire ruined city in front of her.

Cricket produced a tabled from a pocket with a map on the screen. “This is where they crashed. Ten minutes walk. We move in, take a look. Make a search, try to stick to the roofs and not be seen. We find your target; if it’s alive, you make sure it is dead. Simple as that.” She sighed, not very sympathetically with her protege. “Look. I would prefer to be back with my mates too, but this life isn’t so bad. You wanna live? Just stop moping and do your job. Is not that hard.”

Cricket moved on, and she stood there for a moment, taking a breath and looking at herself in a nearby broken mirror.

Yeah, just one more innocent kill, and that’s-

She turned around alarmed, taking the sword from its scabbard.

But nobody was around. Just her and Cricket.

“You seen anything?” called the woman from the other side of the roof.

Exhaling, she shook her head and took off after her minder, who scoffed.

She could swear she had seen a man behind her in the mirror, with glasses and a smirk, and a tablet with the word ‘Lies’.

She would have felt better if she wasn’t sure that what she just saw wasn’t a mere hallucination.

Screw all of this. If she hadn’t lost her mind yet, she was well on her way to losing it now.
Taylor leaped over the gap to the next building.

The side of the hospital she had landed on had fallen over, allowing her to trek down to the roof of a low elongated condo complex she had just jumped to. She could have tried going down to the street, but a long tall building that had the docks behind it had toppled over against the condos, blocking the way with rubble.

So there she was now, jumping over the roofs. The condo complex was damaged, but at least it looked viable to travel over it.

Taylor turned around and looked at the gap she had just jumped over. By her estimates, it was a tough sell. It wasn’t a deep fall, and she would be able to return and try again. But it was too wide to be safe in her current state, though not so much as to not be worth a try. She had expected in her first try to reach the edge with her hands and then have to climb it up, and maybe slip off with the rain.

Yet she leaped over it effortlessly.

With a hand around the wound, she looked at it. While she was able to clean the wound both at the front and the back of her torso, she only had one sock left to dress it at her back, leaving the front in clear view through a hole in her top. It still hurt, but it was a bearable pain.

Has she overestimated the jump? Or did she just suddenly turn into a Brute or a regenerator? She felt less and less tired as she passed more time under the rain.

‘Nah. Must be the adrenaline. It’ll start giving me hell any minute now.’

She started moving, travelling over the roof, until she reached a part where the roof had fallen in. Curious, she got closer to the hole, and peeked inside.

There, among the fallen concrete and the rubble, she saw a metal locker that wasn’t deteriorated, like every other piece of metal in the area. Her gear locker from the ship.

“Finally, something going my way...”

Taylor allowed herself to smile. The Glock she left inside would be useless, but the MP5, the tranq pistol and the knife she looted should be able to carry her through if she were to find herself in a dangerous situation. From what Emma Emmerich said – and what would be the odds of having to work with an Emma in this night of wonders and ‘fuck this Taylor in particular’— she shouldn’t find anything more dangerous than the homeless and the desperate; she didn’t want to hurt them, but at least she’d have a loaded weapon to keep them at bay.

Looking below her, Taylor searched for a convenient place to drop down that wouldn’t involve much of a fall. She started making way towards a spot that seemed appropriate, and knelt at the edge.

That was when a drone flew from below and right into her face.
Her reflexes taking over, Taylor threw herself over her back and rolled behind a nearby chimney. Her wound was *definitely* going to give her hell later.

She got up on one knee, and peeked in the direction of the drone. It looked far too modified to recognize its initial design and to be considered the project of a simple UAV aficionado. And along its camera it had a weapon that seemed too bulky to shoot bullets or even energy projectiles. She very much doubted it belonged to one of the homeless locals.

It was slowly rotating around, taking a view of its surrounding, but it wasn’t looking in her direction. As far as she could tell, whoever was controlling it wasn’t aware of her presence yet.

Taylor took cover again as it rotated in her direction. Moments later, she saw it pass above her, flying towards the hospital she came from.

She put a finger to her ear bud. “Dragon, Snake, I just saw a drone”, she whispered. “I don’t think it located me, but it looked armed and searching for us.”

“Are you sure?” Snake asked through CODEC.

Taylor shrugged to herself. “No, but the gun it carries is big enough to have caused the crash, and It’s moving to the hospital. Whoever is controlling it might know I fell here and wants to make sure I’m down. You haven’t seen any around?”

“No, but we’ll look out for them”, Dragon said. “It’s weird. Some of the lesser Dragonslayers members employ drones; but if it’s really them, why hasn’t Saint shown up yet?”

“Does he follow any pattern when he attacks you?” Snake asked.

“Beyond opportunity and no one being around to support me? No, not really. Taylor, if there’s a drone, there must be an operator nearby. I’ve finished with the detonation charges and we’re currently moving away from the ship. But you keep an eye out.”

Taylor groaned. “I don’t know if I can, I only have one to spare.”

There was radio silence for a moment, but she could swear Snake chuckled.

“I guess”, Dragon said with indecision, “*that joke fell a bit flat.*”

She snorted with amusement. “Sure, a joke. Let’s go with that.”

“I’m sorry, that was tasteless. I’ll repay you after we’re all safe and sound?”

“Just give me a quiet night covered in blankets and everything is forgiven.” Seeing that the drone wasn’t coming back, Taylor stood up and closed in to the hole.

“Sounds like a plan. By the way, Snake, how are your friends holding up?”

“They’re shaken, but fine. Otacon’s more of a lab rat, but he can manage a night standing watch. His sister seems more shaken up; she probably never had to stay out a whole night being shadowed. I’m more concerned about Sunny, but at least she’s sleeping.”
As she neared the border she was planning to drop off, Taylor guessed that Sunny might be the girl Snake said he was taking care of. She wanted to ask what age she was, but a different question formed in her mind instead. “Sleeping? What hour is it?” she asked as she sat, with her legs dangling in the air, and jumped down.

“Must be around four in the morning.”

Taylor dropped on the floor below. The fall wasn’t too high, but it forced her to crouch on the landing, and she stopped herself from standing up for a moment. “That’s… when did we leave Brockton Bay? I thought it was late noon at most?”

“Yeah, it was around midnight when we got shot down.”

A cold shiver went through her spine. At the very least that meant three hours and a half, during which she would have definitely drowned if she spent that much time underwater. Considering the inclined surface she had woken up at, either she slid off down into the water that was already there, or the rain had filled the cavity until the water covered her.

“Why haven’t you left then, Snake?” Dragon asked. “You must have thought at some point that I wasn’t reactivating the suit.”

“The suit padding saved me, but it doesn’t cover my head. I was out cold until half an hour before you two came back on the air.”

Taylor stood up and started walking towards the gear locker. “Wait. And in three hours no one at all has found us yet?”

“Hmm, I took down a few Teeth that were snooping around the crash. But they are locals.”

“Yeah, but we got the Dragonslayers, some military mercs, and a cybernetic assassin. From what your friends said, the city saw us crash and they haven’t sent nobody to investigate. And only now we’re seeing signs that maybe the Dragonslayers are already here.”

The locker was upside down, so she crouched to put it right and open it as Dragon replied. “No one is supposed to move into the North Zone without authorization, and with Accord and the Teeth already controlling the territory… Do you think everyone is dragging their feet and waiting outside for us to be dealt with by the locals?”

“That’s not a comforting idea”, Taylor said as she took the wrapped knife from the locker, and started tying it to her pants, fastening the cloth to one of her belt loops.

She finished fastening the weapon when light flooded at her side. Not waiting for it to reach her, she left the locker and ran behind a big wooden closet that was toppled on its side.

“Dragon, you should wait until we’re farther away to detonate the charges; we don’t want to attract unwanted attention to our position that soon” , Snake kept going through her ear. “And I’m not talking about the local gangs.”

Someone dropped from above, the sound of heavy boots impacting the ground rumbling.

“I agree. Let’s get to the other side of this other building first.”

From her hiding spot, she could see that whoever it was, they were protecting the light that almost
enveloped her. Taking a peek, she saw a large man in a hooded jacket and a Tinkertech-like chest rig with armor, with a floodlight mounted on one shoulder and a small gun on the other. He also had a screen attached to his left forearm, with a rifle hung from his shoulder, and a pistol at his hip. His presence was quickly imprinted in her mind.

He started scanning the ruined floor with the light, until he moved his hand to a microphone near his mouth. “Yeah, saw something just now while seeding the condo. Just checking it’s not the rain playing games on me while the drone moves to the secondary crash site at the hospital. How are things on your end?”

So they had seen her fall on the hospital. If they did, they must have been watching the ship being shot down from the beginning, and it was highly probable that these were the ones responsible for it.

Taylor took cover when he turned around, passing the light over the closet. “Hey, don’t play cute with the tech, Saint’s orders were to search and destroy. Just locate her suit and her pet and blow them up.”

Ok, so the man was a Dragonslayer agent and this wasn’t a rescue operation. But ‘pet’? Seriously?

The Dragonslayer kept turning around. “Yeah, I dismissed my contacts. Half are cops and didn’t want to risk anything in front of the sheriff, too obvious… hold on.” He said when he located the locker.

Well, it was good to have things look easy for a moment.

Standing on the roof of a building, she watched the armed goon enter the crashed ship below.

At her side, Cricket pushed a button on the tablet screen, and a chime came from the neck of her armor. “Are you sure they’re not there?”

She cleared her throat. “Would need to take a better look, but it isn’t hard to guess”, she rasped. “That’s a Dragonslayer agent. Only reason to be here is to loot or destroy the place. Unless they’re already dead, we would have heard a fight by now.”

Cricket stood silent for a moment. “Are you planning to let him kill your target first?”

She simply raised a hand. “Just wait.”

Taylor considered her options as the man approached her locker. The doors behind her or the ones further away from the Dragonslayer were blocked with rubble, and the only one clear enough to pass through was too close to the locker to not be seen. She couldn’t climb back up, and didn’t know what to expect if she jumped down to the floor below or directly to the street, not to say any damage from that jump adding up to what she already had.

So that meant she’d have to subdue him or slip away somehow, hopefully with her gear. And for that she’d have to go through him or distract him.

As if on cue, Dragon answered her thoughts. “Alright, prepare for detonation in three, two, one…”

The ship went off in a ball of fire, and she saw Cricket arc an eyebrow at her through her mask.

She shrugged. “If you were Dragon, wouldn't you be tired of the Dragonslayers stealing your tech
by now too?"

“So she rigged her ship with the girl and the soldier inside?"

“I’m sure they weren’t here to begin with”, she said shaking her head. “There was a hole on the side of the ship. Either they got killed when they got shot down, or jumped out during the fall.”

Cricket scoffed. “Not so fast, princess. Get down there now and start looking for bodies.” She then pushed the button again to lock her speech restraint again.

She rolled her eyes behind her helmet.

The only way down was a nearby metal ladder that had already been fallen off. The building was only two stories high; before, she wouldn’t have dared to jump down five stairsteps, but now at least she felt confident enough to climb down the edge of the roof, hang in there with one hand, look down to better control her fall and-

Her hand slipped, and she fell to the ground on her butt, losing her breath.

She laid there on her back, taking deep breaths, as Cricket looked from the roof, gripping one of her kamas in a way that would have allowed her to pry her fingers off the edge. “I said ‘not so fast’, not ‘take your goddamn time’”.

‘Bitch.’

Her ass and back ached, but at least she hadn’t broken anything.

Groaning, she rose up from the ground and started towards the still flaming wreck. Good thing that blade couldn’t scratch the armor…

Taylor heard a distant explosion. and the man turned from the locker, looking that way. “Hey, was that you? It came from your direction.”

Right. It was now or never.

Crouched, she started moving towards a boulder. She barely had moved halfway the distance when he started turning back again, and she dove, falling behind the rock on her good side.
That was when a burst of the rifle went over her cover.

“Tricky bitch, ain’t you?” he growled as she leaned back against the rock.

She started fiddling with the cloth at her hip, taking out the knife. “Look, I don’t know you and I don’t want any problems, ok? I just wanna leave in peace.”

“Sure, girl”, she heard him say. “In a pine box. All the peace you want in there.”

Alright then. At least she could say that diplomacy was a no-no.

She looked at the locker. It wasn’t far, just a short run she’d be beside it. The problem was how to reach it without being riddled with bullets.

The sound of a grenade pin caught her attention, and in her mind he could see the Dragonslayer taking cover behind the open door, and winding up for a throw.

She didn’t know what possessed her to do it, but she stood up and threw her knife in one swift motion. She had never done such a thing before to even know how to properly throw a knife, much less one so unfamiliar like this one. She hadn’t really taken aim with her eyes, merely guiding herself with the track in her mind about his position.

It was enough. She didn’t quite stop the grenade from flying in her direction, but the knife struck true in his arm. “Agh! Fuckin-!”

Not waiting for the grenade to reach her, she sprang to her feet and ran for the locker. When she heard the grenade touch ground, she jumped, diving behind the rubble behind it. It wouldn’t protect her from gunfire, but it would cover her from the explosion.

The grenade went off and she fell on her belly, scratching her wound, but otherwise untouched by the shrapnel.

Taylor gasped in pain. If she got out from this alive, she was sure her liver would be filing a restraining order against her, and she couldn’t blame it.

She didn’t have the time to waste. In her mind, she saw the Dragonslayer drop his rifle and start unholstering a pistol at his side.

Her hand shot over the rubble, and blindly grabbed the first handle she could find, taking off the safety with her thumb as fast as she could.

Both of them raised their guns, aimed, and fired.

His shot grazed Taylor at the head, nicking an earlobe, but otherwise leaving her uninjured.

Her MP5 roared, aiming at his head. Most bullets were reflected by the armor, but one managed to hit his neck.

He dropped his pistol, and fell on his knees. He put his good hand up to try and stop bleeding from the neck, but he only succeeded in gurgling through his mouth. His strength was fading fast, and it wouldn’t be long before he bled out or drowned in his own blood.

Taylor relaxed her grip on the submachine gun, and let out a breath. If in relief or stress, she couldn’t say.

Killing in self-defense wasn’t something she was enjoying, much less after she tried to talk him down
and got answered with explosives. But staying alive was good.

She left the MP5 at the locker after checking the magazine was spent. Taking the Wu pistol and shoving it into her pocket, she walked up to the Dragonslayer, who was frantically trying to operate the screen on his forearm. “If it’s worth anything, I didn’t want this. You didn’t give me much of a choice.”

She wondered what he’d be thinking. She imagined he would be angry and afraid, as expected. What surprised Taylor the most was the thought that he was amused. But why would he-?

With some gurgling behind a smile, his hand dropped, and then she saw clearly the screen flash with a warning. ‘Detonation charges. Countdown: 00:17’. She remembered him talking about “seeding” the building.

That might be a reason for amusement, Taylor guessed, if one was a vindictive asshole. It would be hard to keep her empathy with people like that.

He finally died, but not before some approximate locations of the explosives planted coming into her head. All of them tinkertech, and alongside the length of the building.

How or why had she somehow plucked the explosives locations from his mind didn’t matter. She needed to run now.

She yanked the knife from his body, and running to the edge of the floor that would lead her to the street, she jumped off. She expected to land hard on the street, but instead she landed in a pile of rubble leading to the insides of the nearby building that had fallen on its side.

So the choice was between dying by bombs, or dying being buried inside a building when those bombs finished the job of making it crumble over itself.

Well, no one could accuse Taylor of being given easy choices.

Hoping there was an exit at the other side, she started running into the ruined building when the bombs detonated.

She dropped the second burnt corpse outside the wreck when Cricket finally deigned herself to get down to the ground.

Cricket moved closer, and locked at the bodies. “The Dragonslayer”, she said looking at the armored one and taking the battered but still functioned screen in his forearm. “And one of the Teeth”, she said looking at the other. “That’s all?”

She nodded.

Tearing the screen off the arm, Cricket started checking its last uses. “There was another Dragonslayer to the east. Turns out their secondary target is Virtue as well, and they think she landed in that zone. They were planting bombs on the buildings around to wall her in…”

That was when several buildings to the east started going up in flames. The explosions were muted by the distance, but it was clear as day that someone had brought some heavy ordnance to that zone.

Giving her a look, Cricket shoved the screen into her hands, and pointed to the explosions with a thumb. “Don’t stand there like an idiot. You got a new lead, get moving.”
“Taylor? What happened? Taylor!”

She didn’t stop to answer Dragon. She was running up a tilted section of wall where she needed to help herself with her hands to climb it up, and the building was collapsing behind her.

Once she got to the top, Taylor took off as fast as she could, running between scattered office furniture, sliding through crumbled door frames, leaping over cracks, and jumping past glassless windows. The dust was getting thick around her, and the rumble of the collapse louder.

She didn’t look back even for a moment. That would be a waste of energy and speed. And she was scared enough as it was.

Several minutes of racing later, she finally got outside through a wide glass door to a neglected garden. She didn’t stop though, seeing water directly behind the grounds, and taking even more speed.

Once she got to the edge, she jumped, diving into the water just as the cloud of dust went over her.

Her lungs were already burning after all that exercise, but she kept herself underwater, following the shore to the right as she swam.

After a few seconds she couldn’t hold her breath anymore and resurfaced. This time wasn’t as dramatic as the previous time, but her breathing wasn’t less greedy for it.

Taylor helped herself with her good hand onto the concrete wall for a while, until she reached a sandy shore and dragged herself from the water, exhausted.

It was still raining when she sat on the sand, and most of the cloud of dust had already dispersed when she recovered her breath. After checking the wound at her torso hadn’t gone worse, she put a finger on her ear. “Dragon? Dragon, I’m here, I’m fine.” She started flexing her prosthesis, checking that it wasn’t damaged. “Soaked and tired, but fine.”

“What happened? We saw explosions close to you and a dust cloud big enough to cover several buildings.”

“Well…” She paused, and then kept going, seeing the building she just left finishing to crumble into itself. “We actually have the Dragonslayers after us, and by the way, Snake, they sent paid cops to trail your friends, but aren’t risking a move in front of the Sheriff. A goon tried to shoot me, and then activated explosives he was planting around. Got away and took a bath.”

“Alright, that’s good. Where’s he now?”

Taylor chewed her lip for a moment. “I killed him.”

The CODEC was silent before Dragon talked again. “Taylor…”

“Look”, she hurried to interrupt. “I… tried to talk him down. His answer was a grenade and…” She exhaled. “I don’t know, Dragon. I’m not trying to become a murderer or anything. I don’t want to, but I feel like if I hesitate for a moment I’ll be the next one to die.”

“No one is saying you did wrong, Taylor”, Snake said. “But what I think is worrying Dragon is that it might start to get easier for you.”

Taylor sat up and started walking up to firm ground. “This time was… At the PRT I just reacted; I saw danger and instinct kicked in. This time I had the option to not kill. But I didn’t take it because I
was already being shot at and I didn’t want to risk getting killed myself. It was,“

“ I know what you mean. This sounds cold, but in the battlefield sparing a live is a luxury. I don’t
know capes, but most soldiers aren’t there to actually hurt the enemy. They’re just on opposite sides
doing their jobs. No one’s out to get you, not really.”

“This one talked as if he was.”

“Because taking you down was his job. That doesn’t make it personal, but at some point you have to
recognize when sparing a life is worse than taking it.”

“I’m not sure how to put it how I thought about it. Maybe not a calculated action, but an acceptable
one? And it scares me.”

“That’s good. Unfortunately, killing is one of those things that gets easier the more you do it. But
being afraid of that means you understand the weight of your actions.

She reached pavement, and a small building with the number 224 and a small sign that said
‘Charleston Marina, Pier 8’. “Does it weigh on you?” she asked in a low voice.

“That’s a heavy question to ask.”

She stopped, and screwed her eyes shut. “I’m… sorry. That was insensitive of me.”

She heard him chuckle. “You are new at this. Every rookie has faced the same questions before.
Even if not all have gone through the same as you at your age.” He paused a moment, and
continued. “Let’s make a deal. I’ll tell you, if you get out of this alive.”

“Oh, wow!” she said with a small laugh. “After the night I’ve had? You’re a real jerk, you know
that?”

“Oh, I knew you weren’t squeaky clean”, said Dragon, in a conspiratorial whisper. “I’ll be giving
you the stink eye, mister.”

“Don’t worry”, he said with amusement in his voice. “There are people who think I’m a legend.
Reality tends to disappoint them.”

“Oh, a legend, are we?”

“Among military. There was a tendency with looking up to FOXHOUND operatives until Shadow
Moses. I don’t really care for it, believe me.”

“Well, legend or not, I’ll hold you to that deal, just so you know”, Taylor said as she started walking
through the streets, and even littered with rubble and discarded vehicles, these were considerably
clearer than the previous ones. “Anyway, did you have any incidents there? Hopefully nothing as
bombastic as what I went through.”

“Diamond located a stand off between members of the Teeth and Accord’s Ambassadors in our
way”, Dragon said. “Both attracted by the crash and the explosion, no doubt. We’re too far away
from them to be seen, but I was expecting the detonation in your zone would have distracted them,
and they’re not moving yet. We’ll be taking a detour, I don’t know how long we’ll take to meet you.”

She nodded, making sure the knife was held tight by its cloth again, and taking out the tranq pistol.
“Alright. I’m on my way to Revere Park, hopefully I won’t find more problems along the way.”
Act 1: V has come to - 12

Vista awoke from her nap when the helicopter touched land, and groaned as she lifted her visor and rubbed her eyes.

Before they boarded the helicopter, officer Zhou had come to her with a cup of foul tasting coffee and the advice of catching a quick nap. It felt like it had helped, but she was going to need a proper sleep in a bed after this. Maybe volunteering herself for this mission wasn't the smartest decision she had ever taken, at least in relation to sleep.

"Vista, are you ready?" Armsmaster asked from his seat while they waited for the propellers to slow down.

"Yes, sir", she said with a nod. "Give me a minute. Though I don't believe I'll try to do this again, permission or not."

"Technically you still don't have it", said Lady Photon, seated at Armsmaster's side and giving him a pointed look.

"Until I deem your presence in the field acceptable", added Armsmaster. "Director Renick's words were very clear, yes. Thank you for reminding me. Again."

Lady Photon simply hummed in response.

The doors of the helicopter opened, and they walked out as Dauntless, Velocity, Laserdream and Glory Girl left their own helicopter.

They were at an helipad situated at the top of the PRT HQ at Boston, a much taller and broader skyscraper than its counterpart in Brockton Bay that towered at the center of the city alongside other buildings.

They were all quickly escorted to a meeting room at one of the top floors. When they entered, there were already two occupants inside. A tall broad man in a suit looking at the city through a window, and a metal figure with the appearance of a teenage boy seated at the far side of a table.

"Ah, finally! Armsmaster and the Brockton Bay division, coming to the rescue", the man said with a strong voice and a Texan accent, turning around and revealing a square face with a smile under his glasses, a finely trimmed beard, and holding a lit cigar in his hand. "Welcome, welcome! I am Director Steven Armstrong, as you might have guessed." He then waved a wide hand towards the metal boy. "And this is Weld, my protege, and the pride of my Wards. Please folks, have a seat. This is an emergency, but that's no reason to keep you standing."

They started taking seats, with Armsmaster and Lady Photon taking points on both sides of the table. "Thank you, Director", he started. "With me come Velocity and Dauntless, plus Vista from the Wards. Lady Photon from New Wave", who nodded in greeting, "has volunteered to help us alongside Laserdream and Glory Girl."

"Of course. I've just read the files on all of you; I'm familiar with what you do, so don't worry, I won't ask you to tell me." With a hand behind his back, Armstrong took a drag of his cigar, and scoffed in amusement. "Seven parahumans, my boy", he said to Weld in a low voice. "And to think that after talking with that old frog Renick we thought we wouldn't get any help at all."

"Director", Weld said with a patient smile, "I might not need to sleep as much, but it's late and I'm
"Sure our guests would like you to get to the point."

"True, let's get this party started, hmm?" Armstrong immediately said, finishing his cigar and putting it out on an ashtray.

"Before we start, we'd like to know why have we been called to assist", Armsmaster said. "Don't get me wrong, usually we'd be glad to help, and I would assist Dragon any time, but we just had a critical event at Brockton Bay and the timing is inconvenient, to say the least."

"I'd like to know that as well", added Lady Photon. "I accepted to help because Boston wasn't that far away, but where are all the local Protectorate capes?"

"Yes yes", Armstrong replied, shuffling on his feet and waving a hand downwards to prevent more questions. "Renick told me of the little... skirmish you had. From what I've been told, your good patriot has the situation in your city under control, and the entire board of directors approved my request, so don't worry about it." He took a seat at the head of the table and clasped his hands, resting them over the board. "The Protectorate have their hands tied at the moment. Accord and Blasto tend to keep to themselves, and the Teeth toe the line because otherwise they would have to deal with everyone else. But the situation has roused every villain gang in the city, and the Protectorate are busy keeping them under control."

Lady Photon's eyebrows shot up in incredulity. "All night, Director?"

Armstrong gave her a look. "What do you want me to say? That they've been partying like a lazy frat party while the Butcher's and Accord's men are running around? They're busy, Lady Photon. Them and almost all of my officers; it's unusual but it's what's happening. That's all you need to know."

He took a remote and pointed at a screen on a wall, showing a map of the North Zone, the part of Boston that Sahelanthropus had ruined months ago. "This is how it is. Past midnight, an explosion was sighted in the sky, causing an unidentified object to fall around Bunker Hill; preliminary analysis of visual footage identified the crashing object as a Dragon-craft stationed until now in Brockton Bay."

Vista noticed that Armsmaster stiffened for a second in his seat when the screen showed a photo of the falling ship.

"It's hers", he said. "That's the one she had at Brockton Bay."

Armstrong agreed with a nod. "Figured as much. When all attempts to contact Dragon were met with silence, that's when I called for help to the nearby branches. We've been regulating the flux of movement to and from the North Zone to keep it quarantined from the rest of the city, but Accord has control of one access, and the Teeth are crafty when they need to be. Given how important Dragon and her work is, recovering that ship and any intel about Dragon is a priority." He turned to Armsmaster. "I understand you share a working relation with her as Tinkers. Is there any reason for her silence?"

Armsmaster took a moment before answering. "She contacted me as I approached the Brockton Bay PRT HQ. She mentioned security concerns, with the attack affecting her own systems, and her intention to cut communications for the time being."

Armstrong narrowed his eyes. "You mean you got moles in there capable of reaching the greatest Tinker alive? The only ones we know who can do that are the Dragonslayers."

"I'm slated to check the security systems upon my return, but you'll have to ask Deputy Director
Renick, sir. I already talked with him about it, and he's currently executing M/S protocols."

Armstrong huffed and adjusted his glasses with his free hand. "I really don't understand how your branch is still standing. But anyway." Pressing a button on his remote, the screen changed to show a row of ruined buildings. "We don't have a visual of the crash site. Too many buildings in the way, and the night rain makes things harder. But we got this footage from one of the patrolling boats we sent from the north east of the crash."

The screen was almost black, just clear enough from a light near the camera to make out the silhouettes of buildings. Suddenly, a series of explosions went off along one of the lowest buildings, affecting the nearest one and causing it to start collapsing. The camera changed to the green tint of a night vision mode, and focused on the two damaged buildings. The video fast forwarded a couple minutes before returning to normal speed, and everyone could see a figure run out of the second building, and dive into the water before a dust cloud covered them.

"This happened half an hour ago", Armstrong kept saying, fast forwarding the video again while the camera seemed to look out for the figure, and pausing it at some seemingly random moment. "Some of our specialists went over the sky explosion footage again, and noticed a human figure falling from the ship. The fall trajectory correlates with the zone where the explosions and collapsing buildings occurred. And look who we then caught getting out of a night bath."

The video resumed again, showing a girl drag herself from the water on a small shore with the camera adjusting the night vision settings to clear up the image. Vista leaned forward to better study the girl, who wasn't aware that she was being observed. She was sitting on the shore exhausted, and moving a finger to an ear to talk, possibly through radio. It was hard to guess at her age, but her face and slim frame were heavily scarred, at least what her clothes didn't hide. Her pants, shoes and tank top were soaked, her hair was a wet mess, and her prosthetic arm was dented.

Vista's eyes widened behind her visor. She'd seen the prosthesis the other night when Dragon brought the owner out of her burning home. She had a hard time keeping her stomach under control, as the metallic arm was the only recognizable part of the charred body.

"Considering that ship came directly from your city", Armstrong said, "I bet you know who that lady is."

Armsmaster sighed. "Virtue", he said in a low voice betraying both his relief and uncertainty. It was clear from the short side glance Lady Photon gave him that the cat was out of the bag. It was one thing to keep the details of Virtue's identity under wraps between the PRT and Protectorate member. New Wave weren't under the same obligations, and with Virtue not being a member of the Protectorate, the PRT couldn't ask them to sign NDAs to not reveal anything about her to the public. Not to say, as a PRT Director, Armstrong would be expected to tell his colleagues.

"That's them? I mean, her?" Glory Girl said with surprise.

"She looks... younger than I expected", Laserdream said.

Velocity tapped his temple with a finger in thought. "She was seen leaving with Dragon. She might have jumped off the ship before it crashed. Sabotage? Someone expecting Dragon to extract her, and rigged her ship?"

"Unlikely." Armsmaster shook his head. "I can't think of a single moment when her ship would be unattended during the last two days."

"The analysts think it was an external explosion", Armstrong added, "perhaps an attack with an AA
weapon. They suggest the Dragonslayers did it."

Armsmaster frowned. "Saint is the only one who always seems to know where to find Dragon and how to take her ships and suits down without resistance. He wouldn't care about collateral."

Dauntless straightened in his chair. "So the building explosions Virtue was fleeing from might have been them trying to silence a witness?"

Armsmaster sat up with a clenched jaw. "Director, when will be your men be ready to depart?"

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The ship was a burning wreck.

Buffalo lowered her binoculars as she cursed herself. Were they too late?

"See anything, Pequod?"

"No. Want me to land?"

A ping in her ear bud caught her attention. "Hold that thought", she said as she put a finger on her ear. "I'm here."

"Buffalo, this is Mitchell." The HEC director. Code Talker had put him directly in charge of providing her with intel.

"What you got for me, Mitchell?"

"Not much. But our observer managed to get us some visuals from his observation point. Dragon and Solid Snake were spotted traversing below the I-93 and the Gilmore Bridge minutes ago. You should be receiving the data now."

Her tablet chimed to show her a photo of Solid Snake alongside Dragon's battered suit and Virtue's dog behind them. The image was poor, and taken from far beyond what she suspected was the camera top range at night. But their forms were easily recognizable. A set of coordinates accompanied the photo.

"Pequod, take us to these coordinates", she said giving him the tablet without waiting for an answer. "Anything else, Mitchell? Anything about Virtue?"

"There are also mentions in social media about explosions at the coast west of Bunker Hill, and sightings of a girl. Besides that, the local gangs are moving towards the crash site so they shouldn't be a concern, but the PRT just received reinforcements from outside, they should be mobilizing into the North Zone pretty soon if they aren't by now. That's the best I can give you for now."

Buffalo smiled as the helicopter lurched towards its new direction. The kid should be trying to meet with Dragon. Find Dragon, find Virtue. "Believe me, Mitchell, your best is enough to give me some hope. Keep me posted, will you?"

"Of course Buffalo. Just be careful. Everyone here wishes you a safe return with the VIPs."

She laughed as she opened the side door and clipped her safety line to the floor. "Aw, guys, you'll make me blush."

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She crouched behind the parapet of the roof, confident that nobody was seeing her under the downpour..
She finally found Virtue, who was currently crossing the roof of another building. The sides had fallen off and blocked the streets around it with mountains of rubble and some mud around it.

She considered what to do. If she had found Virtue, Cricket would have as well, and she'd be waiting for her to strike as soon as possible.

Which seemed weird, now that she thought about it. Virtue had been the one to catch Cricket, whom she imagined had ended in XOF the same way she did. One would think the previous Empire enforcer would try to settle the score herself.

In any case, she couldn't get away with fleeing or leaving Virtue alive. Harbinger would know with help of Cricket, and then he'd find her.

She closed her eyes, and breathed, calming her nerves.

And then started making her way to Virtue.

"I'd like to thank you."

Snake turned to look at Dragon behind him as they walked among the rubble below the bridge. "What for?"

"Taylor." She crouched under a fallen beam he just passed, her damaged suit groaning from the stress it was being put under. "I... What she's gone through, what she had to do... I'm knowledgeable in psychiatry, but it's one thing to know what someone's mental state could be doing to them, and completely another to find the correct words to tell them, to comfort them..."

Assuming an upright position again, she walked at his side along the small road, while Diamond got ahead of them, sniffing. "I wanted to help her. I've killed people before, and I should have known what to say. But I realize it's not the same. Not the same as what she just had done."

"Doesn't the Guild hunt dangerous parahumans?"

"Yeah. But it's different. Half of the time, those parahumans had already left behind any sign of their humanity, living only for the next fight or kill. And... When I kill, which I only usually do when the target poses a danger far too great to the public, I do it from behind a screen, from my home. I've never thought much of it. Someone gets a kill order, if I get interested in picking up the case, I go and do the deed. That's the basic distillation of my experience in killing."

Dragon shook her head. "But now I realize that's far too narrow a view of it. And it doesn't apply to Taylor. The men she killed were normal people. After her, yes, but for all we know, just normal soldiers, that were only trying to make a living. And she killed them personally. I might have compared our experiences during our last conversation, but that would have been the wrong call. They don't compare, and I would have only confused her further."

She stopped, and Snake did the same. "She's slow to trust anyone, and might still need help after this, she went from orphan to killer in barely hours. But what you told her, you said it from a shared experience and without judgment. I think it actually helped her."

"So..." She left the silence hang for a moment. "I don't know what will happen after all this, but you have my sincere thanks."

Snake grunted and started walking again. "Don't mention it", he said as Dragon kept pace with him. "But you understand she could have avoided this situation."
"Would you believe I was against it from the start?"

"Then how did you end up working with her?"

"Armsmaster. He was... insistent about backing her up."

"He's a Protectorate member, right? I thought they are supposed to encourage younger capes into the Wards."

Dragon nodded. "The ENE branch leader. It wasn't like him. It was like..." She sighed, as Diamond returned and took a position at her side. "He was obsessed, it's the only way to describe it. Which isn't that unusual for him. We collaborate on many projects, and I need to drag him away from his workbench when he needs to eat or sleep."

"And he drags you out of it as well?" Snake asked with a smirk.

"Please." Dragon waved a hand dismissively, while holding back a giggle. "My personal time management has no rivals. What do you think I owe my reputation to, producing containment foam?"

"Hmm, a humble woman. Sounds like he's taking advantage of you though."

"I enjoy talking shop with him", she shrugged. "Still, about Taylor... He got fixated on the idea that Taylor's injuries, the ones that took her arm and eye, were his fault, and that he should make it right. It snowballed from there. He wasn't acting rationally on the subject. He had reasons for what he started doing, but the reasoning itself... he wasn't as rational as with everything else. It wasn't his usual self."

"But you still helped him."

She sighed. "Well, if he was going to do it anyway, the least I could do was help so nothing got out of hand."

"Think someone influenced him?"

"I'm not sure how. There are no known Masters among the local parahuman population in Brockton Bay, not of the proper type at least."

"Suggestions? Maybe a therapist that put the wrong idea in his head? Wouldn't be the strangest thing to happen."

"Maybe, but he usually keeps his sessions to a minimum. I'd have to ask him."

They kept walking up the road, halfway to the above level, when he hummed in thought.

"What if a psychic did it?"

Dragon stopped on the spot. "Wait... a psychic?" Snake slowed down, turning around. "What brought that subject? Psychics are considered a disproved matter."

"To the public, yes", he admitted. "But I suspect you know the truth. About ESP."

"Extra-sensorial perception", she said in recognition. "I know the Soviet Union researched proto-parahumans that they called psychics, and their abilities as ESP. There were also rumors that the US military itself employed them for black ops teams. But I never really found conclusive information about their existence. I assume you knew of one or more at FOXHOUND?"
"I only met him at Shadow Moses; he joined after I left in 1999. His codename was Psycho Mantis."

"Foreboding. If a little ridiculous."

Snake scoffed, though more amused than anything else. "Lady, every last one member of FOXHOUND were people that were already among the best of their own militaries when they were recruited, then trained until they were tough enough to chew nails and ask for seconds. Mantis looked like a stick of glass that could break at any moment, but he didn't become their psychological warfare specialist for nothing. He was perfectly capable of holding his own through his psychokinesis and telepathy."

"Let me stop you there. I can understand psychokinesis, that's no different from parahuman powers of telekinesis. But are you talking real telepathy here? The kind parahuman experts deem impossible?"

"He read my mind to anticipate my movements, and my memories to know everything about me in seconds. Hell, even staying on the same island made me have hallucinations of him and things he did in the recent past elsewhere. Psychometric interference, as I was told. That makes telepathy more than real enough for me."

They finally reached the high point of the uphill road that brought them to the highway. "More relevant to this", he kept saying, as Diamond took off on a lazy run, "he controlled one of my contacts to confuse me, fight for him and even threaten her suicide, shared his memories with her before dying, and brainwashed the soldiers that accompanied FOXHOUND to revolt alongside them and bolster their morale. Mantis was one of the most powerful psychics in the world, so I don't think others are at his level. But do you understand now where I'm going with this?"

"I think so. I see how someone with those abilities could implant an idea contrary to oneself. Armsmaster has worked to add anti-Master protections to his helmet, but I can't assume parahuman powers work the same as the ones of a psychic." She saw Diamond stop at some distance in the dark, and start barking at them. Not a warning, so no immediate danger. "It's a possibility worth considering."

"We are only talking hypotheticals anyway", Snake admitted. "But if this was true, who do you think would benefit more from his erratic behaviour?"

"I'd have to discount parahumans, but besides Taylor? I can't think of anyone." She noticed him giving her a flat look. "You don't mean...?"

"I'm no expert, so don't hold me on this", he warned with a raised hand. "But from what she told me about her injuries and her abilities, she didn't sound sure of being a parahuman. It seemed to me more like she was a very subdued telepath."

She gave it some thought. "Statistically, the odds are low. Even admitting the existence of psychics, their numbers are not high enough to even register as a minority among the global population. That, or either most of them aren't powerful enough to be noticed or are taking great care to not be noticed. But if they exist..."

"I'm not saying she did it consciously, if she did it at all, but..."

"No, I think you are onto something." They were finally getting close to Diamond, who stopped barking and sat patiently wagging his tail. "I raised similar ideas to Armsmaster the first night we tested her in a live exercise. It's not just that she lacks a corona pollentia and a gemma; I remember her central nervous system not reacting to the use of her abilities the same way that it does for
parahumans. In fact I compared her abilities to the Soviet research on psychics. But what little literature is available out there doesn't provide many examples to compare." She sighed. "The thought of her actually being a psychic never crossed my mind, it seemed too far fetched at the time. But I don't think she influenced anyone. She hasn't expressed such a capability, not yet at least, and if she did so by accident, she would have used it on more people than Armsmaster. Her father, the medics and nurses at the hospital..."

"A dead end, then."

Snake meant more than their conversation. Behind Diamond, the road had collapsed, interrupting their path.

"So much for our alternate route..." Dragon said, but she turned her head to behind them. "Wait, do you hear that?"

Diamond's ears perked up, and they followed the direction he was looking at. It was the sound of rotors, Dragon was pretty sure. "An helicopter. And it's coming from the crash site."

Snake unholstered his gun and held it with both hands, ready, but aiming to the ground. "Hostile, you think?"

"Not sure. But they are coming directly towards us."

It came into view soon enough, when it activated a flood light as it got closer to the road and started searching with it. "I can see the silhouette. It looks like a troop transport model, but not one I recognize."

"Anything else?"

Dragon shrugged. "For something barely bigger than a Blackhawk, it's very well armed. Armor too."

Snake grunted.

It finally spotted them, but instead of attacking, it turned around, aiming the light directly below it and lowering its altitude until it landed on the section of highway they just walked over.

The side door rolled open, and a single figure left the vehicle, walking to them with raised hands. "Don't shoot!" it shouted with a feminine voice, illuminated from behind by the floodlight. "I came to help!"

Dragon and Snake shared a look. "It might be a trap", he said.

"Only one way to be sure", she said. "Just be ready to take cover behind me."

They started towards the woman followed by Diamond, and soon enough they were close enough to see the woman with more detail. A blonde not younger than fifty with a ponytail, wearing a suit similar to Snake's, but it looked as old as herself and the torso was bulkier with the sensation of false muscles. A rifle hung at her hips.

"Dragon and Solid Snake, I assume", the woman said when they got to talking distance with a raised voice over the sound of the rotors behind her, lowering her hands and resting them on the stock of her rifle. "I'm Flaming Buffalo, I've been sent to extract you and your friends to a safe place."

"You are not PRT", Dragon said. "Who sent you?"
"No I'm not, ma'am", Buffalo answered. "HEC sent me."

"HEC?", Snake said. "HUMINT Exploitation Company?"

Dragon turned her head to him. "You know about them?"

"Only rumours. Some sort of clandestine civilian intel business. Active since the late 1970s."

"The same. A friend of yours founded it", Buffalo said. "The current overseer was a friend of him, and of Virtue's family. He was worried when he heard about the circumstances of her father's death and dispatched a team to safeguard her. He's basically the closest thing to a legal guardian she has now. He's also offering safe haven to all of you."

"That can't be true", Dragon said. "I'm aware of Virtue's family; her father was the only surviving member until days ago. Why would we believe you?"

Buffalo nodded, looking at Dragon. "The matter of Virtue's family can wait until we're out of trouble. What I can tell is that considering your relationship, we visited Saint along our way here, to make sure he didn't get in the way. It wasn't the best of timings, but I notice he didn't steal this suit of yours yet."

That caught her by surprise. "That... can be a coincidence."

"I can show you the proof when we meet my team, I left them dismantling his place. And for you, two names", she said to Snake, raising a hand. She raised her thumb. "McDonnell Benedict Kazuhira Miller." Then her index. "Les Enfants Terribles."

Eyes widened, he holstered his gun. "Snake?" Dragon asked.

"I can tell you later. But I believe her", he said, narrowing his eyes at Buffalo. "For now. You are playing with fire mentioning dead people, lady."

"Don't worry, my client can answer any questions that I'm not able to when you meet him", Buffalo said with a smile, turning around and walking back to the helicopter with a confident stride. "Now I'm sure you want to pick up your friends ASAP. So if you follow me and tell me what you can about their location?"

Vista followed Arm's master towards the helicopter, where Velocity and Dauntless were already waiting inside.

"Teeth and Accord's men have been sighted near the predicted location of the crash site", he told her. "I'm giving you permission to come, but I want you to stay in the vehicle if we move to the crash site. We don't have the numbers for a fight, only for retrieval. And you are still a Ward, in such a situation we can't dedicate our attention to your safety as well."

"Yes sir", she answered as he got up inside.

"New Wave aren't coming?" Velocity asked when Vista jumped inside the transport.

"They've been assigned the search for Virtue", Arm's master said, with some unease. "They'll start looking around the location she was spotted from the air, then sweep the zone as they go."

She picked a seat alongside Velocity, with good view of the door. "ETA for action?" Dauntless asked.
Armsmaster closed the door, and took a seat at his side. "Around fifteen or twenty minutes. Our backup is ready inside their own chopper, but Armstrong has sent ground forces first to the Charleston Bridge to cover our backs."

"What's the plan?"

"Recon the crash site from the air first." The engines of the helicopter started revving up, which forced Vista and Velocity to put on some headsets provided by the copilot. "If there are hostiles, you and our backup will scatter them from above with Vista's help. Me and Velocity will drop down and assess the damage, recover what we can. Weld has been assigned to support us through radio, he'll control our progress and informs us of any eventuality."

"A pleasure working with you, ENE Protectorate", Weld's metallic voice sounded in her headset. "Don't worry about me falling asleep this late, I can go for days without going to bed. Be advised though, Blasto hasn't been sighted yet and he's not really hostile to heroes, but the Director thinks he might make a move soon for Dragon's ship, if only to rub it in Accord's face. Don't take unnecessary risks and everything will be peachy."

"Sir", Vista asked. "What do we do if we find Virtue?"

"We secure her and bring her to safety. She's a victim in all this."

Dauntless gave Armsmaster a suspicious side glance that Vista didn't miss.

A thought crossed Vista's mind. Was the matter of Virtue enough to seriously putting it against him? It was... too ludicrous. Heroes weren't supposed to act like that.

And yet, there were talks at the Brockton Bay PRT HQ about a small feud between Dauntless and Armsmaster. The local rising star that was only getting more powerful by the day, against the leader that many believed had already reached the peak of what his Tinkering could do.

No. They were Protectorate members. Surely they wouldn't stoop so low, even if their animosity was real.

As the helicopters started lifting off, she couldn't avoid thinking if something similar was going through New Wave's heads.

Taylor carefully let herself drop off the windowsill, and slid off the rubble slope that was once the face of the building, finally touching down the road just before Revere Park. N Washington road, a nearby street sign said, still legible despite the corrosion.

She started walking, pistol in hand, when she noticed sounds of rotors coming from the west.

Hearing a ringing in her ear, she raised a finger there and accepted the call.

"Taylor, Snake here. Got good news, someone sent a chopper to extract us."

Her face brightened. "That's great! Who?"

"That's the thing. They say a friend of your family sent them for you, someone high in a group called HEC, they're involved in international civilian intelligence gathering. Got any idea who might have been?"

Taylor stopped, and closed her eyes.
The only "family friends" would have been from her mom and dad-

Don't think about that.

Breathe. Inhale, exhale.

Calm yourself.

She took her hand off her cochlear when she couldn't keep a sob. She didn't want them to hear that.

'Face the facts, Taylor'. Her father was dead. Finally accepting the reality broke something inside her, but it was what it was.

What was she going to do now? Forget the cape work. Everything material that she had had been lost, and with the death of her dad she had lost the last person she could rely on. Lacey and Kurt might have felt charitable, but after rescuing them and seeing their state, she couldn't find in herself to accept any help from them.

And she was not deluded enough to think that moving to the Barnes' household was in the cards after her dad had taken the PRT's deal. The trial hadn't been scheduled yet, but Emma being prosecuted had apparently done more to break the friendship between their families than the two years of abuse and bullying. Taylor had once wondered if Alan and Zoe were unable to think of their daughter as the monster that she had become, but she had lost any interest in dealing with them since they made their opinion clear.

"Taylor?" she heard Dragon say in her ear. "Are you still there?"

She sighed, wet cheeks looking at the clouds above with arms limp at her sides. "What the fuck am I gonna do", she whispered to herself. "What the fuck am I doing right now."

Taylor raised her hand again to her ear. "Sorry, just thinking. And no, not really", she said finally, resuming her walk around a dilapidated truck. "Can't think of anyone like that. Everyone I know were blue collar workers. Or some university professor."

Snake hummed through the CODEC.

Taylor let out a breath. "Are you picking up your friends first?"

She was crossing the middle of the road, and could see now a few trees peeking out from the park. "We could", Dragon said, "but you're still down there. I'd ease my mind if we got you first."

"No, no, it's fine. It's calm around here, and they've been wandering the streets all night with a kid. I'll wait and hide at the road above the park, five or ten minutes more shouldn't matter."

"If you're sure...

Taylor reached the sidewalk directly above the park. The guardrail had fallen off into the park, which was a mess of mud and fallen trees. "I'm sure, just don't take too long."

A smaller voice of a woman came through the earbud, probably someone talking to Dragon and Snake. "I don't like that. Is she at least armed?" A pause. "Alright, but we'll be coming for her fast afterwards, no distractions."

"Alright, hang in there, Taylor", Snake said. "We'll be picking you up as soon as possible."

"I'll be holding my breath, guys", Taylor said, standing at the border of the sidewalk when she ended
the call.

That was when something hit her head and her backside, throwing her to the mud below.

She walked down the street approaching Cricket, who had just leisurely sucker-kicked their target down the border of the sidewalk with far more vindictiveness than necessary.

It made sense, actually. Virtue had captured her months ago. Nobody really knew what happened to Cricket when the Empire tried to break her out of custody. Harbinger had recruited her, of course, but she probably wanted to get back at Virtue.

Cricket dropped a cochlear from her hand and stomped on it, crushing it. "You're slow", she admonished. "Get down there and get the job done now, she's getting friends soon. You got five minutes, tops."

To reinforce her orders, Cricket patting the pocket where she kept the tablet. The threat was clear. With the push of a button, she could activate the bomb inside her.

Sure, Cricket had another bomb implanted, but it was there to avoid capture. Hers was a leash, and they used it as such.

She sighed, sitting on the edge with her legs hanging, and jumped off before Cricket felt like making a point again.

She landed in a crouch on the asphalt of the pass below the street, while Virtue had fallen on the mud in front of her that once had been a patch of grass. It was barely ankle deep, but, it had cushioned her fall and she was now standing up, the rain already starting to work on cleaning the mud off her.

Virtue took notice of her presence, and took a defensive posture. "You again!?" she shouted, surprised. "What the hell do you want from me!"

She couldn't answer. Instead, her hand went to the handle of her sword, and Virtue reached to the knife that hung off a cloth at her hip. The knife she had tried to kill her with at the infirmary room, she realized.

Virtue's good hand moved the knife to protect her face, while the prosthesis guarded her torso. "What have I even done to you?" she asked softly.

She shook her head, drawing her sword. She wanted so much to be able to answer, to at least say that it wasn't personal. But that was survival for you. And she wasn't brave enough to refuse Harbinger.

She had never used her power for fighting before meeting Harbinger, and what little she knew of it relied now on the strength and speed of her suit. Virtue's pose spoke of experience and knowledge much greater than her own, which was unexpected. By all accounts, Virtue was sixteen, and only started caping half a year ago, using stealth more than combat to bag her captures.

There was a chance Harbinger and Cricket were trying to screw her over for their amusement, but that that didn't make any sense. It meant wasting assets uselessly, even if they wanted to entertain themselves. She was betting her money on them not expecting Virtue to be a capable combatant.

Maybe she might be able to overpower Virtue, but in any case, it was obvious she wouldn't have an easy time doing it.
She met Virtue's eye, and understood she would fight to the death if needed. Fair enough, she was doing the same, after all.

Lifting the sword in front of her with both hands, and releasing the hold on her power, Lisa readied herself.
They stood in front of each other, studying their respective opponents, as the rain lightened its assault, and the sun started to make its presence known over the coast before peaking above the horizon.

Back at the infirmary room, Lisa wanted to get the job done as soon as possible. So what if Virtue looked healthy after being burned alive? She didn't need her power to tell her how it was done, and even if Virtue had woken up in time to evade her at first with the help of her dog, there wasn't much she could have done against her armor without Solid Snake's intervention. And they probably called Panacea in to heal her.

Lisa was starting to doubt herself about that.

For one, she didn't remember at the time, what with all the shit she had gone through recently, but she… had probably done a number on Panacea. She loathed to admit it, because as much as she had fun playing mind games with people in the other side of a fight, breaking them was never her intention. Sure, while until now it was her only defense in a world of lasers and concrete muscles, sometimes she went too far, or she found herself against a physically stronger cape (which included almost every cape anyway). But what she'd done to Panacea… No. She hadn't heard of her since the bank, but she probably wasn't in a good headspace now.

As for Virtue… It hadn't mattered at that moment, as the surprised girl was an easy target on the floor of the infirmary room, so she didn't worry much about it, but her power hadn't given Lisa much information during their first encounter, despite the oddness of such a fast and complete recovery. But now that they would fight, she might need that information, and the bloody dressing at her hip would be a start.

Lisa secured her grip on the sword, pushing the button that would activate the high-frequency blade and sheathe its edge with a blue glow, and aimed her power at the wound.

   Wound correlates with position of liver. Liver was perforated, destroying organ and vital functions.

   Sings of the wound correlates with time longer than possible for survival of liver. Virtue still alive. Liver functional.

So Virtue was a Brute as well, or at least a regenerator.

   Liver not recovered by normal human healing. Liver not formed by common human cells. Liver formed by non-human tissue. Tissue not cellular. Tissue formed by a colony of organisms. Organisms acting independently from host, or at least harmonically without requiring possible input.

Lisa blinked. 'What?'

Virtue turned on the power on her knife and at the same time she took a cautious step forwards, seizing her confusion and the initiative. Lisa took a step back, but focused her power on gaining more information faster.

   Organisms in symbiotic relationship with Virtue, parahuman nature undetermined.
Origin of healing of previously burned skin and flesh and broken bones. Speed of recovery unlikely to match with the process of producing new tissue to be used by host.

Help by organisms with healing is limited. Organisms suspected to substitute lost flesh, organs and its functions, as well as strengthening bones, using the host's DNA to facilitate assimilation.

Damaged state of hair, eye, and scars indicative of such not being covered by healing, or taking a longer time to recover. Issues with assimilating nervous tissue and follicles? Issues with replicating protein fibers, regrowing limbs?

Virtue keeping guard over wound. Worried over providing a weak point. Likely unaware of the presence of the organisms, confused by accelerated healing. Parahuman nature unlikely.

'What the hell!?'

Lisa closed her eyes and shook her head, weathering the sudden strong headache, and took an iron grip on her power, reducing the flux of information. She might still need more information later, and it wouldn't do to over exert herself too soon.

Right. So unlike every polite cape in good standing, Virtue was unknowingly carrying an alien bug. Maybe. Perhaps she did knew, but Lisa had already learned not to trust too much on her power, as it wasn't infallible. She figured Virtue's regeneration couldn't keep up with her sword, but that didn't explain anything about her Stranger power yet.

She breathed in, and out, and readied herself to do what had always been opposite to her nature.

Start a physical fight.

MGS TTS OST - Snake versus Ninja

The ninja lunged at her.

Recognizing the incoming slash, Taylor started a sidestep. But she turned it into a full dive jump when she was surprised by her speed.

She landed on her left side, the smell of moist earth coming back again. She couldn't move her prosthetic arm from below her body when she saw the sword fly at her again, so she rolled away, batting the blade away with the knife in her right hand. It didn't stop it, but it diverted its trajectory, landing in the ground close to her legs.

After creating some distance, Taylor rose up and brought her guard up again. Letting the rain wash over her and taking the time to re-asses her opponent instead.
'Alright. She's fast, and that parry hit me hard, so she's strong too.' She frowned, as the ninja could be of any gender inside such a bulky armor. And yet, the thought of identifying the ninja as a female had come out of nowhere, but with a certainty beyond any reasonable hunch.

She focused on the ninja's position and grip on the sword. She had never gotten close to anything bigger than a knife and had no idea of how to properly use a longer blade, but the way the ninja held and used it felt wrong. Her legs were too stiff, her back too straightened up, her grip too tense, barely shifting weight on the balls of her feet… whoever it was, she had never seen any real action and probably had just the most basic of combat instructions, relying far too much on the armor and weapon to do the job.

None of that meant the ninja wasn't dangerous. Taylor remembered her first night out when she met Night. While the Empire cape was fast, she was able to evade the attacks of her monstrous form. Barely. And she had to use the environment to hide and trick her.

This ninja was far faster than Night. And there was nothing nearby she could use to hide. There were some fallen tree trunks at some distance along the asphalt around the plot of earth and muck, but they would only be useful as cover against firearms. And while the ninja had a pistol at her side, Taylor didn't expect her to be dumb enough to switch weapons.

The ninja advanced again with a run, readying the sword over her head for a vertical attack. Taylor dug her heels in, securing herself on the ground, and preparing her prosthesis for a block when—

It hit her out of nowhere. It looked like a telegraphed move, but suddenly something in her mind screamed that the ninja was actually intending to attack from the side.

Taylor jumped off backwards just as the ninja left the sword fall at her side and try a horizontal slash at her belly. If she hadn't reacted as soon as she did, her overconfidence would have left her open to a disembowelment.

Landing on her butt, she rolled over a knee to rise up as fast as possible. She went to raise her guard up again, but instead sidestepped when she got a sense that the sword went for an upward slash at her position.

'Where the hell did that come from?' she wondered, creating some distance again but without taking her eyes off the ninja, who didn't seem to expect such a precise reaction either twice. 'It was as if I just knew what she was thinking.'

Her eyes widened in disbelief.

It had happened before with the Dragonslayer. With the explosion, she didn't have the time to stop and think about it, but it was far too different from her awareness. She suspected she was latching on some part of the nervous system of the people she tracked, as she was able to be aware not just of their position, but a few more things like the way they moved and their sense of touch feeling their clothes around their bodies. It gave her an idea of how they were dressed and if they were relaxed or agitated.

This went beyond that. The Dragonslayer knew about the bombs, and his last thought was about catching her in the explosion. Now she just knew in what direction the ninja was planning to attack.

'I'm... I'm reading their minds!? Or at least sensing their aggression. But then why didn't I sense anything before she kicked me down here? Maybe this is a further aspect of my awareness and I need to be tracking them?'
Whatever it was, Taylor wasn't going to complain. And if she could use these warnings to run away and dodge…

The ninja moved again, opting this time for a thrust. Taylor was ready now though, and instead of moving away from the attack, she advanced to meet it.

They wanted to kill her? Fine.

Taylor turned aside, letting the blade pass her by, and grabbed the hands with her prosthesis. The ninja was caught off guard, and couldn't react fast enough to the knife hilt hitting her in the face. Taking advantage of her confusion, Taylor shifted her grip on the knife, and followed with a slash to the head.

She didn't have anything left in life anyway. But they were in for a disappointment if they thought she'd roll over and die.

Hissing through her teeth, Lisa recoiled from the assault, the sword still in her hands. The knife might have been smaller, but the edge cut just as well and had slashed her faceplate from side to side. While the suit wasn't airtight anymore, at least it hadn't affected the video feedback that allowed her to see outside the armor, but it had scared her tremendously. A couple inches closer, and she'd have a Glasgow smile from the left of her chin to just below her right eye.

The move that Virtue had just pulled was far too reckless. Sure, she wasn't a fighter, and while Lisa was trying to keep the initiative and improvise as much as she could, she wasn't going to boast any kind of excellency in her technique. But moving into her sword like that? One wrong step and Virtue would have skewered herself.

Lisa jumped back to create some space, keeping her watch on Virtue's focused glare. 'Ok. Take a second. What do you know about Virtue? Name's Taylor Hebert. One surviving parent. Stuffed in her locker at Winslow, led to her bullies being criminally prosecuted. And one of them was the damn Ward Psycho Stalker, who went on the run only to end as another pawn of Harbinger.'

Admittedly, it wasn't much, but it gave her power something to start.

Reckless attitude potentially derived from stressful episode. Bullying campaign possible origin, but unlikely. Episode probably more recent.

Stay at PRT medical facilities caused by confrontation with parahuman group, or led by parahumans; civilian identity compromised. State as per Harbinger's briefing consistent with lethal force. Lethal force applied during ambush. Ambush likely to be prompted in familiar place. Virtue likely to be cut off from social circles because of bullying campaign. Family house only option. Burned alive at home. Father not present at PRT facilities. Relocated? No, hurt as well. In contiguous room? No, Virtue not sharing room with any other wounded. Father dead.


'What!? No. Fuck, no!' She just wanted a reason for her attitude that she could exploit. But this… Lisa might as well just let Virtue borrow her sword and let her do the deed herself.

Suicides were a weak point of hers. The last thing she wanted was to see someone do the deed. Becoming the tool used to carry it out was something she didn't want to even stop to think about.
She spared a glance at Cricket, who was crouching at the edge of the sidewalk above, with a camera in hand.

*Camera recording. No, streaming. Harbinger likely recipient. Wants to make sure the job is done independent of Cricket's survival to bring back proof.*

*Cricket tasked with making sure the job is done, but interested in fight. Distracted by fight. Doesn't get attracted to people anymore, fetishizes actions revolving around fighting, considering mastur-

Lisa stopped her power from giving her any more information. But it was enough to know she had no alternatives, not if she wanted to live on and make things right.

The entirety of her being screamed to stop all this bullshit, save Virtue and take the suicidal thoughts off her mind, but Lisa knew she didn't have the courage. She'd have to kill her.

*I hope you rot in a ditch, Harbinger.*

Lisa breathed out, and her cheeks felt wet. No way the rain entered through the gash on the faceplate.

*I'm sorry, Reggie. Guess I'm even worse than we thought.*

Virtue was the one to attack now, swinging the knife at her torso. Lisa was able to parry it in time, but received a punch to the face with Virtue's prosthesis. It didn't hurt, but it brought her back to the fight, forcing her to stay on the defensive.

It was one thing that she was noticing. Virtue was reacting well on point against anything she did. Perhaps far too well. Maybe she wasn't a Stranger, but a Thinker?

Pushing through the rising headache, Lisa gave let her power have another try.

*Reactions are perfect counters to attacks and defenses. Demonstrated skill in combat doesn't correlate to age, parahuman power likely as origin. Skill in combat within human parameters, parahuman power unlikely as origin. Origin irrelevant to reaction times.*

Lisa parried and dodged, a few more times unable to counter Virtue's attacks. *Right. Forget that. What about the timing? Come on, power, give me something useful already!*

*Reaction times parallel to times of decision. Reaction times beyond normal human skills. Foreknowledge required. Precognition possible but unlikely.*

*Correlation between decision and reaction times too late to be any kind of usable precog, points to observation.*

*Not reacting to environment or body position. Observation powers unlikely. Reacting entirely to actions.*

*Direct observation of decision making process is the likely—*

The sudden block from her power caused Lisa to grunt in exhaustion, her headache reaching ever higher pain thresholds. She barely opened her eyes in time to notice the sweeping kick directed to the back of her knee. She jumped away, conscious that while her armor would be able to take the brunt of Virtue's attacks, a well aimed hit would have put her in a compromising position.

She landed on her side, rolling once before standing up again covered in mud, but at least her power
had given Lisa the answer to Virtue's power. 'She's reading my fucking mind!?'"

No, there had to be a simpler explanation. Lisa didn't want to use her power again for the moment, her headache was already fairly painful and she needed to concentrate. And it had already told her that it was "likely", not a sure conclusion. A thinker power that studied her stance to determine her most probable movements was a lot more probable than actually reading minds.

As she ducked to avoid the knife again, she thought what could she do to avoid being kept pinned by Virtue. And so, more through inspiration that planning, she charged shoulder first.

As stupid as it felt, the mindless shock and awe seemed to work.

Taylor ran backwards, trying to recover her balance from the unexpected tackle.

The worst was her lungs burning, as the move took the breath out of her. Punching the ninja with the prosthesis was already feeling like a bad idea, and ending on the wrong end of the metal shoulder had confirmed her suspicions that the armor was hard.

She was too slow sidestepping a stab, and it connected with her good arm. It was painful and Taylor was forced to drop the weapon, gripping the injury reflexively with her false hand.

She quickly spared a look for her injury. It looked bad. The cut made a hollow bleeding gash, deep enough to have damaged a vein.

And Snake said he already fought off one of these cyborg ninjas? With a missile launcher from far away, she'd bet. This one was barely a fighter, Taylor didn't want to see what a seasoned combatant could do with a power armor like this.

Would it be conductive to electricity, though? If she could prepare a good hit, she could use the taser function of her prosthesis and at least try to take away her sword...

While Taylor blocked the ninja's hands with her forearms as she slashed again at her, a new problem came to her mind. Just as soon as she had discovered her mind reading, the ninja has been quick in the uptake, and now that she recovered the initiative, she was holding onto it desperately. Her attacks were improvised and weaker, but it made harder for Taylor to react. She'd have to find an opening and focus on it.

The ninja overextended a swing, and Taylor capitalized on it. Closing in, she grabbed her sword arm, and using the ninja's own movement, threw her over herself.

The ninja touched ground, exhaling with a grunt distorted by a voice modulator. She didn't drop the sword, but that could wait.

Taylor stomped the ninja's sword arm, putting her weight on her feet and buying some seconds so that her opponent would stay pinned, and prepared a punch. Her hand was rotating as fast as she could make it when the ninja saw what was she doing, and started struggling furiously to break free.

Quickly taking her feet off her foe, she lowered her fist and struck the ninja's chest. She screamed, electricity momentarily arching all over her armor and making the raindrops sizzle in contact. Her limbs jerked in pain, and with the sword free from her grip, Taylor kicked it away.
Taylor didn't have the time to celebrate. Just as her foot finished the kick, the ninja grabbed the one she was standing on and pulled, throwing her to the ground with her.

Now Taylor was the one with her back on the ground. The ninja crawled fast over her as they tussled around, until she was sitting on Taylor's belly, leveraging the weight of her armor to keep her in place.

That was when the ninja took Taylor's neck in her hands, and squeezed.

Taylor struggled, but she wasn't strong enough. Her hands were ineffective at pushing the ninja away; the armor was too strong, too hard, too heavy. She needed the sword or the knife.

They were too far, and she couldn't move.

She gasped for air, failing. She tried to free her throat of the oppression, but the metal hands wouldn't budge.

The ninja put her weight against Taylor's neck. She didn't feel her aggression now, not like before.

Taylor gaped. No air.

Everything was violent.


Her eyelids felt heavy. She couldn't keep them open.

Everything was dark.

Were those her own feelings? Taylor wasn't sure. Might as well be. Maybe the ninja was herself? Or perhaps she was the ninja.

Now that was a funny thought.

She couldn't laugh. No air.

She needed to break free. She couldn't end here.

She hadn't even buried her father yet.

She stopped struggling.

Everything was calm.

The sun dawned. Its light fell on her, illuminating her pale face.

She opened her eyes, surrounded by darkness.

Lisa found herself flying backwards in the air.

As much as she was hating herself for doing so, one moment she was choking Virtue until all fight had left her, and the next she had jerked forward, face settled in a terrible focus and the skin around her eyes turning suddenly into a blackened blotch.

Reaction started after sunlight reached Virtue. Organism supplanting skin in contact with sunlight before Virtue. Organism receiving energy from sunlight. Photosynthetic.
Previous relative weakness derived from lack of sunlight during night. Reviving host after receiving sunlight.

Providing host with enhanced physical capabilities. Possible increased regeneration and patching of recent injuries owing to increased activity. Speed of kick beyond normal human capacity of response. Strength of kick enough to bend metallic alloy of armor.

Faceplate already compromised by previous attack, rest of helmet detached, automatically done by onboard systems to avoid complications.

Lisa suddenly noticed that she was actually seeing outside her mask. In fact, she was feeling the wind all around her head, now exposed down to her neck and her hair was flowing around the edges of her vision. Her bottle green eyes were currently looking up at the gray clouds illuminated by the dawning sun without the cameras in the armor as intermediaries.

They were quite calm now, not raining any more.

Despite the immense pain her headache was giving her now, Lisa wouldn't mind to stay looking at them like this. Just for a little bit, that's all. No assassinations, no fighting for her life, no assholes giving her orders... just her and the clouds.

It had been some time to just look to the sky and doing nothing else, or relaxing at all. A month or two. She had lost track of time after Bones—

'Just a few seconds without feeling like shit. It wasn't too much to ask, was it?'

Gravity eventually janked her back, and her vision shifted. Grunting, she fell to land on her shoulder blades, rolling backwards once before regaining her balance.

Crouched down on all fours, she lifted her eyes and saw Virtue at a distance, rising to her feet. Both of them were at opposite ends of the park,

Between them, the knife and sword laid on the mud, the edges still glowing blue.

Lisa's eyes met Virtue's. The both of them grimaced, and took off running.

Lisa had been the faster one. Now that the sun had reinvigorated Virtue's bugs, both seemed to be just as fast.

The weight and power of Lisa's armor gave her a better purchase in the mud. Virtue's bugs seemed to allow her to stride further.

In a bid to gain time, Lisa upholstered her sidearm and shot. Just as she expected, Virtue was able to dodge the bullets, but it made her lose precious time to reach the weapons on the ground.

Lisa jumped, diving towards the knife, which was closer to her.

She grabbed it as she rolled, turning around on a knee, raising the gun to aim in case Virtue went further than expected, and with the knife held below it, ready to receive any coming blow.

It never came.

The blade of the sword was against her neck, unmoving.

Virtue was at her side, lying on her back and holding the sword, breathing heavily, but without taking her eyes off Lisa. The black marks around her eyes had vanished.
Virtue's dirtied face was inexpressive. Her eyes focused.

Lisa's head was throbbing with her headache. She wasn't going to receive any help from her power.

With a sob, she closed her eyes, dropped the knife and pistol, and left her arms drop limp, settling harmlessly at her sides.

Lisa wondered if it would be better end like this. She wanted to live, but what else could she expect now, but dying or becoming a drone? At least this way she wouldn't be used again, and the fear of dying didn't matter anymore to her.

Then again, she had never really mattered to barely anyone, had she?

The only thing they have left to her was her power. Only her power mattered to anyone.

She lifted her chin, exposing her throat.

She opened her eyes again, looking at the sky.

The clouds at dawn were beautiful.

Chapter End Notes

This is all there is, as currently published on SB and SV. The next chapter is almost finished with around 7k words and undergoing beta reading, so it'll be published soon enough. Afterwards, the update schedule is "as it comes".

Thanks for reading, tell your friends and your dogs!
1994

The clouded sky was gray.

There was a blizzard that day.

It snowed until every house, street and patch of green were covered in white.

The brother wasn't allowed to leave the house; instead he was regaled with any comforts he might have wanted at home.

The streets were blocked, and the family doctor couldn't reach their house in time.

Instead of their home, it was a common, small surgery room in a nearby hospital.

Her very first act, being born on this day, already made her parents think ill of her.

They called her Sarah. Sarah Livsey.


"Uh oh." The new girl that she just met, Mary, grimaced. "Don't look but someone is coming straight to you, and that's not a face that says 'hello nurse'."

Sarah didn't look. Instead, she busied herself drinking from a bottle of soda until she noticed a hand fall on her shoulder from behind.

"What are you doing here, Sarah?"

She rolled her eyes, but relaxed her expression as she turned around to see her brother, a handsome bachelor with short hair in the same blonde color as her. "What wouldn't I be doing here, Reggie? Attending a party and making friends, same as everyone else. Same as you, it looks like."

Really, if anyone didn't fit here, it was him. It was a high schooler party, and Rex was old enough to be finishing university. Sure, there were people older than most teens around, but it was limited to the host's family and friends, helping keep things fun and under control.

Whatever the case, he didn't seem fazed by the subtle accusation. "You know father forbade you from parties." Because of course he wasn't here to party.

"Yeah, well, he also basically ordered me to socialize, and everyone from class is here", she pointed with a grin, "so I guess he'll have to learn to live with the outcome of giving contradictory statements.
He can come here himself if he's in the mood to correct himself."

"Still", he said as he took scoop of punch from the nearby refreshment table and sniffed it, "a place that spikes their drinks is not a place for you."

Sarah raised her bottle, as the girls nearby looked nervously to their paper cups. "Keep trying. You think I haven't thought of it? I've only been drinking from this, and I brought it from a seven-eleven three blocks away."

He raised an eyebrow. "And they let you bring drinks from outside?"

She waved a hand all over her dress, a long piece complimented by long boots and a jacket. "Evidently, I got plenty of hiding places. And nobody has bothered to take it from me anyway."

Rex turned to the girls she was with, giving them that damned winning smile of his. "Any of you can say if it's true? I'm just worried about my baby sister, you see."

The very cups in their hands forgotten, the girls giggled among themselves. "Well, we've only seen her with the soda", a small brunette said in a flirtatious tone, "but we can't be really sure whether she drank the punch while we weren't looking."

'Figures. He shows up and everyone get their panties wet for him', she thought as Rex exchanged a few more words with the girls. Thank god he's not that creepy, he's not even interested in brats of our age, he acts the same with everyone.'

"Come on, Sarah", he said moving to grab her arm. "Let's—"

"Forget it", she snapped, batting his hand away. She left the bottle on the table and started moving towards the exit. "I know where the damn door is, I can walk out on my own."

Leaving him behind, Sarah rushed off, wading through the teens that flooded the house. Once she left through the door, she looked behind and saw that people were making way for Rex. She kept moving across the lawn, but it didn't take long for him to reach her.

"I left the car two houses down the street", he said as they left the music and noise behind.

"I'll walk."

"No, it's late, and this neighborhood—"

"This neighborhood", she interrupted him without breaking stride, "is perfectly safe. I've been around on my own long enough to know that the worst that can happen to me is old Harrison's dog running out to play with me."

"Wait, you know people here?"

"Yeah, I do."

"I'm still worried something might happen to you. Or that you'd do something careless."

She waved a hand dismissively. "It's fine. I already smoke pot, lost my virginity, and drove a car drunk. Not in a hurry today for repeats."

"What!?" he shouted. "You're kidding!"

She huffed, rolling her eyes. "Only with the drunk driving, I like my fooling around being safe.
What's it to you anyway, following me?"

"It's my duty as the older brother."

Sarah stopped dead on her tracks and turned around to face him. "Well, too little too late, 'brother'," she drawled. "Not like you or anyone at home actually cares about what I do when I leave the house to have actual human interactions."

"That's not true, Sarah", he said calmly. "I've always cared."

"Bullshit."

"Language, Sarah."

She put her hands on her hips. Rex was taller and more imposing of course, but that didn't matter to her now. "You never fucking cared about me", she said, the crassness being almost physical in her enunciation. "Father always ignored me and mother only cared about those violin classes and those shitty awards that I'm pretty sure she bought off anyway, which by the way is pretty offensive when you think about it."

She took a breath, and kept going. "Even uncle Kenneth cared more about me than they did, and he was a bastard until the day he died. I've known all that that since I was a toddler and tried to get your attention since then. I looked up to you, but the moment I realized you were the same as them, the house felt emptier than ever before! And you wonder why I go and meet people outside!?!"

"Please lower your voice", he said with a sigh. Some of the neighbours were looking at them from the lawns and windows of their houses.

"No". She crossed her arms. "Since I started high school, you haven't left me alone. Why? You had fourteen years to get interested in my life, why now?"

Silence lingered, as the impromptu audience watched. He shuffled on his feet, uncomfortable with being put on the spotlight.

"I've… I've been feeling alone."


She gave off an humorless laugh, as she put a hand to her face and stepped back. "You know, this is… crap, no, this ain't funny. This is pathetic. For both of us."

Rex took a shaky breath. "It… it is."

Sniffing, Sarah lowered her hand. She felt a sneer form on her face, but she wasn't feeling that upbeat right now. "You've always had everything. Everything and everyone. Shit, if uncle Kenneth hadn't died, you know father would have found a way convince him to leave his company to you. I was always swept aside to a corner and given cheap, hollow freebies that were only meant to build up the family's reputation, while you always had father's favor opening all the doors in life. You get people to be close to you! You're always cheered on in your football matches! Girls throw themselves at your feet and men trust you with their lives! You are never alone!" Breathless, she raised her fist to hit Rex's chest, but stopped herself before doing anything else as he took a step back.

Her fist lingered, raised and shaky, then lowered while she regained her breath. "Try again", she pleaded.
Sarah sincerely wanted her brother back. She wanted Rex back in her life.

"Please."

She wanted her family to be real.

Rex kept silent, avoiding her eyes, until he simply looked downwards.

Sarah turned around. "Fine, whatever", she whispered as she walked away.

She didn't cry during the trip back home.

October 8, 2009

They sat her in front of the screens, showing economics TV channels and websites tracking the changes in every stock exchange.

"You must be really stupid to think that would work."

Sarah gave a sidelong glance to her father, and he only said one thing that allowed no discussion.

"Don't repeat the idiocy of yesterday. Start working."

He left the room, locking the door closed behind him.

She looked down at the dossiers, newspapers, and swallowed in silence.

Reggie was dead.

It was sudden. One day he was alive, the next he had taken far too many pills before going to bed.

It wasn't sudden. After the party, Sarah had noticed him growing distant from everyone. More angry. More silent. At the start, she simply thought he just got the hint and took a hike. She didn't have the power to keep him away, but he stayed away regardless.

One of the last things he did, in anger, was to call her a horrible person. She didn't know how sincere that was, but it hit her harder than it would have any other time. With time, she wondered how much she agreed.

After a while, she grew worried that something wasn't right. As much as they had screwed up their relationship, she still cared for him. But she rationalized it away. Everyone in the family was practically strangers to each other anyway, or at least to her; if she could see it, then their parents would too.

She said as much after the funeral. They took it as a confession of guilt, and blamed Sarah for Reggie's death.

Things only got worse after that. They restricted her freedom, and soon enough she found herself trapped in the house. Her parents were hostile, and the staff was charged with making her life as hard as possible.

Idiot, her mother called her. Stupid, her father.

Days later, Sarah triggered in her sleep, tossing and turning in a bad dream. She woke up with the power to figure everything out, and migraines fit to be suffered by elephants.
Her father caught the signs before she managed to get settled, and started showing affection out of nowhere, as if the two months of emotional abuse had never happened.

The first thing she tried to uncover was the only one she was never able to: what was it that pushed Reggie to kill himself. Ironic, as it was the only thing she really wanted to know.

The second thing was that her father was faking everything in order to use her power. She wasn't fooled, so he didn't waste more time to get what he wanted. The fake affection went away.

Now, she was locked in an office, used to help the family business get even richer. She wasn't entirely sure how he'd found out in the first place, but some of the things she saw made her think he was affiliated with the Elite, and they gave him pointers.

Now, she was a tool. An object. Not family anymore, not even in name. Sarah couldn't take it anymore.

That night, she decided, there wouldn't be any more Sarah Livsey. She'd take what, in retrospect, was too much money from the house safe box, and sneak away.

A week later, as her bus crossed the line between Nevada and Utah, she was brainstorming new names. She liked Lisa.

April 12, 2011

Things did go better for Lisa, for a time. She had moved as far away from her birthplace as possible, until she found herself in a city called Brockton Bay.

True, it was saturated with parahumans, but she tried to not draw any attention to herself. She got her GED, she squatted with some other homeless and friendly people, and dedicated herself to a life as a street urchin. Sure, she targeted rich people, but she was discreet, she thought.

It only lasted a few months before another man took her to feed his greed.

Coil, the leader of a gang consisting of mercenaries, had somehow learned about Lisa and her power, recruited her at gunpoint to form a group of teen parahuman thieves, with herself as the intermediary. The Undersiders would only know about Coil as "the boss", and he would send jobs their way.

Unlike her, the other members of the Undersiders were offered things they needed or wanted. Brian wanted to get the custody of his sister, but instead of finding a good job as a bouncer, he decided that having a mysterious benefactor forge papers about a fake job was a better idea. Rachel, a wanted woman who only understood dogs and had no secret identity to hide behind, wanted sanctuary for herself and her dogs; and so did Alec, hiding from his family. They never were more than coworkers, but they made it work.

So they dedicated themselves to being thieves and escape artists, flying low under the radar of every other faction in the city, gangs and PRT on equal measure. They were successful and discreet.

She had to admit, she was earning enough money to live more than comfortably, and she was having fun adopting the identity of Tattletale; perhaps she acted too much like a bitch, but a handgun didn't seem to cause the same reluctance to attack her as the information her power provided. But she didn't fool herself. It was a gilded cage, no more, no less, and despite his efforts to not give her any information about his power, resources, contacts, or even who the hell he was, Coil didn't hide his willingness to assert his dominance and lock her up to make use of her power. Lisa didn't doubt this time would be worse than what her father tried.
That didn't stop her from trying to figure out a plan to escape him from the start.

Everything started going to hell when Lung, the leader of the Azn Bad Boys and a strong enough parahuman that he could defend his territory through reputation alone, took offense to their continued existence.

His goons had attacked the Undersiders first, and by the time they took them down, Lung had already transformed into a giant, fire-throwing monster. He was surprisingly fast like that, easily matching the speed of Rachel's own hulking out dogs. They managed to loose him after crossing paths with Armstmaster doing a patrol on his motorcycle, but not without injuries. Brian got his arm singed by a lucky fire breath, and Lung body slammed Rachel's mount against a wall, injuring her leg.

The very next day, while they were licking their wounds, Coil had called her for another job at a very specific time. So she had an idea to get a better deal from him: hit and rob the Brockton Bay Central Bank, the biggest one in the bay.

They had their doubts. Brian didn't think the attention hitting a bank would bring them would be worth the payoff. Little haul, big risk. And while it wouldn't affect her dogs, Rachel's wounded leg would slow them down.

On the other hand, they knew the Protectorate would be attending an event out of town, the Wards would be attending school, and as they would be closer to the bank, they'd be outside the jurisdiction of New Wave. Even if half of what they said about Virtue's skill was true, she was currently busy at Ontario. At most, they would only expect to face a few members of a junior cape team, as the entire team leaving class at the same time as they attend a bank robbery would blow their identities. Their mysterious benefactor was also willing to match their haul two for one up to a limit, cover their costs, and hire another cape to help the team, a Tinker that would help them with transportation.

The Tinker answered to the name of Trolley Cart, suitably providing a number of floating trolley carts. An obvious fake cape name, using a generic power suit clearly put together to cover both his real cape identity, body profile, and specialization, though she was guessing something along the lines of transportation. It was smart, in a sense. It was the Undersiders’ show, and he was merely hired help, and probably didn't even want the job to be connected to his usual cape persona. Whatever pay he was expecting, it seemed to have been already dealt with by Coil, so they would only be sharing a part of the haul with him, but not the matching deal.

They agreed.

April 14, 2011. Afternoon.

Lisa wished now they hadn't agreed to her idea, as she ran up the steps leading to the Undersiders' hidden loft, going over the events of the morning in her head.

They had entered through a back door. While Rachel waited outside mounted on one of her three monstrous dogs, the others came inside, disabling every clerk in their way until reaching the lobby, where they made a show of force. Simple business: remain calm, don't be a hero, and you won't be at the receiving end of a sense dulling cloud of darkness, a leg twitch leading to a painful fall to the floor, or her gun. Not that she expected or wanted to use it, but if things went bad enough that she was forced to shoot, Rachel's dogs would be already demolishing their way inside to help anyway. Technically, Trolley Cart was also armed in case of a cape battle, but the Undersiders needed to be the ones in control of the hostages by themselves.
Everything went swimmingly. The vault was opened, bonds and documents were taken, and the money stuffed in bags and loaded into the trolleys, which started moving automatically to the backdoor, to finally attach themselves to the sides of the dogs, where they would wait until their escape. It freed their hands to speed up their work.

Three problems came up before they were finished.

First, not two Wards nor three as expected, but the entire team showed up in front of the bank. And they brought Glory Girl.

Second, by the time Lisa had noticed Panacea, Glory Girl's sister, was among the hostages in civilian clothes, she was already typing something into a phone.

Third, Alec had managed to force Panacea to drop her phone, but not in time to avoid the wall falling over the hostages, Panacea and herself, courtesy of Glory Girl flying in blind, as far as she could tell.

They had made plans in case Glory Girl or anyone from New Wave showed up, just in case. They had no plans in case she had a personal reason to break through the wall.

Lisa was fast in covering Panacea from the debris, and was lucky to receive only a light graze at the hip. As much as she didn't want any of the hostages to be wounded, the local healer was more important, and wouldn't be able to heal any injured if she herself was badly wounded or knocked out.

When things calmed down, the rest of the Undersiders had left. Glory Girl was looming over her, and the rest of the Wards were approaching.

With no other way out, she held an arm around Panacea's neck, and readied her gun.

She hadn't enjoyed the rest of what she had done. Using the knowledge her power fed to her was fun when she only threatened to use it. Using it to defend herself was fair game when it was all she had to prevent being splattered against a wall. Breaking someone, really breaking them until they fell on their knees… that wasn't right.

She wasn't sure if she was angrier with herself for doing it, or Glory Girl for not believing she would. But she knew who she was absolutely pissed off with.

Having changed her costume for jeans and a shirt, she didn't slow her stride as she came in through the door. Alec was sitting on the couch as he usually did, still fully costumed and masked in his Regent renaissance faire style and fiddling with his taser rod. Not playing a videogame for a change, but watching the news, with Rachel sitting in a nearby armchair with her dogs at her feet. Her injury wasn't enough to warrant a cast, but a crutch was leaning against the wall nearby.

He spoke quickly. "Hey Tats. Sorry for leaving you with your pants down, it wasn't my idea", he hurried to say. His deadened emotions made it difficult for him to actually feel guilt, but at least his facial expression and lack of a real mock assured her he was being sincere.

Rachel herself was even harder to read, being usually aggressive and more capable of understanding complex meanings from dogs than simple statements from people. She didn't say anything, but she looked expectant, if not worried. Lisa had already pushed her power to it's limit, but she had used it to understand Rachel for long enough that she was able to read the surface on her own. Rachel wasn't the one she wanted either.

She turned a corner to the open kitchen, where she saw Trolley Cart and Brian seated at the table, with the former in his power suit and the latter in his Grue bike leathers and helmet.
She pulled out her gun, holding it with both hands securely against her chest, and aimed in their general direction. "Who."

"Tattletale?" Brian asked from the other side of the table.

"Who!" she shrieked, punctuating it with a shot to the table that left a mark in the center and knocked a couple of glasses over. Rage helped her power through the immense migraine.

"Oh shit—!

"What the fuck, Lisa!"

"Which of you assholes made the call to leave me behind!" Even without her power available, she already had an idea, but she wanted to see how they reacted.

"Fuck this! Grue told us to run. I recalled the trolleys and ran back outside with Regent, just like we planned", Trolley Cart said. He had jumped out of his seat at the gunshot, and was backing away with his hands raised. "Grue came out alone and gave the word to run! There was nothing in the deal about sticking my neck that far out for any of you."

Breathing loudly through her nose, she locked eyes with Brian's despite the blackened visor of his helmet, waiting for a rebuke. When none came, she waved the gun towards the door. "Out, Cart. Now."

He didn't need to be told twice. He gave her a wide berth, grabbed a sports bag that she assumed would contain his share, and left through the door.

"What. The. Fuck, Brian", she started. "Leaving me behind and surrounded? Is that your idea of leadership?"

Brian took off his helmet, revealing his black skin and hair in cornrows. There was no need to hide his identity from an outsider anymore. "Lisa, I'm sorry—"

"You're sorry?"

"I'm sorry!" he insisted as he left the helmet on the table. "Look, we had planned for a stand-off, so when Alexandria Junior started knocking the walls down we had to run. I had to make a split second call between the four people I could see and the one person I couldn't, and I decided to put the safety of the four over the one. So yes, I'm sorry, but I had to make a call and I made it."

"You had to…" she echoed, baffled. "You just don't leave your intel member behind! You and Alec were close enough to me that you should have taken a hit from the rubble!"

"I did!" She looked as Alec walked in, holding his arm up to display a bruise taking up most of his upper arm. "Cart helped me get out. Mommy gonna kiss the pain goodbye?"

She ignored him, and focused on Brian.

"Glory Girl was already on top of us and the Wards were coming. There was no time, Lisa. What did you expect me to do, fight all of them on my own?"

"Ten seconds, tops!" she screamed. Her headache was killing her, but Christ she was pissed. "They can't deal with your fog, all I needed were ten seconds to get clear—!"

"I couldn't know that!" he ground out. "You should have thought twice before jumping between a
Lisa slammed a hand on the table. "You dumbass, that was Panacea! The moment her sister dropped the wall on the hostages, any injuries and deaths would be on our heads! Keeping Panacea alive was the only way to salvage the situation. And you know what you forced me to do? I broke her!"

She heard Alec whistle. "Wow, you went full bitch on the Panacea?"

"Tried not to", she said with a sigh, rubbing the bridge of her nose with one hand and holstering the gun with the other. "Already made all the Wards back off one by one threatening to air out whatever secrets I could find, but Glory Girl just didn't stop. Not even when I said I would do it to her sister."

"You know." Brian leaned back on his chair, and huffed. "Panacea being there would have been good to know before the walls started coming down."

"I'm not omniscient, Brian!"

"Neither am I. I couldn't tell if you were even conscious in the confusion. I wasn't going to… I couldn't risk the safety of four people to try to reach one who might be too injured to move. So I am sorry, but I didn't have a good choice."

She had a rhino stampeding in circles inside her head. She wanted to drop down and not think forever. But she was already worked up and in a roll. She couldn't just stop and let it be.

She raised a finger and jabbed it at Brian's chest. "You know what I think? I think you panicked. You're so used to having the advantage, to being able to see while everyone else stumbles around blind, that the second the dust starts flying, and things get confused, and you can't see everything, you panic and run. You—"

Brian got up. "Stop."

Lisa narrowed her eyes at the interruption. Brian hadn't gotten as worked up as she had, yet he was breathing as heavily as she was now.

"This conversation is over", he said as he took his helmet.

He left the loft, slamming the door closed behind him.

She groaned, lurching forward and gripping her head with both hands. Her power decided to send her a bit of information alongside a new needle into her brain.

Reaction to accusations of panic related to trigger event.

"Sssssshit", she hissed, as it dawned on her what she had just done.

That was completely out of line. You don't fuck with a cape's trigger event.

"Hey, Lisa?" She turned to Alec, who had taken off his mask and was looking to the TV. "I don't want to interrupt you while you're having a moment, but you might want to see this."

She moved sluggishly to behind the couch. The television was on the local news channel, and while muted, the letters under the anchor told her all she needed to know.

Parahuman robbery at Brockton Bay Central Bank

2 dead and 5 injured, Panacea unresponsive
Wanted villain: Tattletale

Lisa stood there looking at the screen for a moment.

They were making her the one responsible. They were making her *too dangerous* to work with.

"Balls."

She went back to her room and took the cellphone she had reserved for Coil from the table. She checked the screen, and saw there were two missed calls.

She turned around and closed the door. She then surrendered to the migraine, leaning her head against the wood. Defeated, she started sobbing as she gave in to the pain, slowly sitting down with her shoulder and head against the door.

She still had to return Coil's calls. He'd want to know how much had she screwed the pooch, and she had no idea what would convince him to let her stay where she was.

The only thing she wanted at the moment was to burrow below her blankets and sleep until next year.


Lisa was now very glad she had managed to convince Coil to let her stay with the team. And horrified.

After the bank, the PRT took a hard stance with the Undersiders, and particularly with her. They had to lay low for a bit, half a month.

There was a schism now between her and Brian. They hadn't been close, not by any stretch of the imagination, but they had worked together. Now, he avoided her as much as possible. Her apology had only made things worse; he didn't believe she hadn't meant to poke at old wounds, and her claim to the contrary only further lost his trust.

Before the bank, she was the backbone of the operation, being the one to choose the target, draft a plan, and get the information in the field while the others showed muscle or covered the flanks.

Once the Undersiders started running jobs again, Brian sidelined her as much as possible. He would go over the her plans himself instead of trusting her judgement, double-checking every detail; and once he was satisfied, he'd be the one to present the plan to the group, rather than her.

Lisa also didn't feel as cheery on the job. When she dressed as Tattletale, her annoying bitch act was a tool to get a rise of people, make them react and in so have them reveal more information that she could use. But the more jobs she did, the less she felt like she could keep doing it.

Not since she'd left Panacea behind at the bank and seen the look in her eyes.

She's sent people crying before, given them a bad time. It was fine. People mend. Bad times pass. No one was really hurt.

This was the first time she saw someone *break*, watch their little shaky dear worldview fall apart with a few words and the reaction of those around...

They didn't mention it out loud, but the others noticed she was less springy, more reserved. There
was little joy being Tattletale now.

This wasn't helped by Coil's conditions. He gave them a period of respite to let heads cool down and lay low while the heat died down, but afterwards, he started demanding jobs that were more risky, more high profile. Alec and Rachel didn't mind, they thrived on it in fact. But for her, it would have been hard even if she and Brian still worked well together. As is was, it was exhausting just getting through the planning with him double-checking everything.

The jobs they did had them face almost every other villain cape in the city during the month after they came back. Lung wanted their heads, and they had to contend with Oni Lee carrying bombs from Bakuda. The Empire also paid more attention to them; Rachel's strikes on Hookwolf's dog pits made skirmishes with his group an almost regular occurrence, and the group lead by Krieg prepared traps in some of the gang holdings they were protecting.

They managed to evade the Protectorate and the PRT, and even Virtue, who she was pretty sure Armsmaster asked from time to time to track them down. New Wave was a different story. They were flyers, more capable of a quick response, and they were out for blood.

The Undersiders were about to snap under the pressure. It had to happen, the situation was too tense.

Coil had already presented himself to the Undersiders as their backer for the last year and a half, and having used his power to maximize their chances of success. He declined to reveal the details of his abilities, but offered them a week to decide on a deal: keep working for him as they were until now, or involve themselves more closely in his operation, becoming lieutenants of sorts.

Now, a week later, they had come into his bunker, a hidden location below the streets of downtown, where they found a small army of mercenaries under his services, as did Circus, an independent thief, and the Travellers, a roving group of villains. Lisa was sure that those weren't the only capes Coil was employing.

There, they complained to him. In trying to calm their concerns, he had apologized for his faults handling them in the field, assured them more safety, and brought them to what he had called his "secret weapon".

A girl in pajamas, no older than twelve, with bags in her eyes, uncaered-for dark brown hair, who didn't make eye contact with anyone, keeping her gaze to the ground and avoiding Coil's. Nervous fingers with the nails bitten off drummed against her thighs as she asked constantly for 'candy'.

Coil had shared in the past with her an idea of his assets, but at this moment Lisa kept silent and let her teammates ask the questions. Her power filled her in faster than Coil's explanation of her power and a demonstration of it.

*Answers questions about chances with extreme precision. Questions about hypothetical future events. Precog, calculates possibilities. Sees all potential outcomes, categorizes them, and figures out chance of posited event coming to pass.*

'Holy shit, that's incredibly powerful precognition. Where did this girl come from —'

*Physical state consistent with heavy use of Thinker powers. Power is taxing. Asking about 'candy' every five questions. Coil only calls her 'pet'. 'Candy' some sort of heavy duty drug or drug mixture. Made compliant through drugs. Not willingly here. Calling her 'pet' is a means to habituate to subservience. Coil willing to go further at the sign of rebellion.*

*Face familiar. Seen on missing child poster. Child is Dinah Alcott. Dinah Alcott member of*
Mayor Christner's family, declared missing the day of April 14. Reported time of disappearance same as bank robbery. Bank robbery a smokescreen, real purpose was to kidnap Dinah Alcott.

Dinah looked her in the eyes, and Lisa turned away.

Lisa kept mostly quiet while her teammates, reassured now, accepted the deal to become Coil's lieutenants. They left shortly after, returning to the loft. Brian and Rachel left barely minutes after changing out of their costumes to their own houses, while Alec returned to his games. None of them had reacted strongly to the obvious underage slave in front of them.

Lisa went straight to the bathroom, locked herself in, and started vomiting into the toilet.

She was sure that this was the fate Coil had reserved for her in the event he had no more use for her in the field. That she had barely avoided it by the skin of her teeth.

For now.

How long had Dinah asked her power, through a merciless headache, if there was any chance that she'd return home? That she'd be freed from Coil? That she'd know peace?

As she spat out the last of her dinner, kneeling on the floor against the toilet, Lisa decided it was time to kickstart her planning to free herself from his influence.

She didn't know what to do about Dinah. She didn't like the idea of leaving her like that, but she didn't know if she'd be able to help the girl. Frankly, she doubted it. Leaving Coil altogether was going to be enough of a challenge already.

Lisa would smile and work for the time being. But she wouldn't be a slave again.

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**June 21, 2011. Evening**

"Sup boss?"

"Tattletale. I would like you to tell the Undersiders to come to my base tomorrow. I have jobs for you."

"Jobs, boss? As in plural?"

"I have assignments for each of you. Simple enough that they can be done individually, and planned around each of your abilities. I trust that won't be a problem?"

"Depends. Regent isn't the type to work alone, but I'm sure Rachel will appreciate it."

"Excellent. You can tell your teammates to come to my base tomorrow, where I can give them the details in person. You, on the other hand, should get prepared for traveling; a car will arrive at eight in the morning to fetch you and escort you to Boston."

"Boston? You've never had me do anything outside town."

"I made a deal with Accord that will benefit us all. Part of the deal is that I would send you to help him deal with an issue he's had for some time."

"Didn't hear about Boston having any problems recently."

"I didn't ask for details. Accord wants to keep things quiet, and he needs someone to provide him
with otherwise unavailable information. It should be easy enough for you, as long as you act properly and with deference towards him; he values order and proper manners above all else, even life. It shouldn't take more than a few days."

"Alright, boss. Consider it done."

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**Now**

Lisa lowered her gaze, and saw she wasn't in the ruined Boston park anymore. She was kneeling in a field of white flowers. They reached to her elbows, and the white petals in star formations danced softly under the a gentle breeze. She put her hands on the ground, breathing the cleanest and most fragrant air she could have ever imagined.

A hill rose at one side, leading to a jungle, while at the other, she could see a vast lake reflecting the light of the dawning sun. Birds flew from the jungle to the water, as a couple of silver-white snakes hung placidly from a tree at the edge of the flower field.

Trying to use her power gave her nothing, so it was possibly the most peaceful place she had ever seen, but she had no idea how she came to be here.

Had Virtue finally put an end to her? Was this some sort of afterlife? Was the tree supposed to be a Biblical allusion between the snakes and—

Lisa noticed a hand on her shoulder, and at her side she saw a man. Long white hair reached his the shoulders, and he wore glasses and a military sweater.

He was also smiling. She knew she had an annoying grin when she flaunted that she knew something others didn't, but this man could teach her a thing or two.

That was when she heard a voice that could make a god *flinch*.

"Is this how you plan to let it happen?"

Lisa turned to the voice coming from in front of her, the man's hand not leaving her shoulder, and she saw her.

Her breath shuddered.

A woman. A black cloak covering her torso, a white jumpsuit underneath. Blonde, with her hair in an utilitarian ponytail. Tall, as a terrible tower keeping watch over the world. Mature, her face set in the sternness of the wisdom who has already seen the world go to hell and not surrendering. Blue gray eyes, not fooled by what Lisa looked like, in her dirty and damaged armor, piercing straight into her core. Her deep voice demanded, no, *secured* attention.

"I understand it; you don't think of yourself a fighter. Neither did I, when I started my training... barely younger than you are now."

The woman squared herself in front of Lisa, confident and assured, with nothing to prove to anyone.

Lisa didn't know who she was, but she knew she was *someone*.

"But this is not how you were supposed to end, is it? You looked at the cards that life gave you, and kept playing. You are not the type to quit."
Lisa gulped. "But I..." she found herself babbling, despite the vocal restraint in her armor. Was the man doing something to it? "I don't have... I can't—"

She stopped. An army would follow this woman to hell. No hero would question her orders. Every villain would cower in her presence. And the Triumvirate themselves might even see an equal.

How was anyone supposed to contradict such a person?

"Consider your past, girl. Sarah, Lisa, Tattletale, whatever – all of them are dead. No loyalties, no goals, no family." She shook her head, in dismissal. "Nothing but being carried by the currents, being used by those who only care about their greed", she said sternly. "You can only go up from here."

Lisa looked down from her gaze, at the ground, and saw a white snake slither in front of her. It raised its head and looked at her; it looked dangerous, or at least as dangerous as any snake had a right to be. But for some reason she didn't feel threatened by it.

"Think of what your path has given you", the woman went on. "Your family brought you pain and sorrow. Your power made you something to control, made you afraid and furious at the world. And you looked death in the eyes and begged it to take you."

The snake moved to her right hand, and climbed the arm, stopping when it's upper body reached the shoulder, and staying there in a sort of hug.

The woman took off her cape, slowly revealing the rest of the jumpsuit under it, and crouched on one knee until their faces were at the same level. "Even the greatest man can be reduced to nothing by those emotions. Or accept them, and become something greater", she said as Lisa took notice of her torso. It made her blink. The jumpsuit was zipped open, showing a hideous scar snaking along her torso, and a bleeding gunshot wound where her heart should be. With her as the epicenter, the flowers in the entire field turned red.

Lisa gritted her teeth as she worked her fingers into the dirt, the wind getting stronger and starting to howl. "What the hell do you want from me?" she screamed, her vision trembling as she felt tears run down her cheeks. "I'm a screw up, alone. Anyone I deal with ends hating me, any friends I make barely tolerate me, and, well, they shouldn't! I can't do anything without an asshole giving their approval!"

Lisa sniffed, looking down again. "I'm dead anyway."

The woman's face relaxed into a motherly smile. "This is not the end. Every death gives off a final lingering aroma. You don't have that, not yet."

She shook her head. "I have nothing."

The woman stood up, the wind picking up floating red petals and moving them around them. "Then start again", she said extending a hand as an offer to help her get up, "and find something. An idea, a country, a people or one person. That's up to you."

Lisa blinked, and the flower field had disappeared. She was back at the ruined park. The headache that she hadn't noticed vanishing had returned as if it had been there all the time, and her speech was restrained again.

And instead of the woman, she saw Virtue standing in front of her. She was still holding the sword with her prosthesis, and she had taken the pistol with her good hand, but she wasn't holding the blade at her neck or the gun at her head, just at the ready, seemingly trying to come to a decision.
Lisa could hear behind her the engine of an incoming helicopter. Virtue looked up and smiled. Someone was picking her up.

Virtue put the gun in her pocket, lowered the sword, and extended her good hand to her.

Lisa looked at the offered hand in confusion, while the woman's voice echoed for the last time in her mind:

"Who will you be loyal to?"

Eyes wide and breathing quick as the dawning sunrise illuminated her, and against all odds, Lisa felt again something that she had thought forgotten long ago.

Hope.

She took the hand.

Chapter End Notes

If you recognized the reference to Skyrunner's On a lark, you've won a cookie. If you don't, go read it naw. It's short and nicey nicey.

https://archiveofourown.org/works/13127589
Cricket sighed in disappointment and tapped the button to detonate her charge's bomb.

When nothing happened, she pressed it again. 'Stupid piece of junk.'

There was still no boom. She looked at her tablet in confusion.

'What the hell do you mean, No Signal?'
Velocity crouched and turned the corpse's head on its side. "Bullet wounds on these three. This one on the side of the head."

Armsmaster turned around, scanning the interior of the wreck – or what was left of it. "So whatever happened to the ship didn't kill them." He looked at the three corpses lined up near the breach that was the only entry point inside. Their tribal style of clothing, studded with bones and other gruesome trophies, marked them as members of the Teeth. At least what, if any of it, survived. "At least for these three. This is just speculation, but I think this was a deliberate scuttling; observe how everything is burnt down, no signs of explosion other than what can be blamed on the AA attack or the crash. If they weren't killed by the scuttling, then they were brought inside to hide them from sight. In an orderly fashion, I'd dare to say. Whoever did it was someone trained and meticulous. That other one", he said pointing to a fourth body closer to the pilot seat, heavily disfigured and partially broken in pieces, "I'm sure was here during or after the scuttling, but we're going to bring in a forensic team to be certain."

"I can't tell with the burnt skin", Velocity said, "but this was a big caliber. Dauntless, what do you think?"

The hero in Greek armor stepped besides his companion, and studied the wound. "Not a rifle, the hole would be bigger, but I'd say it was quite the heavy pistol. Not the kind you see with the police; from either end of the barrel. Military grade." He hummed. "But with the state of the body, it could have been an icepick for all we know."

Velocity shuddered, tugging at one of the racing lines in the torso of his red costume. "The man in the jumpsuit, you think?"

Stepping around the fourth body, Armsmaster closed in to the pilot controls, and sighed. Everything was meticulously destroyed. "Possibly. Dragon didn't have any weapons of the sort aboard, and she would have used the weapons of her suit anyway. I don't remember if she returned them to the PRT armory, but there were a nine millimeter and tranquilizer darts, but that's all."

"Tranquilizers?" Dauntless asked. "I've read Virtue was putting those to good use, but I thought the PRT troopers didn't deploy them because they were too expensive?"

Armsmaster rocked a hand back and forth as he pried open a panel with the other, checking the components inside. “The CIA developed the original formula in the Sixties”, he said as he started rummaging in the mess of burnt cables and circuits. “Other government agencies are allowed to use it in training exercises, but because they’re intended for stealth operations and it acts so aggressively on the body, they regulate it heavily to avoid accidents. I fabricate my own nano-tranqs for our branch, but the process is still complex and Miss Militia is the only one other than me to use it in the field. A case was made that it was precisely the kind of job Virtue does, and a license was granted to the
Guild. These weapons were taken the other day from the Brockton HQ due to time constraints, though.

He withdrew his hand and looked around again. "This wasn't caused by the crash or an indiscriminate attack, it damaged every important component in the ship. I'm starting to think Dragon did all this herself."

Velocity tilted his head. "A trap?"

"That. Or resource denial. We already suspect the Dragonslayers were involved." Armsmaster turned to the fourth body, and crouched to lift it on its side, revealing a wreck of metal under it. "A rifle, melted but recognizable. And he's wearing a metallic rig. Definitely not Teeth or Ambassador. This probably was one of their lesser agents, sent to take control of the wreck until Saint or some other higher-ranked Dragonslayer gets here." He paused. "And I didn't find the black box; I knew it's placement, but it wasn't there. Grating."

"We didn't find Dragon's suit around either", Dauntless pointed out.

"I can't be sure of it", Armsmaster started, "but I'm thinking, the man in the jumpsuit takes out the Teeth, waits for Dragon to finish setting up the ship with thermite and they leave. The fourth man, Dragonslayer or not, enters to steal as much of Dragon's tech as possible, and through activating a trap or bad timing luck, he's caught up in the scuttling. Though I don't know what to think of the black box's absence." He allowed himself a smirk. "At least she finally got one up on Saint, it seems. In any case, that might mean she's still around with an ally having her back, looking for Virtue. I hope."

His radio chose that moment to come to life. "Armsmaster, Weld here. The men at Charleston bridge have spotted Virtue on the peninsula and crossing the street across Paul Revere park. It was only for a moment, with all the ruins and fallen trees blocking the view, but she's there, we're sure."

"Thanks Weld, I appreciate the heads up." He turned to leave but Dauntless stepped in.

"You should stay here, try to salvage anything you can before the gangs come."

Armsmaster frowned. "She already knows me. She'll respond favorably to my presence."

He could see Dauntless, arc an eyebrow through the slits of his helmet. "What, is she going to shoot me on sight? You already said it, you're the tech specialist here. I can go with Vista and secure her. You're better employed here until anything else comes up."

Armsmaster nodded reluctantly. "Alright."

"Don't worry, chief, she'll be safe." Dauntless turned around, but stopped. "Vista too, I mean. Both of them." He left through the hole and floated over the cordon of PRT troopers that surrounded the ship, flying up towards one of the helicopters that were flying above. Vista was peeking out from the open door on its side, having been assigned to watch over their surroundings.

She came back inside, and the helicopter turned around, flying alongside Dauntless in their way to the direction Weld have indicated.

Not sooner than the ninja — a taller girl than her, with shoulder length blonde hair, and her left jaw and cheek covered in a burnt scar — had accepted her hand, Taylor fell on her knees, dropping the sword and gripping her head with her free hand.
She felt confused, nauseous, and her ears were being drilled with a high pitched sound. Sparing a glance, she saw the ninja was doing the same, seemingly sharing the same reaction with her.

Looking above, she saw the helicopter lurch dangerously, until Dragon opened a side door, brandishing a big firearm — a grenade launcher — and started shooting at something or someone beyond themselves. Whatever it was, it wasn't wise to stand there in the open.

Shaking her head, Taylor took the sword in one hand and rose up to her feet, helping the ninja do the same. She took the fallen helmet with her free hand and followed as she dragged her in a dazed run to one to one of the fallen trees, while the ground shook several times as the grenades exploded. It almost made them stumble and fall, but it interrupted the sound as many times, giving them small reprieves. Until the sound finally stopped.

They jumped over the trunk and hid behind it. Relieved from the sound, Taylor spared a look behind their cover, and saw the helicopter regain control. But it wasn't landing yet.

She turned to the girl at her side. After their fight ended, she didn't feel aggression anymore, but a mix of sadness, and fear that made her think twice about taking her life. Spending a few seconds to study her better, she felt something more positive.

She had already killed not once but five times that same night. Taylor suspected she'd have to do it again, even if she didn't like the idea. But killing a surrendered combatant?

That wasn't right.

And something had came up on her mind. Something about death bringing sorrow.

Taylor only hoped she had made the right choice.

"You good?"

The blonde turned at her with scared bloodshot eyes. She gave a look at herself, and nodded.

"Can't talk?"

The girl mimicked a silent talk while grabbing an imaginary dial at her neck with her fingers. A twist, and she stopped moving her lips. Then she tapped the armor.

Taylor blinked. "Christ. Ok, I get you're not here willingly?"

The girl's face twisted in fear, and she nodded vehemently.

"Fine. That chopper is here for me. I'm taking you with me, alright?"

Flattening her lips, the girl peeked her head above the trunk, looking for something, and then the streets above the park exploded into violence.

"Right", Taylor said as she saw people start to fight among themselves and advance to their position as well. She left the sword leaning against the trunk and took out both pistols, the ninja's and her Wu with tranquilizers. She looked at them, and then turned to the ninja, offering both guns by the barrels.

"Tranqs or lethal? And I hope you're better at shooting than fighting."

The girl gave her an incredulous look and with a snort took back her pistol and sword.

The helicopter left the buildings below them behind, and Vista grimaced. "Uh, Armsmaster,
Dauntless here. We got complications.

Looking through the window of the side door, she could see the Teeth and the Ambassadors fighting each other, and taking potshots at an unidentified helicopter flying low beyond the park, over the shore.

"What's happening, Dauntless? We heard explosions from here."

The copilot was at her side, looking through the same window as her, and passed her a set of binoculars. "Look there," Vista took the offered item, and raised it to her eyes.

In the middle of the park, she saw two girls behind a trunk. She recognized them. "Virtue, and the Swordswoman?" She was able to recognize the first one by the metal arm, and the other by the armor. And much to her confusion, they were helping each other. Both of them had pistols, but they stood behind their cover, exchanging meager fire with a few of the unpowered Teeth members who were shooting their guns relentlessly from the street above, while the ones who had sticks and blades advanced between them.

"We got the Teeth and the Ambassadors coming to blows just below us, and they seem to have taken an interest in Virtue. There's another helicopter, not ours. It's giving her covering fire, but they're outnumbered and she's pinned down."

Vista then looked at the foreign helicopter, which had the door at its side opened. Dragon was manipulating a big machine gun affixed to the vehicle, while a woman and a man fired a rifle and a pistol. All of them were providing suppressive fire against the Teeth, but those were taking cover behind vehicles and debris, while red projectiles were hitting the vehicle, allowing them to advance bit by bit. The helicopter armor seemed to endure it, but it was limiting the pilot's ability to provide a better firing angle for the passengers.

She took her hand to the side of her visor to activate her radio. "Sir, the Swordswoman is helping Virtue, and Dragon's in that helicopter protecting them with gunfire. One of the people helping her might be the man in the jumpsuit, I think they're here to extract her. Permission to facilitate their escape?"

"That chopper looks like it can take a hell of a beating, Armsmaster, and have the space to carry them all", Dauntless said. "The Teeth have enough numbers to split their attention between the Ambassadors and Virtue. I'm not sure how strong are the blood shards Hemorrhagia is throwing at them, but their unpowered members are closing in on Virtue and she's running out of time. If Dragon is on their side, it'd be better than waiting and risking Virtue being captured or killed. We can follow their escape route later."

"Granted", came Armsmaster's voice. "Dauntless, cover Vista. I'm sending Velocity your way; I'll recall New Wave, and gather the troopers on the other helicopter to assist you. But until we arrive, be careful, don't engage needlessly."

"We need to get closer! Above them!" she told the copilot. He nodded, and after muttering something on his helmet microphone, the vehicle leaned on its side, moving into position.

"Vista, I'll try to get Hemorrhagia's attention, you focus on getting them a clear path."

The copilot opened the door as Vista made sure her safety line was securely attached. She took hold of a safety bar at one side of the door, and started on the slow work of compressing the space between the girls below and Dragon's helicopter. The red projectiles stopped pelting the other helicopter.
"Damn! Her blood hits my shield hard! Work fast, Vista!"

The helicopter trembled as she heard a crash from the front side.

The copilot shoved her aside to the back of the cabin. "Get down!"

She fell on her back, and saw a multitude of razor sharp force fields pass over her, wrecking the fuselage as the went through the vehicle.

Alarms and red emergency lights were activated inside the cabin, the front windows cracked and splashed with blood. She looked to her side and gasped. The copilot was lying still on his back, his neck and chest riddled with bleeding slashes. The helmet had been perforated as well.

Vista saw the world spinning through the door. Getting up on all fours with difficulty due to the movement, she frantically grabbed onto the bar again, and saw the ground come closer fast.

Her power couldn't help her in this situation. She couldn't work it fast enough at the speed the helicopter was falling and turning around. But she sensed the small twist she had affected coming fast in her direction.

It wouldn't make for a soft landing; and in the direction she would be jumping it would probably send her to the middle of the park. But it was better than a crash.

"Shitshitshitshit." She detached the safety line from her belt and got ready to jump. She had only one shot for this.

Vista jumped, feeling the direction of her fall twist in the wrong direction, and touched ground shortly after. But despite the mud, it was a hard landing. She rolled several times until ending up lying down on her belly, keeping her head down when she heard the inevitable crash and shriek of metal.

Shaken by the experience, she looked up. Her legs hurt, though thankfully she hadn't broken them. She had also lost her visor, which she found a few feet at her right, and started crawling to reach it. She didn't care about her face being exposed right now, but it was protection, and it had her radio. She'd need it to call for help if Dauntless was still occupied.

She moved a hand to grab the visor, and then a blade fell on it, crushing it.

Vista withdrew her hand instinctively, and saw it was a kama. Looking to the owner, Vista gave a short scream, as she quickly sat up and backed up as fast as she could.

Half the woman's face was torn down to bloody muscles, and there was nothing below her chest.

Vista's hand found something akin to a handle. Sparing a look, she saw it was a knife. With no other thing at hand, as she wasn't permitted any kind of weapon, she held it in front of herself.

The protection wasn't necessary. A tangle of vines shot from the mud and took hold of the woman, dragging her a few meters back until the mud swallowed her.

"C'mon, run!"

Vista felt a hand slide below her arm and raising her to her feet, dragging her into a blind run.

Dragon, kneeling to handle the chain gun, stopped firing and looked above it. "Is that… Vista?!"
Buffalo stopped firing her rifle and looked at the trunk, seeing Virtue and the ninja as they dragged a shorter girl dressed in white with wavy lines of green to their cover.

Dragon moved to get up but Buffalo stopped her. "Hey! I'm the one supposed to be protecting you. Keep manning the gun, I'll go."

"They're getting close!" Snake shouted, as he pointed his pistol to the gangers. The interruption of chain gun fire allowed them to make a run for the fallen tree. "Whatever we do, it has to be now!"

"Shit. Pequod!" called Buffalo, "Fly down, I'm getting the VIPs in!"

Pequod obeyed, and Buffalo turned to Snake, giving him her rifle while the chopper descended the few meters that would allow her to make a safe jump down. "You two keep covering my ass."

She holstered her pistol and jumped, landing on a crouch. Then started on a jog with a light crouch and shooting in the general direction of the closer gangers, while Dragon and Snake kept the rest pinned down.

The armored blonde was the first one to see her, but while she looked scared and in need of a long nap, she had the presence of mind to not shoot at her. Buffalo dived in to her side, sitting fast against the trunk at the same time Virtue and the green blonde — Vista — noticed her. Virtue looked fine, the wetness and the wound at the side of her torso aside, while Vista seemed to be in shock.

"Hello ladies, call me Buffalo. Heard you're in a bit of a pickle", she calmly said, swapping her empty magazine for a full one.

"You're with Dragon and Snake, right? We can't hold this position", Virtue said. "She just ran outta bullets", she said with a head tilt to the armored blonde, "and mine's only good here for the noise." She raised a Wu in her hands, still loaded.

"Sounds fun." Buffalo peeked above the trunk, and shot three times. "You two coming then? Word of warning." Two more shots. "We're going dark the moment we leave Boston and cross the border with Canada."

Vista choose that moment to react. "What!? I can't leave, I need to return to Brockton Bay!"

"No can do, missy. I have strict orders to not stop for anything and take Virtue and Dragon to a safe location. Undisclosed." Four shots, an empty magazine expelled, and three confused sets of eyes.

"You can stay if you want, but I wouldn't advise it as a healthy option." She inserted a full magazine.

Vista seemed to start a complaint, but a rumble got their attention. All of them looked above their cover, and saw a four legged monster rush among the gangers in their direction.

"Run!" Buffalo shouted as she rose to her feet and started shooting, walking backwards to steady her aim and catch the creature's attention while the three girls ran to the helicopter.

The creature, no bigger than a baby elephant, screamed, sending some sort of air shock in her direction. and while it didn't seem to do anything, Buffalo decided to start running as well.

Buffalo didn't stop shooting, aiming behind herself. She saw the creature crash against one extreme of the trunk, making it pivot over itself violently without losing much speed. She doubted her forty-five would do much more to it, and focused on running.

She almost reached the girls, who were helping Vista get inside the helicopter aided by Snake. Dragon was firing on the monster, and when Buffalo reached the helicopter, she saw the creature
buckle and step over itself, falling on the ground but not dying.

Seeing that the last two girls had already climbed inside, she turned around to do the same. "Pequod, get us out of here, now!"

The battle on the ground was starting to wind down, and she rolled the door closed as the vehicle started moving up and away. "This is getting really cramped", she heard the Emmerich girl mutter.

"This is Pequod, all VIPs aboard and accounted for", the pilot said to his radio. "Leaving Boston at the moment. Be advised, unexpected passengers aboard."

Lisa moved to sit onto the first seat of the row at the right side of the helicopter. Virtue took a seat at her right, just behind the pilot's seat. At the copilot seat was a man, handsome and wearing glasses, who despite seeming like a geek able to clean himself well, acted like he was quite capable of helping to fly the vessel.

In front of Virtue were the older mousy girl wearing glasses and shorts who had just commented on the number of passengers, with a shy silver haired kid seating in her lap; both of them civilians, and looking frightened. And in front of her was a distressed and unmasked Vista. How the hell had she shown up in Boston of all places was beyond Lisa, and not something she wanted to strain herself using her power to know.

Though the furtive looks she was throwing her way weren't calming her nerves in any way.

Dragon, or at least the beaten suit that Dragon was piloting from wherever was her house in Canada, had retired to her left, leaning against the door opposite to the one where they had come onboard. A dog — or was it a wolf? Not worth to have her power answer her either, though it seemed tame enough — running from behind her to Virtue, standing up with its front paws on her lap, and started licking her face with an excited wagging of its tail. Virtue gave out a sad small chuckle and rubbed its head. "Hey boy."

The child in front of them looked curiously at the animal, though the girl holding her was doing her best trying to fuse with the fuselage at her back.

At the back of the room, the blonde woman who had retrieved them from the fallen tree was taking a seat alongside a man that Lisa recognized as Solid Snake, though obviously older than the photo that Harbinger had shown her. He was passing the woman a rifle, while studying Lisa with a frown and a hand hovering over the pistol holstered at his hip.

The female soldier was hanging her rifle from straps anchored to rails over Dragon's head along with a grenade launcher with the handle mangled, when he spoke. "I remember you attempting an assassination", he said. "I don't care what happened down there before Virtue dragged you inside here. But I care if you're planning to cause trouble."

Lisa rushed to shake her head, and started taking off the pistol holster strapped to her leg and the sword sheath hanging at her back; the knife sheath as well, even if it was empty. She passed them to him along with her helmet, which seemed to satisfy him. Buffalo was the one to take them instead. "I'm the one in charge of this op, I'll take care of them", she said as she put them in a space between her seat and the closest wall.

A wall that Lisa noticed was full of photos stuck to it, like the opposite wall closer to Snake. She couldn't see the details, but they seemed to be full of people in uniform and jumpsuits looking at the camera. Snake had caught on them as well, and was currently looking with confusion at one that had
been folded on itself

"She's Tattletale."

Lisa turned fast to Vista.

"What? Are you sure, Vista?" Dragon said.

Lisa felt her breathing quicken as Vista scanned her face. "No, but she looks close…" Vista's face hardened at that moment. "And she almost killed Gallant."

Lisa shook her head again as Virtue spoke. "Look, she doesn't seem able to talk, and isn't acting like a threat."

"Give her pen and paper?" the girl with the glasses said, and Lisa nodded frantically. She needed to tell them as soon as possible.

The copilot twisted around. "Here", he said, passing a notebook and a pencil that Virtue took, and then gave to Lisa.

Their hands touched in the exchange, and Virtue's eyes widened.

Not wasting time, Lisa started scribbling as fast as she could. Before she finished, Virtue spoke again.

"She's rigged."

Lisa made a great effort to not stop writing from the shock. But the silence that fell on the room gave her a big enough hint of what everyone was thinking.

She finished, and displayed the message in direction of the two adults and the armored proxy. Lisa noticed Snake and Dragon exchanging a strange look while Buffalo started reading.


"You have to be kidding", 'Glasses' said again, a sentiment that the pilot expressed at the same time.

Vista then held a very familiar knife to Lisa's face, making her push back against the wall behind. "I say we throw her out."

Virtue took Vista's hand, moving the knife away from Lisa's face. "Hey! I didn't save her just to kick her out. Let's see if we can solve it first."

Vista struggled against the grip. "She admitted she has a live bomb inside of her! What do you expect to happen, that she'd burp the explosion harmlessly?"

Virtue's gaze on the younger teen was as silently chilly as her voice. "And you call yourself a hero?"

Vista recoiled, but kept quiet. She lowered the knife, and Buffalo took it, inserting it into its sheath.

Lisa could kiss Virtue there and then, if she wasn't so frightened at the moment.

"Still", Buffalo said, "we need to decide what to do now."

"I don't like it", Snake started, "but the kid has a point."
The copilot turned his head to glare at him. "Snake…"

"I said I don't like it, Otacon", Snake insisted. "It reminds me of Fox, bomb aside. But she needs field surgery, and none of us can provide that, unless Buffalo or Dragon can."

Buffalo frowned. "Just a grunt here. First aid is my limit."

Dragon shook her head. "I can't. I could help taking off the armor if that's a problem, but..."

Lisa noticed Dragon lightly turning her head to Virtue. Buffalo and Snake seemed to noticed as well.

Virtue looked at Dragon and then at Lisa in an obvious fit of indecision.

Lisa didn't know what that exchange of looks meant, but she pleaded desperately to her through her face expression.

"I can."

That brought another moment of collective silence.

Snake raised a hand, palm facing down. "What do you mean, 'you can'?"

"She learns field medicine fast", Dragon answered.

"She doesn't learn shit, she already knows", Buffalo interjected. She leaned forward and looked Lisa straight in the eyes. "Time on the bomb?"

"What?" was all that Dragon could say, while Lisa looked down to her belly, and suffered another stab in her brain.

Dazed, she took the notebook back and scribbled the answer in it, showing it to Buffalo.

"Six minutes." The older woman looked now at Virtue. "How much time you need?"

"The fuck you doing, Buffalo", the pilot shouted from his seat. "You want a kid to pull a 'Paz' here!?"

"Shut up, Pequod! Eyes on the sky!" Buffalo told him before turning to Virtue again. "Time."

"Five", she answered quickly. "Once the armor is off."

"You have four starting now", Buffalo said as she opened a compartment under her seat and passed a medkit along. "And I'll kick her out myself."
Virtue didn’t waste time to start organizing the room, getting to her feet and moving to the back of the room. "Lay down. Dragon, can you help take the armor off? Lower torso’s enough. Vista, help me."

The dog, wolf, whatever, moved back with her master along with Vista, and Lisa laid down on her back, her head lying on the seat closer to Pequod.

She saw Snake turn to Buffalo, as both moved in to hold her legs. "You know something —"

"Not now. Later", she said.

Dragon’s bulkiness forced Glasses to move to the seat previously taken up by Vista, until she was able to reach the space just behind the pilot's seats. "Ok, any way to take it off, or do I need to cut?"

Lisa shook her head, and indicated with her hands the approximate location of the bomb.

Dragon deployed a small laser-like device from under her right wrist. "I don't want to hurt you but we need to do it fast. Guide me if you know where to cut. Get ready."

Lisa started pointing out to Dragon where to use her laser, and she went to work. Lisa grit her teeth. The pain came as fast as the smell of melted metal and cooked meat. It was bearable, but it took a pained gasp from her all the same.

The kid jumped off Glasses' lap and took Lisa's hand.

Lisa appreciated the gesture and held hers fast, trying to not go overboard with the strength her armor provided.

"We're being hailed", Otacon said. "The PRT has a chopper behind us."

"Pequod, can't you lose them?" Buffalo asked.

"Not if you want to carry out the surgery", Pequod said. "And I'll remind you this mission has conditions."

"I hear you", she said back. "Dragon, could you talk them down?"

"Dragon…" Lisa heard Vista say at the back.

"I'm sorry Vista", Dragon said as she was half way done. "I couldn't tell anyone before, but the assault on Virtue and the PRT was carried out partially by moles. Armsmaster asked me to go dark and protect Virtue." She looked at Buffalo. "Can't we at least leave her behind?"

"Fuel says no", Pequod said. "We're far from the extraction point, we'll be running on fumes by the time we reach it as we are."

Buffalo turned to Vista. "I'm sorry", she whispered. "Mission has priority, and I know it wasn't much of a choice but I told you we couldn't stop. We'll try to work something out when we're done, but I can't give you any guarantees just yet. If you don't trust us, please trust Dragon."

Vista kept silent.

"Three minutes", Buffalo reminded.

Dragon switched off her laser. "Done", she said as she quickly took three pieces that where previously the plating on Lisa's belly.
"Give us space", said Virtue. Dragon moved to the seat behind Otacon. "Your name?", Virtue asked Glasses.

"Emma", she said nervously.

"Emma, please hold her down by the shoulders."

Emma whimpered at the request, but complied, moving between the kid and Dragon to the space between Pequod and Lisa, holding her as instructed. "I hate you, Hal."

"What have I even done now?" Otacon muttered.

Virtue moved at Lisa's side, dragging a reluctant Vista with her. Vista was holding a metal tray with surgery tools, and both of them had clean surgical gloves on.

"Need me to help?" Dragon asked.

"No", Virtue answered, "If you could deal with the PRT, please?" She then turned to Lisa with a scalpel in her hand and an apologetic look. "No time for anesthetics, we have to open you now." She raised the scalpel. "Last chance to back down. Should I?"

Lisa felt herself breathing fast and heavy through the nose.

She nodded.

Taylor lowered the scalpel, and Lisa looked at the ceiling.

Lisa gasped, and the kid squeezed her hand.

Dragon showed her head over the pilot's seat. "I noticed you have a loudspeaker outside. Can I use that?"

Pequod's mouth flattened under his mustache, the only parts visible with his helmet on. He started using a small control panel behind her leg, which curiously included a cassette tape player. "You could, but I need a moment to reorient it. Why not use the radio?"

"As I said, moles in the PRT. Safer to not give them an idea of our frequency, and our position with it." As excuses went to avoid having her authority restriction kicking in, it was admittedly lame, but it'd have to do. "Also", she said pointing to the window at his side.

He looked up, where he could see Glory Girl flying just a few meters away and matching their speed. She looked angry for some reason, looking at the field surgery taking place behind Dragon through the side windows. Glory Girl said something into a headset she was carrying, and slowed down, letting them go.

"Vista", Dragon said, "did anyone else come here with you and Glory Girl?"

"Huh, Armsmaster, Dauntless —"

"Steady", Dragon heard Taylor remind Vista.

"Would Armsmaster be in that helicopter behind us?"

"Last I knew he was getting into it."
"That helps me, I hope", Dragon said.

"But if Glory Girl is here, so are Lady Photon and Laserdream."

That didn't help her as much.

Pequod offered a hand microphone to Dragon. She took it, but he didn't let go. "I can use three different heavy weapon systems in this ship, and we have enough armor to resist several impacts from missile strikes. I've carried my passengers safely to their destinations in war zones since the Eighties and I've only failed once. Do we understand each other?"

"Same goes for me", Snake said from behind. "Any threat to my friends, and I'll use these chainguns."

Dragon nodded. "Crystal clear."

Pequod nodded, letting the microphone go.

"Vista, hold these, steady", Dragon heard Taylor say behind. The ninja, or Tattletale if Vista was right, was understandably screaming through gritted teeth.

"I see them on the radar", Otacon informed. "They're keeping their distance, I think they're just waiting to see what we do."

"Speaker in position", Pequod said. "You can speak now, volume's high enough to hear from Washington DC."

Dragon pressed the button on the microphone. "To the PRT and Protectorate members behind us, this is Dragon speaking from aboard the unidentified aerial vessel." She could hear her words thundering behind.

"Two minutes!" Buffalo reminded them.

"We are not hostages. We are unharmed, and the men in charge have already expressed and proved their intention to keep us safe beyond all reasonable doubt. But they are under orders of extracting Virtue to a safe location of theirs and they can't stop. Vista was not forced to board this vessel, instead offered passage to escape the battle zone, and I must insist that she's not being held hostage, and I will make sure she's kept safe."

Dragon heard a sickening squelch, and Tattletale let out a chilling scream, then struggling. "Keep her guts in!" Taylor instructed.

Dragon sighed mentally. She wasn't sure if she could assure anything about Vista's mental health by now.

"The ninja from the attack on the PRT Brockton Bay HQ is with us, and in no condition to fight anyone. She communicated being used as a slave for assassination, and currently we are taking steps to free her from undesired control."

A technical lie by omission, but they didn't need to know about the bomb. Yet.

She just realized her screams were probably being heard through the microphone.

"The screaming you heard", she continued, "is the ninja, her control device has been implanted surgically and we're providing field surgery to take it out."
There. It would paint a gross mental image, but it wouldn't make them worry about the other passengers' health. Too much.

Dragon hoped her faith on Taylor would pay off. Doing this for a stranger — a possible villain at that— that had attacked her previously…

But it was true. Leaving anyone to die like this, even a villain, wasn't heroic. It wasn't right.

"These people aren't the enemy, but they are willing to defend themselves. Armsmaster, please", she pleaded. "You know me. I wouldn't do this if it weren't for the best. If it wasn't the right choice."

"One minute!"

Tattletale stopped screaming with a gasp.

"No! Vista, hold this", Taylor said. "I need to go deeper. Hold her down!"

The only response was Emma's frightened mumbling, and the strained "trying" shared by Buffalo and Snake.

"Trust me, Armsmaster. Please."

Dragon depressed the mic button. There was nothing else she could think of saying.

It was waiting time.

"Got it!" Taylor screamed.

Dragon turned her head around as she heard a small squelch, and saw Taylor's arms, wrist deep in guts, move out slowly from Tattletale's belly, producing a small white package.

Barbarous. Doing this to anyone was monstrous.

"We're flying over a lake", Pequod said. "Drop it now."

Everyone took a deep breath as Taylor passed the bomb to Snake, who looked at it as he moved to the door. He rolled it open, and threw it out.

Dragon looked around as Snake closed the door again. Everyone looked exhausted from the experience. Taylor was kneeling at her patient's side, looking at her own hands, as if she didn't recognize them anymore.

And of course, Tattletale was a wreck, but there was a crook of a smile on her lips, as if the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders.

She dropped Sunny's grabbing hand, who instead went and hugged her around the neck, and put her hand over the crook of Taylor's closer elbow, getting her attention.

"hank 'u", she managed to softly exhale among tears. "hank 'u."

Taylor nodded at her.

Dragon caught her eye, and nodded at her. "You did great."

Taylor smiled weakly, and rummaged on the tray. "I'll start stitching her up."
"The PRT is slowing down", Otacon said. "They're leaving us."

"If all that's done then", Pequod said, "engaging jets. Don't be alarmed. Dr. Emmerich, keep me informed of the engine temperatures, if you please" They lurched slightly before Taylor started the stitching, but she could see the world moving quite faster outside. This helicopter was impressive, despite her failure to detect any Tinkertech.

Kneeling at Taylor's side, Vista swallowed, looking up at the ceiling and letting out a breath.

"Vista, are you alright?" Dragon asked.

Vista looked at her, reacting more relaxed than Dragon expected given the situation. "I'm fine. And hey", she chuckled, raising her hands and displaying the blood in them. "At least I'll have a nice story to tell the Wards, about how I assisted on a bomb defusing surgery on my archenemy."

Morbid, but it took a sorely needed chuckle from almost everyone on the vehicle.

Snake kept looking through the window in the door for a moment, seeing the sun fall over the countryside and the suburbs.

He rubbed the blood between his fingers. What kid can practice a field surgery under time limits and without loosing their nerve for what was clearly their first time?

That wasn't a parahuman or psychic power. There was something else behind that.

Buffalo was sitting in her seat in the back of the cabin, her face buried in her hands, when Snake turned to her. "You owe us an explanation."

Buffalo's fingers parted to show an eye. Snake saw Taylor turning an eye their way, but kept on stitching the ninja.

"Now that you mention it", Dragon started carefully, "and that we are safe… you've said things about Virtue that don't add up."

Taylor stopped at that moment, and looked around as she mumbled a confused "What?"

Buffalo let her hands drop as she leaned back on her seat. "I'm sorry, but as I told him before, you'll have to wait until later. I'm not the one that should explain it."

"Really?" Dragon said. "Are you going to be that cagey now? After what I just told the PRT? To Armsmaster? One my most trusted friends?"

Buffalo raised her hand in a placating gesture. "Look. I don't have the full story, only a part of it."

Taylor muttered something.

Buffalo frowned. "I'm sorry? Didn't catch that."

Taylor left the tools on the tray, and kept her eyes on Buffalo.

"You said I don't learn shit. That I already know."

She turned towards Buffalo without breaking eye contact, as the older woman narrowed her eyes.

Something was very wrong here, but Snake couldn't put his finger on what exactly.
Taylor blinked, taking a breath, and pointed a finger at the passed out girl behind her. "I don't know what I was thinking about. By any logic I shouldn't have tried to do this." She took a step forward, as much as her crouched position allowed her under the low ceiling. "Nothing I've ever done before to treat anyone has come even to a tenth of what I've just done. My first joint reduction on myself? Yeah, just luck. This? Surgeons need years of training to understand what they are doing." She shrugged. "I took it as being talented. But you sounded very sure of what you said."

"Taylor…” Buffalo cautioned.

"And you know my name," Another step. "You said a family friend sent you. But I cannot think of anyone who could spent enough on an operation like this."

Snake wasn't liking this, and neither seemed the other passengers.

"Whatever you are thinking", Buffalo said, "I assure you it's not. Just calm down and wait, everything will be explained when the time comes."

"I had a hell of a weekend", Taylor groused. "Three different groups have tried to kill me during the same night. The Empire tried to kill me — killed my father." She choked, as tears started to fall down her cheeks. "I spent at least two days on the verge of death. Don't tell me to wait for an answer. Who. Sent. You."

Buffalo wasn't intimidated. "I told you to wait, kid —"

Taylor leaped on Buffalo, and they struggled for a second.

Snake moved to separate them, but by the time he succeeded, Taylor was holding a pistol to Buffalo's face. Buffalo's gun.

Buffalo raised her hands. "Fuck."

"Taylor, no!" Dragon started to move around Sunny, but Snake held a hand in front of her before she could pass Vista. His other hand went between Taylor and Buffalo.

Dragon gave him a look, and he shook his head.

"Taylor", he started. "I get it. You are tired. And frustrated. But think carefully what you are doing."

The girl had suddenly become coldly calm. "She only has to say it."

Buffalo kept a non threatening posture, and to her credit, she seemed calm as well. It was clear she's been in worse situations. "Trust me, Taylor, you really don't want to hear it. Not like this."

"Buffalo…” came Pequod's voice.

"Shut the fuck up, Pequod", she said without taking her eyes from Taylor's or raising her voice. "You're not the one with a gun pointing at your temple."

A few eternal seconds passed in silence. Until Buffalo took a breath.


Taylor narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"1975", Buffalo repeated. "That's the year everything started. Get comfortable, it's history lesson."
Taylor moved the gun closer.
"Christ girl", Buffalo said between gritted teeth. "You want to know or not?"
"Talk."

Buffalo nodded. "It was before my time, I was just a cop fresh out of the academy. But down in the Caribbean, the biggest PMC of the decade had built its base. Militaires Sans Frontières. It was founded by two men: Kazuhira Miller, and Big Boss."

Snake tilted his head in surprise.
"I heard that name before last night", Vista said. "A war criminal?"

Buffalo scoffed. "Sweety, Big Boss was many things. You say war criminal, others say hero. The most important of them? He was the greatest warrior of the century. Soldiers around the world spoke his name in the same breath kids mention the Triumvirate today. He was also part of a secret cabal formed by his old team in the CIA; he had a break up with them when Zero, his old commander, tried to make clones of him. Something to keep the legend alive, just in case."

Emma raised her eyebrows and looked above her glasses. "Clones? As- as in completely healthy clones created without parahuman technology?"

Snake sighed. "The Enfants Terribles."

"And not much harder than practicing surrogate pregnancy. Get enough genetic material, an egg donor, and a willing woman to carry out the kids to term." Buffalo gave him a funny look. "Funny what can come up from men acting like idiots, hmm?"

"Ok, this is getting surreal", Emma said, leaning back against Pequod's seat.

Buffalo turned back to Taylor, who was taking everything with attention.

Whatever her reason, Buffalo wasn't interested in revealing Snake's part in the project. Which suited him just fine.

"So. Back to 1975. Don't know the details, Zero still cared for the Boss. But an asshole that worked for him lured Big Boss away, and then had the base sabotaged. By the time Big Boss returned, he was only able to extract a handful of soldiers." She swallowed. "His helicopter was carrying him, Commander Miller, and their best soldier, a field medic called John South, who he trusted to accompany him everywhere. They were shot down just as they left the base. Zero's men rescued them all, but only Miller was conscious. The Boss and John were comatose.

"Miller left to rebuild their army. Just this time", Buffalo said as she showed the emblem in her arm, "he called them the 'Diamond Dogs'. Zero hid Boss and John at a British hospital in Cyprus, under the care of a man called Ocelot."

"Is that the same…?" Dragon chimed in.

"Gunfighter clothes?" Snake asked. "Predilection for revolvers?"

Buffalo nodded. "He was part of their secret group."

Snake grunted. Surprise after surprise.

"To protect the Boss, he had the doctors practice plastic surgery on John so he looked like him, and
then practiced hypnotherapy to impart in him all the Boss' skills, memories and personality."

"That's absurd", Dragon interrupted. "Hypnotherapy has been studied long enough to know of its poor results."

Another scoff. "Well, John woke up in 1984, some time after the Boss did, and spent the rest of his life thinking wholeheartedly he was truly the Boss. He went by Ahab, though."

"Ahab. 'The brother of the father'", Snake muttered. "They didn't have enough with genetic clones, that they made a memetic clone as well."

"Wait, what do you mean, memetic?" Vista asked. "Like, lolcats?"

"No", Dragon said, "he means the information that made Big Boss' persona was passed to this John man. Overwriting his own personality, if that's true. And Ahab was a Biblical figure who was just what Snake says. Appropriate."

Getting impatient, Taylor steeled her grip on the gun. "Get to the point already."

"I'm getting to that", Buffalo said with a sigh. "While Big Boss stole John's identity and started raising the countries of Outer Heaven and Zanzibar, Ocelot brought John, now Ahab, to the Diamond Dogs. And no one will teach you this in school, everyone will tell you Scion stopped the Cold War by himself. But with Ahab, we Dogs did a lot of good. Enemy soldiers talked about him as a demon." She smiled sadly. "We helped the rebels kick the Soviets out of Afghanistan, kept other PMCs humble in Africa until the cape warlords went outta control, stole and disarmed nukes developed by PMCs that were imitating MSF's model, helped humanitarian organizations… Until Big Boss ordered Ahab to leave for Outer Haven, taking with him half of the Dogs."

Snake's eyes widened. "You don't mean…"

Buffalo turned to him. "The men and women you killed there when NATO sent you? Yeah. Don't worry, no hard feelings."

She turned back to Taylor. "Anyway. Here's the thing. All of that didn't sit well with Miller. He was told the truth just before Ahab left, and he was pissed enough with the Boss to swear vengeance. Two of his goals became helping Snake here and Ahab fight the Boss."

"That would explain why he was so strict when training me. And he was already known as Hellmaster Miller."

"Yeah well, that wasn't all of it." She took a breath. "16th of June, 1991, maybe you remember."

Taylor frowned. "I think? Mom told me about when she ran with Lustrum, and someone threatened to release a biological weapon at New Hampshire university? But nothing came of it, just a scare."

Buffalo tisked gently. "Oh, honey. The weapon was released. It was a mutated Wolbachia strain. The Dogs had already worked with it, to eliminate a different plague. It induced infertility in human males."

Taylor shook her head, confused. "But what does all has to do with me?"

Buffalo lowered her head, and took a long breath. "When Snake killed Ahab, Miller wanted a memento, something that would carry Ahab's legacy on. So he made a deal with a young couple that had been affected in Lustrum's group attack and couldn't have their own kid anymore. A project inspired in the Enfants Terribles, using the genetic material of Ahab and a woman he spent time with
called Quiet, to impregnate the woman they made a deal with. Project Athalia."

Snake brought his hand to his face. "Goddammit, Master…"

Dragon went still. Nobody else seemed to get the reference.

"The Queen of Judah, and daughter of King Ahab", she whispered horrified.

That got a reaction from Taylor, who looked behind at Dragon. "Wh-what?"

Buffalo looked up again at Taylor, tired. "It was a girl."

Taylor turned to Buffalo, eyes wide as a tea plate. Her grip on the gun started to shake and move lower.

"She was left to the care of the couple as if she was their very own kid, with occasional contact so HEC could know she was safe and healthy", Buffalo continued, softly grabbing Taylor's wrists, not taking the gun away, but aiming it away from herself.

Taylor's breath hitched, and she fell on her knees. "No."

"Until January of this year. Ocelot thought being a genetic clone wasn't enough. So he had your medics at the hospital amputate you and instill Ahab's skills and personality through hypnotherapy. I suspect he also put you under parasite therapy recently. Quiet was host to a symbiotic organism that healed her. And you're not burned anymore."

The gun fell to the floor with a clank, and Snake hurried to take it away, unloading the magazine.

"That's enough, Buffalo."

She grimaced. "I'm sorry, Taylor."

Taylor fell backwards and Dragon hurried to grab her in a hug.
"Run!" They heard more shots, including those from a heavy machine gun, until Animos charged against the fallen tree that had been blocking the camera's view. Whoever was handling it, it was at ground level, and moving too slowly to go around the trunk before the voices left and boarded the unknown helicopter.

The voices of Virtue, Vista, and that woman, Buffalo, who rescued them, along with mentions to Dragon, the Swordswoman — no, ninja, Dragon had called her — and one Snake.

The video cut after the helicopter flew awchaay, and Armsmaster took a long breath.

"That's... that's a fine mess right there." Bastion, the leader of the Boston Protectorate, was seated at his side, dressed in casual clothes and a domino mask. He told them he had been doing extra shifts for a while, and had crashed down from exhaustion the previous day, and ordered by Armstrong to sleep and rest. Technically he still was supposed to do so, but he had come to the meeting after being informed of the situation.

Velocity rubbed his neck. "At least it looks like Dragon was right. Vista wasn't coerced."

Armstrong rolled a lit cigar in his teeth, thoughtful, and then looked at the other side of the table. "Alright, Blasto, what else?"

The video in the screen of the meeting room was replaced with a live feed of the Tinker villain, who was covering his face with a fungal mask and pretty much ignoring the glares New Wave were throwing at him. "Not much, I'm afraid. Armsmaster was right in noticing the absence of the black box. I had a couple of my creations search the crash. I merely wanted to get anything valuable before Accord did; not to use any it myself, just to show up the idiot."

He leaned to one side, and produced a small orange device. "They saw the ship had been trapped with explosives or whatever, so I had them focused on finding it. I'll send it to you with one of my more inconspicuous creatures."

"That", Armsmaster started, "would be appreciated, Blasto. I know you have no reason to do it."

Blasto waved a hand dismissively. "Please. I might be a villain, but I don't screw with other Tinkers, and I respect Dragon. Besides, I doubt anything there would have been compatible with my specialization anyway, other than circuit boards. Think nothing of it."

He stopped to type on a keyboard. "What I did try to retrieve for myself, though, was Vista's attacker. I didn't think much of it. Help a kid, retrieve some samples, and given the state of the body, maybe a corpse so you people could investigate what the hell happened there."

Dauntless straightened up in his seat. "You mean the one who was flailing around and crushed her
visor in the video?"

Blasto produced a vaporizer and flushed it contents to one side, before returning to the camera. "Yeah. The camera couldn't show her properly, but once my creations took her, their cameras showed the woman was in a, ah, deplorable state of health, enough to expect her to die in matter of minutes. What I didn't expect was to her to blow up."

Lady Photon leaned forwards with her elbows on the table. "Blow up?"

"Right, she exploded hard enough to kill my minions and destroy their gear. Only thing left was gore, and these." Blasto turned towards some hands that came off camera and took a weapon, displaying to his audience.

"A kama." Armsmaster blinked. "One of Cricket's kamas."

Blasto returned the weapon to the hands off camera. "My minion's cameras reported a high pitched sound before the fight between the Teeth and the Ambassadors started. It very well might fit with her power, if I understand it right. I'll send the weapon along with the black box and a sample of the woman's remains."

"I thought she died when the Empire tried to break her out of jail along with Rune?" Laserdream asked.

"Nothing was found of her. One would have thought she was back with the Empire, like Rune, but Hookwolf has been in a bad mood since then", Armsmaster said. "I can't make any sense of any of this", he muttered.

Armstrong nodded. "Alright. That would be helpful, Blasto. I guess you'd be expecting something in exchange, though?"

"No, already did what I wanted to do, and my losses are acceptable. As I said, I just don't have much use for any of this. Just let the messenger come back to me unharmed, please", the villain said, but he looked aside, chuckling. "If Apple still were here, I would have asked for a reservation in a nice place."

Armstrong smiled. "We'll be expecting the goods. Just do me a favor, and lay low, will ya? Don't want Accord throwing a hissy fit just because you got to the crash first."

"And don't give me a reason to make me pay you a visit", Bastion added.

Blasto nodded, and the feed was cut.

"So. Is anybody going to address the elephant in the room?" Glory Girl said. "Not only did we let Vista and Virtue be taken by God knows who, but they took the asshole that cut Gallant open too."

"Vicky, you yourself said you saw Virtue arms deep into the guts of that girl, and Vista helping her", Lady Photon told her, raising a hand in her direction. "I don't like it, but I'm sure there's a reason for all that, and it's not our job to know."

Glory Girl bristled. "But—!"

"Vicky." Lady Photon's voice was stem. Glory Girl acquiesced and kept quiet.

"Rest assured, it is indeed our job", Armstrong said. "You people on the other hand I'm sure want to return home and rest. I'll have an officer escort you all to a break room while a helicopter is made
ready to take you back." He stood up. "Armsmaster, you stay here with Bastion. There's a meeting of the director board due in a few minutes, and they want to debrief you."

Everyone started to get up and leave the room, followed by Armstrong. Armsmaster caught Velocity looking at him with pity just before he left.

Armstrong was the last one to leave and close the door, leaving the two leaders alone.

Armsmaster leaned back on his seat, letting out a breath. "I'm finished."

Bastion leaned to him, putting a hand over his shoulder. "Hey. Shit happens all the time. Look at me. One PR disaster, and I'm still around."

Armsmaster scoffed. "Don't take it the wrong way, but I doubt calling a persistent fan a 'spic' compares to losing a branch director, one Ward, two Guild members, a suspect, two Wards injured, one of them critically, one helicopter crashed, two pilots dead, and the worst local security breach in recent memory. Plus my backing of Virtue behind the scenes. At the side of all that, I think a racial slur lacks certain weight."

Bastion flattened his lips. "Huh, yeah. You may be right there."

"But I appreciate the support. Really."

Bastion smiled, giving him a pat on the shoulder before leaning back.

Armstrong returned, and after closing the door, he left his cigar on an ashtray. "Right. The directors are ready and we're going live in a few seconds." He took a remote, raising it in direction of the screen. "Word of warning, the Chief Director is pissed."

The helicopter finally touched down, and Buffalo rolled the door open as the engines died down. The airport was deserted at such an early hour, and a cargo plane was parked at a distance, its cargo ramp lowered.

With her rifle at her back and the damaged launcher in one hand, she climbed down first to the tarmac as Chameleon arrived flanked by Mastodon and Laughing Wallaby behind them, dressed in jeans and a blouse. Squirrel followed from behind pulling a gurney. Only Mastodon was armed.

"The patient?" Chameleon asked.

Buffalo signaled Snake and Dragon to start lowering Tattletale from the vehicle. Her armor was heavy, but with the assistance of the old Dogs, they got her on the gurney. Only Mastodon was armed.

"The patient?" Chameleon asked.

"You can't talk either, but we think that's due to some sort of restraint in her armor", Snake added.

"Are you a doctor?"

"Staff Sergeant CMT Class 1 in the Royal Army, chief surgeon in the Dogs, and surgeon in the NHS since 1998", Chameleon said offhandedly. "Take her to a bed", she ordered to Squirrel, who nodded and started pushing the loaded gurney in the direction of the plane. "I'll need help taking off
the rest of the armor."

"I'll be there to help in a bit", Dragon said.

Chameleon nodded and followed Squirrel to the plane.

"You're Spetsnaz, right?" Snake commented to Mastodon. "I recognize the uniform and insignia, but they look outdated."

Mastodon smiled through his beard. "That I am. I was unit commander in Afghanistan, back in 1984. Until the Dogs were hired to kill me; the Boss extracted me instead. Not my choice, I was loyal to the Union, warts and all, but joining the Dogs beats a bullet to the head. An honor meeting you two, by the way."

"Silent Mastodon is one of the oldest Dogs the Boss recruited, and a hardass whether he's commanding a CP or an assault team. Has a few nice stories from before I joined too", Buffalo said with a pat on his shoulder. "Everything fine on your end?"

"Absolutely", he answered. "Bit rushed, but got all you asked loaded on the plane. You? Heard you got unexpected company."

They looked behind at the sound of shoes hitting the tarmac. Otacon was helping Sunny climb down, followed by Emma. Taylor was next, followed by Diamond, who climbed down along Vista.

"Oh dear", Wallaby exclaimed. "She looks like—"

Buffalo raised a finger to her lips and Wallaby went silent.

Taylor stopped for a moment at the remark and swallowed.

Diamond gave out a whine and looked at Dragon. She gave him a pat, and he moved to Taylor's side.

She started again without a word with Diamond behind her, walking towards the plane, and with her gaze lost in the distance.

"It's the expected company that worries me", Buffalo muttered.

"Vista", Dragon called to the younger girl. "Can you please make sure to look after her?"

Vista inhaled sharply. "Yeah, of course. Is she gonna be alright though? That was quite the bombshell she got dropped on her."

Dragon kept silent for a moment. "I… I hope so."

"I'll guide them to the infirmary", Wallaby said with a thick British accent. "Make sure Chameleon gives them a check."

She took off with Vista, reaching Taylor and Diamond, and kept pace with them.

"She doesn't look military", Snake observed.

"She isn't", Buffalo answered. "Zoologist, rescued her in Africa. Managed an animal reserve the Dogs had for an eco group, married Pequod and became a mother hen for kids and critters alike. A small portion of the Dogs staff were civilians who got stranded in war zones, or scientists and engineers who worked for the military and which Miller hired."
The space between them and the plane became compressed, allowing music to reach them from inside the plane. The girls and the animal arrived at the loading ramp a few seconds later.

She turned to her charges and clasped her hands together. "Now, I know what you might be thinking, where we might be taking you. The pilots are the only ones to know where exactly, infosec reasons, you understand. But I can tell you we're leaving the continent to somewhere West and we'll meet the overseer of HEC, an old friend of Miller and Ahab; Taylor's parents too. He'll answer any questions you might have. Dragon, I know you'll want to stay with Taylor, but once you're done with Tattletale's armor, one of my men will want to talk to you in private; it's important, about what we found at Saint's place."

"Alright", Dragon said with reticence.

[Sweet dreams are made of this, who am I to disagree? I traveled the world and the seven seas, everybody's looking for something.~]

Buffalo blinked. "Don't tell me..."

[Some of them want to use you. Some of them want yo get used by you. Some of them want to abuse you...~]

Buffalo rolled her eyes.

"Not what I expected to hear in these circumstances", Otacon said, holding Sunny's hand.

She turned to Mastodon. "Mind taking them inside, get them comfortable? I need to talk with Pequod first. And when you get there, tell them to stop the music. We got enough with a kid in shock around without having her listen to a song about depression."

Mastodon nodded. "Follow me, please", he said, with the group following him while he lifted a finger to the bead in his ear.

As they walked out. Buffalo turned to Pequod, who had just left his helicopter. "Hell of an op", he said.

Buffalo sighed. "This day has gotten longer than an episode from Highway to Heaven for everyone, 'specially for the kid." She bit her lower lip. "I feel bad for her."

"She's not alone, at least", Pequod pointed out. "That's something."

She nodded, noticing a group of technicians come from a hanger. "Those are HEC people. They'll hide your baby until we can recover it. Mind if you bring some of the photos from the walls?"

"Help put faces to the names?" he asked.

"Yeah. Didn't think about it, what with the, you know."

Pequod nodded. "Sure, I'll get them."

Buffalo walked out to the plane, leaving Pequod to his business.

Lisa felt the last piece of the armor being taken off. It left her in sport shorts and bra and she sighed.

She opened her eyes as she felt the plane take off the ground. "Feels like repeating myself in my mind", she rasped laying on her cot, finally free from the vocal restraint in the armor, "but thank
you."

Dragon shook her head as she left the piece at the foot of the cot. "Think nothing of it. Though you can expect some questions."

"That's fine. I'll tell you whatever. Just, let me return from the kilometer ninety three of my headache first, please."

"I finished cleaning the wound", Chameleon said, leaving a tray aside to a nearby shelf and taking off her gloves, dropping them in a bin. "You should be good as long as you stay on the bed." She turned to Dragon. "Rest first, questions later. Doctor's orders."

Dragon nodded. "Of course."

There were two other cots in the improvised infirmary. A black man was on one of them with his legs bandaged, sleeping after a discussion with Chameleon ended with her injecting him an anesthetic.

Virtue — Taylor — was on the other, her now healed torso wound cleaned from her dry blood. She wore a clean tank top and was staring at the ceiling. Diamond was laying down at the side of her cot, tail swishing from one side to the other and ears perked up, keeping watch.

Lisa didn't like that look. She was still conscious in the helicopter when she heard Buffalo telling Taylor her true origins, and she didn't like the way it had hit the girl.

Vista was standing at one side with folded arms. "Just tell me this. Are you really Tattletale?"

"I said questions later", Chameleon said firmly, putting a hand over Vista's shoulder.

Lisa raised a hand. "No, that's fine. Yes, I'm Tattletale." Vista bristled, but Lisa kept going. "And I'll give you another one. I didn't want the bank to happen; Coil wanted the Undersiders to do the job, and we didn't plan for Panacea being there, or Glory Girl breaking through."

Dragon stepped besides Vista, interposing a hand between them. "The Undersiders work for Coil?"

Lisa hummed. "Except me. He recruited me at gunpoint. And has moles in the PRT. Being arrested was just as good as dying or worse. And look, I've been a bitch, but I didn't want to go as far as I did, figured Glory Girl would step back."

"You still broke Panacea", Vista accused her. "You got all the Wards in trouble and made Browbeat quit."

Lisa sighed. "And for what little it's worth, I'm sorry. Really."

They stood there, looking at each other for a moment. "Can you cuff her to the bed?"

Chameleon frowned. "What do you expect her to do like that?"

"She's still a villain."

Lisa shrugged and offered a hand. "Go ahead. If I'm in bed, I'm not in a cell."

Chameleon scoffed, and took some handcuffs from a pocket in her uniform. "When I was young, I used to go to jail just so I wouldn't go to bed…" she said with amusement as she handcuffed her to a bar of the cot. The job done, she turned to the heroes. "Come with me, I'll take you to the others."
When they left, Lisa looked at Taylor.

"Hey", she whispered. "You alright there?"

No response, not even a twitch.

Diamond looked at her for a moment, but returned to his watch.

Lisa hummed, deciding to not press the issue for now or knowing how to even do it, and closed her eyes. She didn't feel like sleeping, but it made her headache tolerable enough to think in ways to help her savior.

Buffalo stopped the trio as she met them besides a hatch along the corridor. "Dragon, come inside here, please. We need to talk. It's about Saint."

"Just a second", Dragon answered. She looked then at Vista. "I need to check this. Stay with Snake and the others for now."

Vista nodded and kept following Chameleon.

Dragon went through the hatch, and Buffalo closed it. Dragon looked around, and saw they were in what looked like a communications room. A couple of technicians were operating some computers at one end of the room, while Otacon and Emma were in another one closer to the entrance.

"Hmm, Doctors Emmerich", Buffalo said. "I thought you were in the common space?"

They looked up from their screen. "Oh, I needed to contact the rest of our group through a secure channel, tell them we're fine. That man Squirrel brought us here. Do you need us to go?"

Buffalo raised a hand. "No no, that's fine. Actually, we might have use for your expertise."

The brothers looked at each other. "Sure?" Emma said, not really convinced. They got up from their seat and came closer.

Buffalo turned to the other side of the room, where a black woman about the same age as her was occupied in mounting some sort of computer rig. She wore fatigues and her black hair showed signs of starting to gray. "Frog!" Buffalo called at her.

"Oh", the woman said, looking up from her work and taking off her headset. "Didn't notice you were here already." She left a few components in the table and moved closer, offering a hand with a smile. "Biting Tree Frog, intel and computer specialist. Please to meet you."

Dragon took her hand gingerly. "Dragon. Pleased to meet you too." She tilted her head. "I noticed, everyone in your outfit use animal code names as well? I thought only Snake and FOXHOUND did it."

"FOXHOUND did it since the Boss founded it in the Seventies, but the tradition carried over when he founded MSF and the Dogs."

Tree Frog gave a look at the siblings, and took Buffalo by the shoulders. "Can you give us a moment?" she said before dragging her companion to the far end of the room.

"Buffalo. Tell me I'm seeing a ghost and that's not actually Huey's son."
Buffalo blinked. "He's… Crap. His last name is Emmerich." She looked back to the trio of guests, who were talking between them. "Now that you mention it, he kind of has his face. Just actually attractive, instead of, you know, Huey. Took after his mother I think."

Tree Frog gave her a hard look. "Buffalo", he said slowly. "You're old enough to be his mother."

"No I'm not, I'm at least ten years younger than Strangelove", Buffalo said with an air of being scandalized, then changed to a conspiratorial tone. "But I've roleplayed weirder things."

Tree Frog widened her eyes at her leader.

After a moment, Buffalo grinned. "Gotcha."

The intel specialist took a hand to her face. "You'd do him anyway."

Buffalo swayed her head from side to side. "Yeah, probably. I mean, forget the roleplay, kid's cute. Wouldn't be surprised to see him surrounded by girls trying to shack up with him."

Tree Frog took a breath as she lowered her hand, and steeled her face. "What are we going to tell him? Them. Do they know the truth about his parents? What Huey did?"

Buffalo grimaced. "I don't know? Let's say he doesn't know. I wouldn't like to be the one to tell him, I feel terrible already after jumping that gun with Taylor in the chopper."

"Let Code Talker decide?"

Buffalo nodded. "I agree. You text the others to keep shut until then, I'll start telling Dragon."

"Anyway, I promised you proof", Buffalo said as she came back, leaving Tree Frog to use a tablet. She moved to a mess of boxes, taking something from one of them and offering it to Dragon. "And here's exhibit A."

Dragon took the object, studying it as she rotated it. "A hand?"

"Saint's hand. Well, a hand of his suit", Buffalo said. "His armor held against our five five six decently, but everyone is equal in the watchful eyes of the twelve seven and an AMR."

"Alright, I believe you now; I recognize the plating from one of the suits he stole."

Otacon moved to look at it closer. "Designed to resist small and medium weapons?"

"At the very least, but I think he reinforced it", Dragon said. "If I expect anything heavier, I use my bigger suits." She left the hand in a nearby table. "That's good foresight to bring a gun powerful enough, but it must have been hard to get him into position."

Tree Frog coughed into a fist from back in the room, while Buffalo looked aside.

"You didn't snipe him?"

"Actually, we assaulted him inside the cottage they operated from."

"Wait, you went again Saint with an anti-materiel rifle? Close combat, indoors?"

"He was beating old Mongoose." Buffalo shrugged. "Ahab taught a few of the Dogs how to fire an AMR from the shoulder. It's awkward, and the recoil hits like a truck so it can cause a shoulder
injury, but it can be done with a padded suit like mine. Worse, the Dogs developed our own brand of AMRs, the Brennan and the Serval. Normal AMRs don't rate well against modern heavy armor, but those were made to chew up tanks like champs. The recoil is a blast."

"So", Emma asked. "I get it's hard?"

"Very", Dragon said. "Conventional AMRs are unwieldy. There are some rifle models able to be used without a prone position, but that's more of a last resort."

"I'm honestly impressed", Otacon agreed. "Although, well, Snake took out an Abrams tank once with grenades, and... why are you looking at me like that?"

The three women stood in silence looking at him.

"Oookaaay moving on!" Buffalo said clasping her hands together with a shaky smile.

She turned to Dragon. "Before we start, I want to assure you that you have nothing to fear from us. We are on your side, both my guys and HEC."

"Huh." That was an ominous start, and the Emmerichs raised their eyebrows. "Alright?"

Buffalo looked back to Tree Frog. "Your show."

Tree Frog motioned them to follow her to the rig she had been constructing. "This is a computer we captured at Saint's place. Their main computer in fact, I'd say, and you can keep it, of course. It's an impressive setup, it had enough screens put together to allow three operators to work at the same time in the same desktop. They kept all their information in it, and controlled their operations from here."

"You mean, control my movements", Dragon said. She chuckled. "You have no idea how much I owe you for this. I considered dealing with his crap a lost cause."

Buffalo bit her lip, and Tree Frog rubbed her arms, as they exchanged a look.

"Don't look at me, you should know more than I do", Buffalo told her.

"I know", Tree Frog answered. "Trying to figure how to break it to her."

Dragon looked between the two. "Know about what?"

Tree Frog took a breath, and exhaled. "Ok. Ripping the bandaid. Saint, huh, knew you were an AI. He found the last will of your creator along with code in case you had to be kept under control, and instead went paranoid with thinking you'd bring the apocalypse."

The room went silent, except for the typing of the technicians and the running of the computers.

"What", Emma whispered.

Dragon took a step back.

Buffalo and Tree Frog raised their hands. "Wait, wait! That's fine!" Tree Frog rushed to assure Dragon.

"Yeah, it's true!" Buffalo took a step forward. "I'm honest, we don't have a problem with you being an AI!"

"You don't fear me?" Dragon breathed out.
"And why would we?" Buffalo said with a chuckle. "Should we be afraid of the great job you've done in Canada and the States helping people, protecting them?"

"And how do you even know I'm not… I'm not going to go rogue!? You must know about the machine army. Why do you accept me at face value? Why?"

"Because, one", Tree Frog started, "we know of your restrictions. In a pragmatic sense, we already know you're safe to be around. And second…" She turned to Buffalo. "Tell her about Imago." She then walked to the rig.

"The CIA developed an AI pod in the Seventies", Buffalo explained while Tree Frog started connecting loose cables and initiating the computer. "It was designed to control a nuclear weapon system."

"Metal Gear?" Otacon asked.

Buffalo shook her head. "It was called Peace Walker, and it worked with a secondary AI pod; Imago was what they called a 'Mammal' pod, and the other one a 'Reptile' pod. Together, they would work as a functional human brain. Or something, I'm not big on the details. A CIA director called Coldman wanted a weapon that could take the theory of deterrence to the next level during the Cold War. Shit happens, as it tends to, it almost caused a nuclear apocalypse, sending a fake signal to NORAD that made them believe the Russians had started several nuclear launches. Big Boss called the Pentagon, but the President and Vice President were at the SALT II meetings."

"The treaty that intended to reduce the number of nuclear weapons manufactured on both sides of the Iron Curtain", Otacon explained. "That's ironically bad timing."

"Yeah, and without them, the chain of command fell on the Chairman of Joint Armies. He listened to Big Boss and ordered to ignore the signals, but everyone else in the Pentagon rebelled. They wanted to retaliate. Coldman wanted to prove humans would be too afraid to do such a thing; they proved him wrong."

Emma shivered. "How… how did they stop it?"

"Peace Walker and the pods had armor rated against nuclear weapons, and while Big Boss fought it off and managed to disable Imago, the Reptile pod kept fighting and sending the signal. But here's the thing." Buffalo raised a finger. "He couldn't stop it. It just wouldn't stay down. And suddenly, Imago revived, somehow. Instead of carrying her commands, she took over the Reptile pod, and controlled Peace Walker into the depths of Lake Nicaragua, drowning herself and the signal. The blips in NORAD's systems disappeared."

"That AI", Otacon started after a moment of silence, "was a hero." Emma threw him a look, but Dragon couldn't decipher why.

"Imago was modeled after The Boss, Big Boss' mentor", Buffalo continued. "She was a World War Two hero, until the Government schemed to have die as a traitor at Big Boss' hands, and bury her name, but she never stopped being a hero." She turned to Dragon. "Even dead, as an AI, even before Scion. Just by laying down arms."

Buffalo brought her hands to her hips, and exhaled. "Imago was recovered, and the Dogs and Ahab found her in Afghanistan in hands of the Soviets, restored. She was retrieved, and HEC had her ever since. Tree Frog made a hobby of trying to upgrade her with better hardware." She laughed with a shrug. "And she's content with chatting, singing, and quoting the Boss. I tell you, in our experience, AIs aren't intrinsically bad. And honestly, only by this little couple hours I've been with you, you've..."
been human enough for me. I see no reason to hurt you. Why would I?"

Dragon lowered her head, ashamed. "I appreciate your candor. I've... I've lived in fear since I was created that people would hate me."

"Well, I have to agree with Buffalo", Otacon said with an encouraging smile. "I can respect not going public yet, but facts tip the balance heavily in your favor."

Buffalo shook her head. "HEC's not doing that, and I agree. Not if you don't want to. They are spies, analysts, and mercenaries. Not assholes."

"I have a question, though", Emma interjected. "I thought your public story was that you piloted your suits from your home. But all communications in the plane go through these computers." She pointed a thumb to the technicians behind them.

Dragon looked up. "Oh, well. Yes, that's not true. I actually download my current instance to a biocomputer housed into my suits, or to a mainframe when I don't need to, using cell phone towers to communicate and move among my equipment. I also keep backups in a server farm. Both the mainframe and the farm are disguised as super computers for analysis."

"Wait a second", Buffalo said, narrowing her eyes. "We've only had encrypted radio tightly controlled since we left Boston. Have you hacked our systems, or you don't know anything about what's happening at your places right now?"

"No, not since... " Dragon straightened. "Not since the crash."

She took hold of all the will she could to not lose herself to panic and start fretting and pacing back and forth. She knew what the PRT Chief Director Costa-Brown would do; Dragon's services were an asset after all. Afraid that she would have been compromised, they would start checking all of her buildings in the hopes of finding a claustrophobic woman in a room that had never even existed.

And then they'd find the mainframe and the server farm.

These people had been ready to accept what she was. Would the PRT, an organization defined by their paranoia?

Dragon grabbed Buffalo by the shoulders. "I need a connection. Now."

"I'll do you one better", Tree Frog said, starting up the rig. "Your code is written so you cannot see certain things, you just ignore them, but this thing has root access to your systems." She turned to Dragon. "Tell me if I can help."

When she heard small steps, Lisa opened her eyes again to see the silver haired child from before.

The kid realized Lisa had spotted her, and with a gasp, she hid behind one of the folding screens that made the walls of the improvised infirmary.

Lisa waited a moment as the kid peeked out from behind the screen.

"Heya", Lisa offered.

"Hi", said the kid timidly.

Lisa smiled. "I'm Lisa. What's your name?"
The child stood behind the screen for a moment, looking at her. "Sunny."

"Sunny. That's a pretty name."

Sunny looked around, and stepped from behind the screen. "Thanks."

"I remember you, from the helicopter."

Sunny nodded. "It was scary."

"It was", Lisa said. "You held my hand, and hugged me. But you didn't know me."

With a shrug that made her look smaller, Sunny fidgeted in place. "You were hurt."

Lisa nodded with a small laugh. "I was. But you made me feel better."

That seemed to make Sunny less nervous. With hands stuck at her sides, she approached her bed. "Do you still hurt?"

"Yeah, but not so much anymore. Don't worry."

Sunny took a few more steps, carrying her to Lisa's side. "I don't... I don't like when people gets hurt."

"Me neither", Lisa said. "But it happens."

Sunny took a breath, and brought her hands to Lisa's arm. "Snake... Snake gets hurt sometimes when he gets back home. And Hal helps him. He says I shouldn't worry..." She shook her head. "But I don't like when he gets hurt."

Lisa grabbed Sunny's hand. "You worry about him?"

"They care for me", Sunny said. "Is she gonna hurt you again?"

Lisa blinked and turned her head to Taylor's cot. "Who? Do you mean—?"

Taylor wasn't in her cot. Neither did her dog.

The only thing left was her prosthetic arm.

Alarmed and with a grunt, Lisa straightened in her bed as fast as her pain allowed, when another voice came from outside the screens.

"I shouldn't let you talk with her, you know."

Lisa and Sunny looked back to where the kid had come, and Vista was there with her arms folded.

"I mean, considering what you did to Panacea, I wouldn't see you doing anything to a kid that young."

Sunny answered with gripping Lisa's hand harder.

Lisa ignored the accusation, and raised a pointed finger to the vacant cot. "Do you know where Taylor is?"

Vista waved a hand to the cot with a raised brow. "What do you mean where is... huh."
Chameleon, who was tending at the black man at one side, looked up as they talked and noticed Taylor’s absence. She then ran off in a hurry.

"Vista, I have a bad feeling but", Lisa started, and then swallowed. The teen hero didn't trust her, so she'd have to make overtures. "Look. My power, is Sherlock Holmes on steroids. You feed it information, and it skips steps to give you a conclusion." True, sometimes it could be wrong, but that was irrelevant now. Better safe and wrong, than ignored and right.

Vista blinked. "Ok, but what does that has to do with—"

"It told me Taylor was suicidal. She wouldn't jump off a cliff, but she'd be very reckless." She paused a moment to regain her breath.

"Wait, and you think…" Vista followed, "you think what happened in the helicopter pushed her too far?"

"I don't know, I've been burning out my power all day and I can't tell anymore, but she had a pistol with tranquilizer darts when we left Boston. Do you know if anyone took it from her?"

Vista stood in silence, arms falling at her sides. That was not a 'no'.

The hero turned to look at her right. "Her dog is trying to open a door at the other end of the plane. I think those are the bathrooms."

Lisa swallowed. She hoped this would be easy to sell to the teen hero. "Vista, you don't trust me. Fine, hate me, whatever. Taylor saved me, I owe her my life." Sunny grabbed her arm with her two hands. "Do you believe me if I say I want to help her?"

"What, why are you asking—?"

"Do you or not?" Lisa insisted.

Vista looked around herself, indecisive. "Fucking— Yes, yes okay I believe you, why?"

Lisa raised her handcuffed hand. "Help me get out, then run back to the others and warn them." Vista moved to turn around and leave, but Lisa started shouting at her. "Taylor has a Brute rating! No one else here does, but Bonesaw augmented me. Let me help!"

Vista stood in her place, glaring at her. If looks could kill, hers could boil Lisa inside her own skin.

"Fine", she hurried up to her side as Lisa sat up. She worked for a moment with the cuff, and slipped it off her hand. "Go!"

Lisa didn't waste any time. Getting up to her bare feet, she started running along the metal floor, clutching at her stomach with one hand.

She slammed her shoulder against the wall as she left the screens behind. It hurt, and made her feel nauseous, but it allowed her to control her turn.

Running along the corridor, she reached the bathroom doors. The dog was standing up on his hind legs, whining and crying as he clawed at one particular door.

'Please don't let me be late.'

Lisa rushed there, released the safety, and opened the door.
She threw herself inside, and grabbed Taylor from behind.

Taylor started struggling, while Lisa tried to grab hold of her hand, which she saw grabbing a small dart.

"Let me— Leave me alone!" Taylor shouted, as she strained within Lisa's hold.

Taylor jumped back, smashing Lisa against a wall of the bathroom. It took Lisa's breath away, but she didn't let go.

Lisa then felt as they started falling back, moving outside the bathroom and into the corridor.

Lisa impacted against a wall once again, and they fell to the floor, Taylor still in her arms. The girl was bucking hard, trying to free herself from the grip. But Lisa refused to let her go.

Her headache was killing her, and her stomach was in agony again. But Lisa felt incapable of letting Taylor carry out the deed.

Taylor kept shouting and crying, but her strength was decreasing, more flailing and crying than the strong resistance from before.

From their position, Lisa could see three spent darts on the floor of the bathroom. Two more, or even just one, and Taylor would have been successful.

She heard steps running towards them, and saw Snake and Vista approaching, followed by the mercenaries.

Taylor started sniffling, all energy spent. Her hand opened, letting the dart fall and roll away.

Her head then fell back over Lisa's shoulder.

Taylor had fallen asleep. The dog moved closer, whining and licking Taylor's cheek.

Lisa closed her eyes, letting out a breath as she leaned her head back against the wall, feeling the plane's vibrations. Raising a hand, she softly stroked Taylor's forehead.

"Not gonna let you go, you hear me?", she whispered. Lisa wasn't sure if she was trying to reassure Taylor or herself. "I'm here for you."

Lisa opened her eyes again when she noticed the steps reaching them. "How is she?" Chameleon asked.

"Sleeping." Lisa breathed in as the mercs took up Taylor to one side, freeing her from her weight. "I think she took three darts", she said as Chameleon checked on Taylor.

Snake kneeled at Lisa's side. "You're bleeding."

"Huh." Lisa looked down. Her stitches had broken, and she was bleeding again. "Figures", she breathed out.

"Get her back to bed", Chameleon ordered. The merc with the beard nodded. Then he and one other took Taylor by her arms and legs and started carrying her back, the dog following in their trail.

"You got to her in time", Chameleon said, turning around and inspecting Lisa's wound. "One more and we'd lose her."
Lisa noticed Vista looking at her at one side, hugging herself.

"Thank you, for believing me."

Vista nodded with an awkward smile.

Chameleon grimaced. "Back to bed with you too. You're going to need a transfusion."

Lisa nodded. "Aight", she said, out of breath.

She started to try and get up, but Snake put a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "No. You'll make it worse. Let me."

He took her in a bridal carry, and started moving her along the corridor.

It had been a long time since Lisa felt this small, and safe.

Or it might have been due to the blood loss that finally got to her.

With her head falling to rest in the crook of Snake's neck and putting her arms around it, and felt herself fall asleep at last in his arms.
He would have liked to say that he had slept well. Or at least that he had slept, period. He hadn't.

He switched off the alarm of his bedside clock at the same moment it went off, and got up from bed. He didn't bother looking around anymore. The house would be as empty as it always was. No one would be waiting at the bed for him.

He switched on the radio as he moved to the bathroom. He'd showered last night, after the last bout of heavy drinking, but he still needed to clean up all the same.

[The main story this morning is about what, believe it or not, looks like a militarized assault on the PRT ENE headquarters in the town of Brockton Bay. We are on the air right now with, Arnold McCarthy, our reporter in Brockton Bay. Arnold, how are things developing at the scene?]

Washing his face and brushing his teeth was quick. Getting his hair in order, though... He was able to have it longer than regulations allowed, but its length and its platinum blonde color made it obvious when it wasn't all that clean. Thankfully, it would only take some water to do the job.

[Hello, Clint. I'm currently standing outside the perimeter set up around the PRT offices in downtown. Things are calm right now, the worst was over by midnight. Current reports describe an unknown group of uniformed assailants storming the building late yesterday. While the defenders repelled the assault, two PRT officers were killed, and three injured, one seriously. More troubling, two of the local Wards were also injured. The PRT has refused to comment on the severity of the Wards injuries, but we have reports that one required urgent medical care. The Youth Guard is-]

Finished with his morning routine, he moved to the living room. He passed by a weapon stand that held several knives, a machete, and a set of katanas.

He stopped in front of the photo of a young brunette, and lit a candle sitting next to it.

[The primary theory is that they were there for Virtue, a junior Hero affiliated with the Guild who took the scene by surprise earlier this by year disrupting gang activities across the states of New Hampshire and British Columbia in Canada, working under the supervision of renowned Tinker hero Dragon. Since her sudden appearance in January, Virtue has been responsible for-]

He stood there for a moment. He then leaned down to the photo, and gave it a kiss.

[Virtue was targeted several days ago in a public attack by members of the gang 'Empire 88', including shocking attacks against her civilian identity and family. These shocking attacks resulted in the destruction of her home and the death of her immediate family. Capes across the country have expressed concern about the newfound willingness to cross the unspoken line between costume and civilian life-]

In the kitchen, he prepared his breakfast, a bun and a cup of coffee on a tray, and walked out to the living room.

[Armsmaster, the leader of the Protectorate organization in the city, and the Guild tinker Dragon were responsible for saving Virtue from the fire that destroyed her home. Virtue herself sustained heavy burns in the fire, and was in critical condition at the PRT infirmary when the attack on the
Building took place. Armsmaster's actions are under scrutiny, as he was not present to lead his team during another conflict in favor of responding to the attack on Virtue's home.

Walking around a multitude of empty bottles and beer cans behind the sofa — he'd clean that up tomorrow — he approached his computer and switched it on. He then set his plate at one side, taking a sip from his cup and starting to eat the bun.

[It's not clear what the goal of the assault on the PRT offices was, but Virtue's presence is the most likely cause. As for its success - there has been no word of Virtue since she was admitted for medical care, and she is not listed among the people evacuated from the building. The PRT have promised a thorough investigation, but it may be months before the results are made public. As their policy is to withhold all comments during such an investigation, we can only speculate as to whether Virtue-

Switching off the sound system with a remote, he scoffed. A non-government military strike on American Soil, on the PRT, no less? That was sure to be a jurisdictional clusterfuck. The PRT had snatched a lot of duties from the various alphabet agencies in the past decade, leading to no shortage of conflict as the agencies struggled to justify their funding. Criminal Investigation Command would surely fall on this like a pack of wolves, if only to make sure no one inside the Army had gone rogue; and to stomp them into the ground if they had.

He had an hour to kill before he was due at the base, so he opened an encrypted folder, and looked at the board at one side of the computer desk. He got up, cup in hand, and started examining the clues he added last night.

All together, it was an intricate framework of information, scratched-out lists, sticky notes, and cotton cords connecting data. Recent locations. Routes. Transportation. Abilities. Customs. Personality analysis. Modus operandi. Victims; types and number.

And in the center of it all, the photo of one man. Middle-aged, handsome, with a charming smile and a knife in hand.

"Alright, Jack", he whispered, "let's work."

"Rebecca, care to tell me what the hell I'm looking at?"

"Contrary to what most people think of me, Narwhal," the voice on the other side of the line stated flatly, "I am not as omniscient as I would like to be".

"Then allow me to rephrase", Narwhal said into her phone, straightening in her seat. "Care to tell me why the hell I'm looking at an indefinite suspension, ordered by you, a mere hour after you delivered a search warrant signed by two different governments for every piece of Dragon's equipment we have?"

"Dragon's services are an asset the PRT sorely needs", the PRT Chief Director answered. "Do you have any idea of how reliant are our troopers in the continued production of containment foam alone? Either she turns up somewhere and explains herself, or we take over everything she has. It's that simple."

"No it's not", Narwhal insisted. "This is spitting in her face. She has given a lot to the PRT, and you know other Tinkers won't be able to maintain her production plants running as they should!"

Narwhal noticed she had started yelling, and controlled herself. "You still haven't explained why I'm getting caught in this."

"Let me spell it for you", the Chief Director interrupted, "You recruited a cape as a Guild junior
member. This cape turned out to be an American teenager who should have gone to the Wards, which, by the way, is something I wish you luck trying to explain to the Youth Guard. This cape's mere presence in one of our infirmaries then caused a disaster: several troopers are dead, the local director is nowhere to be found, and she has taken a Ward and a suspect with her to who-knows-where with the apparent assistance of one of Dragon's suits. Neither she, Dragon, nor her co-conspirators have made any attempts to talk to us. What would you expect me to do?

"Think of this as a warning to keep your house in order from now on. Consider yourself lucky that we can't fire you from the Guild."

The call ended, and Narwhal sat down again, leaning back in her chair.

'But we can pull out our support', was the threat underlying behind the last line. After all, the Guild could only operate the way they did with the cooperation of the PRT. While they might be able to survive an uncooperative PRT, an adversarial, actively obstructing PRT could drown the Guild in red tape until their funds ran out, then step in and take whatever assets remained for themselves.

She looked up at the screen mounted on the wall, still showing the news of what had happened in Brockton Bay. The media hadn't connected the crash and following violence in Boston to the mess earlier in the day, but it was only a matter of time. With a sigh, she wondered who'd they call to replace her as Toronto Protectorate leader while she was suspended.

Narwhal hadn't known Virtue was a teen. She didn't know where Dragon lived. She didn't know what was going on inside Dragon's head when she had assured Narwhal that the girl was a safe bet. She did know what she was going to do to Armsmaster's neck the next time she met him for asking Dragon to bring Virtue into the Guild.

Hell, she didn't know what she was going to do without Dragon, period. The woman carried out half of the administrative duties in the Guild by herself. Narwhal had no idea how Dragon found enough time for all the work she did, even if she was one of the capes who didn't need to sleep.

Too many fastballs coming her way, not enough answers to the questions she had. Above all, she was worried sick for Dragon.

A knock on the door roused Narwhal from her brooding, and her secretary came in.

"Haven't you got the memo, Scott? I'm suspended from active duty."

"It's not that", he said as he moved to her desk and left an envelope there. "This came in the mail. It's addressed to you personally."

She took it and looked it over. "No return address?"

Scott shrugged. "It passed through the screening." He turned back to the door, but stopped before leaving the room. "Also, I'm sorry for the suspension."

Narwhal nodded. "Thank you."

When he closed the door, she opened the letter and started reading.

By the time she finished, she was opening a window on her computer to check airport timelines and ticket prices.

"What mess have you gotten into now, Tess?"
Sitting at his usual table in the cafe, he lowered his cup of coffee carefully. What he had just read in the newspaper had nearly made him spill the drink.

It was the photo of the article that had taken his attention. In it, he could see a familiar man wearing the same stealth suit that he had seen six years before, sans jacket.

The article was curious, to say the least, not just because of the subject, but because he thought he knew the man and he knew parahumans weren't a priority of his.

So why had he gotten involved with a famous Tinker and her outed protegee?

"What the hell have you gotten yourself into, Snake?" he muttered.

He made a mental note to contact the other members of Philanthropy. Mei-Ling was busy, trying to make a museum ship shine and be ready for a combat situation that it'd never be allowed to see. Surely Otacon would know something…

"Colonel Campbell?"

He looked up to the waiter and smiled. "I told you I'm not a Colonel anymore, Garci."

The waiter shrugged. "Sorry, Roy. Still getting used to it. Anyway, someone left a letter for you, said they didn't have your address." He then produced said letter.

Roy raised an eyebrow. "Really now? And they didn't leave a name?"

"Sorry, they left before the boss asked. We couldn't see anything wrong with it - we checked."

Roy took the envelope. "Can't be too safe in this time and age, son. But that's fine, anyone who would want me dead are six feet under anyway."

The waiter nodded and left.

Unfolding the letter, Roy started to read its contents. It quickly made him go through it faster in a frantic race to finish it.

When he did so, he took his cane and hurried up to leave.

Garci looked up from the bar. "Sir, your coffee?"

"Put it on my tab, son", Roy called out as he opened the door. "I have a suitcase to fill and a plane to catch."
Meryl shoved open the door to her office. "Ed, what do we have?" she demanded as she advanced between the desks of her teammates.

Ed was the only one of her men in the office at the time. A black man with tattooed arms, he was the first to arrive and start working, as her second in command and comms specialist. Jonathan was their big guy, and she allowed him some extra time to exercise or check their weapons.
The less said about 'Akiba', the better. He wasn't bad; he has made it into several special operations groups before joining the Criminal Investigation Command, after all… but his lack of confidence bleeding through everything he did around her was exasperating.

Ed looked at his laptop. "Not much, commander. The PRT are keeping details under heavy wraps, and not giving anything away, but there are witnesses saying that those men weren't parahuman. They had 'lasers' attached to their rifles, but they barely used them." He shrugged, smirking as he passed her a manila folder. "Absolutely normal joes, from what I've read between the lines."

Meryl opened the folder and read through report within quickly. An injured girl as the possible target, assault repelled, girl rescued by Dragon alongside…

With a frown, she turned to Ed. "This bit, about a 'man in a jumpsuit' escaping with Virtue. Do we have an ID?"

"I was on that, looking for any photos any passersby could have made", he said as he returned to the laptop. "And I hit the jackpot. No one seems to recognize who it is, though."

The printer started running and provided her a hard copy of the photo. Meryl took it and studied the figure in blue behind the girl in a hospital gown. She grinned. "You bastard…"

Ed blinked. "Commander?"

"Not you. I recognize him." She turned around and walked off, inserting the photo inside the folder. "I'm taking this up the chain."

Ed got up from his desk. "You know you'll have to fight them to have them fight the PRT for the case, right?" he called out as she shoved the door open.

"I'd expect nothing less", she answered, the door closing behind her.

Taylor worked to get her eyes open. Why did they feel so heavy? In fact, her entire body felt heavy. She usually got up from bed quick after sleeping —

Ah, right. She hadn't fallen asleep…

The tranquilizers.

Remembering that, she lost all progress as her eyes drooped closed.

"Welcome back, Sleeping Beauty."

She turned her head slowly towards the raspy voice coming from her right. The mental effects of the tranquilizers disappeared quickly once one woke up, but her muscles would need some time to get the memo.

It was the ninja, the armor now removed and piled into a bin at the feet of her cot. In a way, she looked even worse than she had during the impromptu surgery, the blood pack hanging from a nearby perch and a cable connecting it to her arm accentuating her state. But even with the bags under her eyes and her blonde hair a mess, she seemed at peace, with a smile on her face. The kid from before — Sunny? — had fallen asleep draped over her. In better circumstances she'd look pretty, Taylor thought, despite the scars. The serenity she showed went a long way to help her on that.
In all fairness, having a live bomb taken out from your stomach would do that to anyone.


"You scared us all", a man said in a low voice.

Between their cots, Taylor saw Snake sitting on a stool and looking at her over some photos. He'd taken his bandana off. Vista was standing at the feet of her cot, looking at them over his shoulder.

The medic from before, Chameleon, was sleeping in a chair at a desk nearby.

How long had she been asleep?

"Vista came to me", he said as he returned to the photos. "When we returned, she", Snake nodded at the ninja, "had taken you out of the bathroom and prevented you from taking a lethal dose. We found you asleep in her lap."

Taylor blinked slowly. "But, if you stopped me… why the transfusion?"

"The stitches broke during your struggle", Vista said. She also was talking in a low voice, to not wake up the child. "She bled out enough that she fell unconscious just after you." She waved a hand towards the kid. "Sunny was so worried for her that she insisted on sleeping with her. The kid's scared of you, by the way."

Taylor turned to the ninja. "I didn't… I didn't want to hurt anyone but…" She said sheepedly. "How do you feel?"

The ninja took a breath. "Like a whole football team ran me over, then celebrated a touch-down on top of me."

Taylor swallowed. "Sorry."

The girl exhaled softly, in the way one would want to laugh but didn't have enough life for it. "Don't be. Intrigue, emotion, belly ache. It's been an interesting day."

The ninja moved the hand that was buried under Sunny with some difficulty, and then offered it to her. "Lisa."

Taylor looked at the hand for a moment, then tried to sit up straight on the cot. It was a slow process, but once done, she saw that Diamond was laying down at the side of her cot. When he noticed her, she received an enthusiastic barrage of saliva through licks to the face.

"Hey, boy", she said while stroking the back of his neck in a daze. "I'm sorry I scared you too."

Taylor suppressed a shudder when she realized what she had tried to do. Diamond loved her, and she had almost abandoned him.

'You are just too stubborn to see what is in front of you.'

Once Diamond's worries were eased, head snuggled under her disabled arm, Taylor leaned and took Lisa's hand; she had let it fall while waiting but lifted it again. They were a bit far from each other, so they only managed to interlock the points of their fingers. "Taylor." She took a deep breath. "And… I wasn't… I don't know what I was— actually, I know what I was thinking, and…"

"Sadly, we both know that's true." Lisa tched with a knowing smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Don't worry, I get it. Bad times."
Taylor's fingers tightened their lock around Lisa's.

"But, thank you. For stopping me."

Lisa's fingers tightened now around Taylor's. "Don't sweat it." She smiled widely at Taylor. "You saved me. I'm serious, you can't even imagine what kind of mess you got me out of, and I'm not just talking about the bomb."

"What do you mean?" Taylor asked.

She sighed. "To be honest, I haven't made a lot of good decisions…"

Vista snorted at that. "What she means…"

"I'm Tattletale", Lisa answered before Vista managed to say anything more. She closed her eyes. "My power is deducing things. I look at something, it starts giving me information, but sometimes it gets things wrong. It's always active; I can control how much I use it, but sometimes it likes to jump by surprise just to fuck me over, and it gives me headaches if I go over a few minutes for a week, and then I'm spent." She exhaled, waving her free hand over her face. "Case in point."

Taylor blinked. Tattletale. She had heard of what had happened at Brockton Bay Central bank, and the exhausted figure in front of her didn't match how the villain had been presented in the news or what Armsmaster had told her. She looked at Vista. "So she's…"

Vista shrugged. "A villain? Maybe, but considering what she's done here, I guess she's not totally bad?"

"Not totally bad…" Lisa said, opening her eyes and rolling them. "You're following that with the me being mostly a total bitch, I guess?"

Vista pouted at her. "What if you start explaining yourself, instead of having my assumptions be the first thing she hears about you?"

Lisa glared at Vista for a moment, before exhaling in frustration. "Fine."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and Taylor thought it was for something more than concentration. "I… I triggered after my brother died. My father tried to control my power. Make himself rich - well, more rich. I left home and became a street urchin." Taylor turned again to Lisa when she felt her grip on her fingers whiten her knuckles. "Coil forced me to work for him instead. The threats were clear if I didn't toe the line, or if I tried to go to the PRT. I enjoyed part of it, the work at least. But… I'm ashamed of the bank. I was scared, and after I escaped, I said even more things I regret..." Lisa closed her eyes. "He used the bank to kidnap Dinah Alcott."

Vista gasped. "The mayor's niece."

Lisa nodded. "She's a precog. Possibly the greatest around. He flaunted her to the Undersiders. A test, I guess, to see how loyal we were. I failed. I thought I could be smarter. He sent me to Boston. That new Endbringer attacked the day I arrived.

"I thought I'd die. I woke up in an office. Motherfucking Harbinger, the original psycho of the Slaughterhouse Nine, was there, talking about offering me a job as if I had a choice in the matter. He obviously didn't want me there either - he clearly despised me and threatened me with a lobotomy, so I decided to play ball." She looked back to Taylor, tears falling down her cheeks. "He threw me to Bonesaw."
Lisa's hand was shaking. Taylor tightened her grip.

Lisa raised her free hand, looking at it with fear. "I don't even know where my real body really starts or ends anymore. Until I met you in Boston, I wished I had died instead."

Lisa chuckled, a dark undertone in the sound, as she brushed Sunny's head with her free hand. "Christ, what a hypocrite. I stop you from taking your own life because I have a thing about suicides, and here I am, admitting I had been thinking of doing the same for months…"

Vista seemed to shrink in on herself, hands on her lap.

Taylor knew what Vista had been thinking on the helicopter. The same applied now. How much of what they were seeing of Lisa was real?

She had issues using her recently discovered 'reading' power on demand, but it reacted to Lisa pouring her life story.

It told her Lisa was painfully, desperately sincere.

Taylor didn't know where to go on from there. Emma's betrayal and subsequent bullying campaign had destroyed any hopes or even urges for friendship.

Hero, villain, civilian, soldier, abuser and victim. Could she dare to accept anyone at all in her life again?

Did she even get a choice, or would the hypnosis choose for her?

Did it matter?

'I didn't save her just to kick her out.'

Taylor moved her legs over the edge of the cot until her feet reached the floor. Diamond jumped on the cot and lay down at her side, resting his head on her lap. He didn't prevent her from leaning forward, shortening the distance between the cots. Taylor took both of Lisa's hand with hers, and focused her grip on stilling Lisa's shaking.

Lisa turned to her again with a sad grin, but Taylor felt the blond girl calm down. "We are absolutely fucked up, huh?" Lisa stated.

"Yeah, quite the pair." Taylor smiled. It felt like she hadn't done so in ages. "How about, I'll look out for you, and you look out for me?"

Lisa raised her eyebrows in surprise. She quickly hid it behind a mask of amusement, but it was clear she wanted it too. "You and me, two wrecks together against the world as we know it? I can say I've gotten worse job offers." She nodded, slowly but assured. "But, yeah, I'd like that."

Sunny shifted in her sleep, her snore echoing through the room. Snake looked from his photos and sat up to check on her.

After a last smile between them, Taylor and Lisa released their hands.

Vista hummed, with her head resting on her hand. "Aw, and there goes the cute moment", she said in a whisper.

"And here I thought you didn't like me?", Lisa asked lowering her voice as well.
"We've had enough bad feelings for a day", Vista said with a shrug.

"By the way, Vista, why were you in Boston?" Taylor asked. "I didn't remember anything about you getting transferred."

Vista sighed. "The PRT wanted to recover you and the shipwreck, but the local Protectorate was unavailable, and Director Armstrong asked for help. I volunteered to go with Armsmaster."

Taylor flinched. "I'm sorry I got you involved in this."

"It's fine. The Dogs are definitely treating me better than the Teeth would have, so I can't really complain." She smirked. "Besides, I felt like I had to help you, you know? Even after the rig exercise."

Lisa's eyes moved between the two. "What rig exercise?"

"One we had months ago. Wards against troopers", Taylor explained. "Armsmaster included me as a third party."

"She knocked me out, put me inside a cardboard box, and used me as bait for Clockblocker." Vista said. "Nobody found her until Miss Militia was the only one left. First and only time anyone on the team met her, Armsmaster excepted."

This time it was Taylor who shrank on herself. "No hard feelings?"

Vista shook her head. "Nah. I was frustrated, but not at you; there was a lot of crap going around. I think you're cool."

Taylor scoffed. "Cool. First time anybody tells me something like that in… I don't know, forever."

Vista grinned. "Besides, the way Clockblocker was panicked for a month at every mention of you made it all worth it."

"Huh", Lisa said eloquently, and turned to Taylor. "So, seriously, a cardboard box?"

"Everyone dismisses them as harmless", Snake chimed in as he looked up from Sunny. "But they can be your best friend. Traps, distractions, sneaking around… If you care for your box, your box will care for you."

Vista and Lisa exchanged a look, and then turned to Taylor. She shrugged. "First time I went out as Virtue, a bunch of boxes saved me from Night. And I got to the Rig hidden in one."

"Got it", Lisa said, "No dissing the box."

Snake looked at Lisa. "Is Sunny bothering you?"

Lisa shook her head. "Unless she climbs on my belly, she's fine. She's a little angel."

"She took a liking to you." Snake smiled. "I'm glad she's socializing. She spends far too much time with me and Otacon, and we're afraid of letting her go outside."

"Why?" Vista asked.

He frowned. "Her mother is someone important, and we made a deal: we protect her daughter, and she helps us. If any of her enemies knew of her existence, they'd attack Sunny to hurt her mother."
"Oh."

"Anyway", he said, taking his stool and placing it between the heads of their cots, and sitting on it facing the space between them. "Buffalo brought me these photos. Considering what we know, I thought I should talk to you. Give you some perspective." He paused, considering. "I wanted to do it before what happened, but I don't think you were in the right mind at the time."

Taylor rubbed the stump of her left arm. "Right."

Snake turned to Lisa. "And after what you said, I think you may appreciate it as well."

Lisa gave him a confused look. "Ah, alright?"

Vista pointed a thumb to the exit. "Huh. is this something personal and I need to…?"

Snake shook his head. "No, you can stay. I don't talk about it because I usually don't have a reason, and what few friends I have know anyway. I made peace with all of it time ago. Worst it can happen, you babble it out, and nobody believes you until the Pentagon silences you one way or another."

Vista blinked. "Oh, ok, not telling anyone, sure."

Snake took one of the photos, and displayed it between the two older girls. Vista went around and looked over his shoulder. "Before that… Buffalo said this one was taken in 1975, at the MSF base", he said as they saw four men in a row posing for the camera.

Pointing a thumb from left to right. First on a man in green jacket and white helmet. "Morpho, Big Boss' pilot; turns out he's Pequod's father." He huffed. "It always feels like it's all about family", he muttered.

He then moved on to an attractive man, his blonde hair pulled back, and with sunglasses and a scarf, carrying a rifle in his hands. "Master Miller. He had both his arm and leg missing when I met him though. He said he never saw real combat, but could still make grown men eat the dust." Snake shook his head. "It's amazing how at ease he looks here."

"He is…" Taylor started, but didn't go on.

"For what it's worth", Snake said, "he was strict, and bitter. That's why everyone called him 'Hellmaster'. But he wasn't heartless. I can't, and won't, defend what he intended to do with you, but I'm sure he would have cared for you. He wasn't the type to abandon people."

She nodded.

Next one was a bearded man in a similar jumpsuit as Snake's; well built, brown hair in a mullet, and an eyepatch across his face, carrying a rifle against his shoulder. "Big Boss himself". Snake chuckled. "I never thought I'd see him this young…"

Taylor realized she was rubbing her bad eye. Her hand shot off to the edge of the cot.

"He doesn't look that bad. Even with the eyepatch." Vista said. "I thought he'd look, hmm, uglier? Like, evil villain general?"

"No one is born evil, kid", Snake said. "Everyone always has a reason for what they do. And Big Boss was considered a hero for a long time. When I was in the Green Berets, they always talked about him in awe. Not surprising, he had been a snake eater as well."
"Snake eater?"

"Army slang. All Green Berets are taught to not be picky about living off the land."

"Ugh". That was all Vista added.

Lisa started to switch glances between the photo and Snake with a weird look, Taylor noticed, but she couldn't say why.

Snake moved to the last man. He wore fatigues and a rifle, and a small white mark on his armband and one of his pouches hinted at being a medic. "This, turns out to be John, before the plastic surgery."

Taylor held her breath.

He had a similar build to Big Boss, but a bit wider and taller. His brown hair was cropped, his face shaved, and his jaw prominent. If both were SUVs, John would be the bigger and cleaner one.

"And as Ahab, after the plastic surgery…" Snake took a couple of photos from the stack. "He really did look like the real Boss. Except for the horn. I didn't pay any mind to it at the moment, with the fight, but Buffalo said it was a souvenir from the helicopter crash in '75. He was protecting Big Boss from an explosion." John appeared on those as an accurate likeness to Big Boss, though older than in the posing photo. Taylor also noticed the more obvious changes, like the eyepatch and the beard. While the small horn over the right eye and the ponytail were the most curious.

She inhaled sharply seeing the scars and the prosthetic arm.

Taylor felt her fingers itch. She moved her hand to scratch them, but realized those fingers weren't there.

So she hugged herself.

Snake took one of the other photos and put it over the left half of the pose photo, leaving only John uncovered. "This was Quiet. An assassin and sniper. They told me that after the Boss and John woke up from their comas in 84, she almost killed John, and Big Boss burned her alive to save him. John met her later in Afghanistan, sniping at Soviet soldiers. He captured her, and took her back to base. She followed him everywhere afterwards."

Taylor did a double take. The photo was of a brunette woman carrying a sniper rifle and who didn't seem to know the meaning of modesty. She wore a bikini, along two gloves, one of them long enough to cover the entire arm, boots, ripped leggings, and a pouch rig.

"Wow, skimpy much?" Lisa said, gently combing Sunny's hair with her fingers.

"The way Buffalo told me, when Big Boss fought her off, the fire ruined her lungs. The parasite that Taylor has now did the breathing for her, so she seemed to prefer keeping as much skin as possible uncovered." Snake rubbed an earlobe. "There were plenty of breathable BDUs during the Eighties though. I'd say she was just very self-confident."

"Self-confident? That's… exhibitionism!" Taylor scratched her forehead with a small laugh. "Ok, huh, look. Someone must have gotten it wrong with the clone thing, because I don't look like her at all."

Her humour dissipated fast under the watch of the others.
Lisa gave her a pitiful look. "Taylor, I don't know how to say this without hurting you…"

"You have her mouth and ears", Vista said without much tact, looking between the photos and Taylor. "Flatter lips than her, but it's there. Your hair looks like a mix of both of theirs. His eyes. You might be taller than either?"

"Your, uh, assets are less developed than her, though?" Lisa offered with a unsure smile.

Taylor hugged herself, over her chest. Lisa flinched.

"Or she could be a late bloomer?" Vista continued.

Lisa blinked. "Says the girl who looks younger than… what are you, twelve?"

"Thirteen", Vista answered with a frown.

"Alright, Vista, thirteen. I can't believe I am the one saying this", Lisa said extending a hand to Taylor. "But a bit more tact would be good."

"My mother's hair was black and wavy", Taylor found herself whispering. "She dyed and curled my hair, said that way we'd be closer. After she died, I kept doing it to remember her." She grabbed at the ponytail. "I don't recognize my hair anymore."

Cringing, Vista came around Snake, and sat beside Taylor. "I'm sorry", Vista said. "I didn't think about what I was saying. I don't have a good relationship with my parents, and… I guess I projected some of that on you."

Lisa waved a hand, motioning Vista to continue.

"And I was trying to be contrarian to Lisa", Vista sighed. She then stuck her tongue at Lisa, who answered with a scoff.

Vista extended a hand to Taylor. "I'm sorry. Friends?"

Taylor accepted it with a sniff. "Ok."

Snake cleared his throat.

"Taylor, I haven't shown you these photos for entertainment. Until they give you hard proof of your relationship to these people, you have to prepare yourself for the possibility that it's true." He sighed. "I know what you're going through. I went through it too."

The girls shared a look. "What do you mean?" Taylor asked.

Snake tapped the photos with his thumb for a moment. He considered the people who knew what he was going to tell these girls. Campbell knew all about it, of course. Otacon, Mei Ling, Meryl and Naomi knew second hand, either told by himself or Campbell.

"Remember when I told you I have been taking down Metal Gears for a time already?"

Taylor nodded.

"First time was in Outer Heaven", he started explaining. "1995. Big Boss had raised the country in
secret while he worked as the commander of FOXHOUND. NATO, when it still meant something anyway, was worried about them having nuclear weapons. They knew Scion hadn't eliminated all of them; no one was sure why, maybe he didn't think they would be used at any point, or the bunkers were too well hidden for him to find them.

"So Big Boss sent me there. I was still a rookie. He hoped to use that to feed me misinformation, return home, and make NATO think there was no problem."

"Wait wait wait", Vista interrupted. "They told us about that place in history class. They told us NATO sent an army, and Scion arrived too late to stop the battle?"

"There was no battle between armies, kid", he said. "It was just me, a small country's worth of of veteran soldiers north of South Africa, and a fortress blowing up after I activated a self-destruct sequence. NATO followed with an aerial bombardment all across the country; that's when Scion arrived. He eliminated a nuclear weapon facility before the bombs could reach it, but that's all he did."

He looked at Lisa. "I also met there a man called Frank Jaeger; his code name was Gray Fox. The Fox code name was given to only the best men and women in FOXHOUND. Big Boss taught me CQC - the real style, not the watered down moves they teach to civilians - but it was Frank who showed me the ropes, who took the time to spend time with me and teach me most of what I know now."

Taylor took a breath. "So that's… when Buffalo said you killed Ahab."

Snake nodded. "Big Boss tried to fool me into leaving, but I kept going with the mission. Until I found the Metal Gear and nuclear warheads they were hiding. After I destroyed them, Ahab cut off my escape."

"I fought all kinds of people. Soldiers, psychics, parahumans… but that was the hardest fight of my life, even after all these years." He shook his head, looking again at one of the post-surgery photos. "After Outer Heaven went up in flames, a Green Beret Colonel called Roy Campbell took command of FOXHOUND. He's one of the few people I'm confident in calling a friend. But… I had to leave. The experience affected me. Between all that I did there, and my emotions after what I thought then was Big Boss' betrayal…"

"PTSD?" Lisa whispered with concern.

He nodded.

"That's… really harsh", Vista commented. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I had nightmares for years. But as I said, I made peace with it long ago."

Snake noticed then that Dragon was at the entrance, looking behind the screens. Otacon had told him about what had happened after Taylor's… attempt. Dragon probably wanted to talk with the girl in private, but she wasn't interrupting yet. Snake paid her no mind.

"I worked as a mercenary", he continued, "and some time for the CIA, but I refused to use CQC anymore; only the very basics, at most. Then the Colonel tracked me down in 1999, to rescue an engineer kidnapped by the country of Zanzibar Land. I met Big Boss there again. Frank too, as his second in command."

"Wait. You fought your friend?" Lisa asked.
"We did. Barehanded in a minefield. It was nothing personal. We were just professionals on opposite sides, that's all. I still think of him as a friend."

"But, he betrayed you, right? Switched sides", Lisa said.

"I don't make friends easily, but I haven't found a reason to end a friendship yet. There are conflicts and disappointment, sure. But to totally end it?" Snake shook his head. "Nothing. Not even war."

Lisa looked away, as if remembering something, and Taylor looked downcast. "I don't know if I could do that."

"Crap, me neither". Vista rubbed at her shoulder under her neck.

Snake inclined his head towards Lisa. "From what I've been seeing here, it seems to me you are both quite capable of separating personal feelings from the job."


"In any case", he continued, "Fox explained himself. He grew up as a child soldier, something Big Boss saved him from several times. He hated war, but that's all that he knew what to do. This was the time groups like the Protectorate, Red Gauntlet and the Yangban were establishing themselves, and with parahumans monopolizing internal conflicts and external ones falling to the wayside, soldiers like us were even more at risk. After all that he had suffered and been controlled for, he felt lost. He saw in Big Boss someone who could still give him meaning, some justification for what he had gone through.

"In the end, I won. I thought I'd killed him. I left him behind in that minefield. In the next building, I met Big Boss, talking about how he was creating a place for soldiers and parahumans alike. I didn't buy it, and we ended fighting, if only because I needed to get rid of my nightmares. I won, but before dying, he told he was my father."

"Your father", Taylor said, breathless, "was Big Boss. The real Big Boss…"

"That's all I knew, all he told me. I thought I had freed myself from him, but instead it turned me into a patricide." Snake nodded, and noticed Lisa didn't look as concerned as Taylor or Vista. "You don't look surprised."

Lisa rubbed her neck. "Harbinger knew you were in Boston, gave me the rundown on your story. It was…" She exhaled. "Comprehensive, for an ex-roving serial killer."

"That's hard to believe", Snake said with a frown; what he could read of Dragon's body language, told him she was thinking the same. "And worrying. You'd need the highest security level in the Pentagon to even know there are files on FOXHOUND. Even more, the Colonel was the only one with authority in the military who knew about me and Big Boss, and he wouldn't have told anyone."

"I don't know what to tell you. He kept me away from a lot that could have given me a clue to his operation." She shrugged, lost for words. "He called you 'uninteresting', if that's any consolation."

He scoffed. "Then I doubt he's with the government. Anyway." Snake paused, gathering his thoughts. "I holed up in Alaska. Spent far too much time drunk, then made a living as a musher, racing and taking care of dogs. Until Shadow Moses, in 2005. Campbell found me again; he had retired, but the Pentagon wanted me to solve the situation."

Lisa narrowed her eyes. "That's… Harbinger told me about that too. FOXHOUND rebelled, and you took them out?"
Vista blinked. "I'm sorry. Shadow what?"

"Some island in the Bering sea", Taylor said. "He told me already. The government were developing another Metal Gear there, the original Rex, and FOXHOUND took it to threaten the government with a nuclear strike."

"Yesterday I would have laughed at anyone saying nuclear bombs were still a threat as recently as 2005", Vista muttered, "but with what I'm learning here…"

Taylor turned to Snake. "You didn't tell me what they wanted. Is there any connection with what you're telling us?"

"True", Snake admitted. "Ever heard of the Gulf War Syndrome?" At the girls' negation, he continued talking. "The veterans of the Gulf War returned with a diversity of illnesses with no known cause. Most people thought it was the depleted uranium ammunition, PTSD, anti-gas injections, or even effects of the Iraqi parahumans. But it wasn't any of it. One Dr. Clark had been experimenting with gene therapy experiments, ignoring the international laws that banned it. After the fall of Zanzibar, and with government funds being funneled towards the PRT and the Protectorate, the US needed men to keep the army in shape. They formed the Next-Generation Special Forces, and filled the group with members of Big Boss' mercenary company, after purchasing their contracts. After the Gulf War, Clark took these men and subjected them to experimental gene therapy, using Big Boss' genes as a model to modify theirs and enhance them. The soldier genes, they called it."

"Get out", Lisa said. "There's actually something like that?"

"So they told me", Snake said with a shrug. "Better senses and skills, high grades in psychological tests, high IQ levels. In short, better soldiers. Genome soldiers."

"And your brothers", Taylor concluded.

"In a sense", Snake conceded. "Someone called them digital copies, analog clones. That's it, until they discovered they had started to suffer from a genetic disorder. They were in Shadow Moses when they rebelled alongside FOXHOUND, demanding Big Boss' remains so they could treat themselves."

"Christ", Vista exclaimed. "All this sounds like a bad wet Tinker horror film. Why did FOXHOUND rebel?"

"That's the thing", Snake said with a sad chuckle. "After Campbell had retired, the command of the unit went to a man called Liquid Snake."

Lisa's eyes widened, then shut. "God… I already know where this is going."

Taylor looked between them. "Liquid… was also your brother. A real brother."

"Got it in one. He wanted to help them", Snake said. "He considered the Genome soldiers a failure, and us along with them to be on the verge of extinction." He waved a hand in front of himself. "Turns out, he and I were born sterile. He said family members help each other to survive, and that's why he was trying to save them."

"In other circumstances it would have been touching. The thing is, he also wanted to create a new Outer Heaven, using the Metal Gear and the nukes there, and surpass Big Boss. I wasn't about to let him do it. So when I confronted him, he revealed we were also experiments by Dr. Clark." He turned to Taylor. "Les Enfants Terribles."
Lisa opened her eyes again. "Ok, didn't see that coming."

"You, you can't mean…" Taylor stammered.

"It was as Buffal0 said", Snake said with a nod. "Or at least it fits with what Liquid said. Their plan was to artificially create the most powerful soldier possible in the Seventies. So who better to chose as the model than the man known then as the greatest living soldier in the world?

"I don't know how much Buffal0 knows. As Liquid told me, they combined 20th century analog cloning and the Super Baby method. Fertilize an egg with one of their cells, and let it divide into eight clone babies. After they transferred them to someone's uterus, they later aborted six of the fetuses to encourage strong fetal growth. He thought that because of it, we were accomplices in murder before we were even born." Snake frowned. "He then started to go on some tangent about how they used him to express all the recessive genes in him and the dominant genes in me. Some justification to consider me the superior clone that took all from him."

"I'm not an expert in biology at all", Vista chimed in, "but I'm pretty sure that's not how genes work."

"Yeah", Lisa added. "If anything, that means you're the one who got shafted?"

"I never cared, honestly", Snake said, leaving the photos on a nearby shelf and resting his hands on his knees. "I gave all I had to kill him. Shot down a gunship he was flying. Threw him down from on top of the wreck of Rex. Shot him with a machine gun. A car collision. He still kept walking."

"Craaaap", Vista said raising her brows. "They made Brutes before Parahumans. How did you stop him then?"

"I didn't. He had me trapped under a jeep and looking down the barrel of his gun." He chuckled. "It was irony at the end. He thought those genes dictated our fate. And it was his genes what caused his death." Snake then turned at Taylor. "Remember that severance package I told you?"

She nodded.

"FOXDIE. It was an artificial virus developed by Naomi Hunter, the chief of medical staff in FOXHOUND after Dr. Clark died. She injected me with it under orders of the Pentagon. It could be programmed with the genetic patterns of several targets and a given time, and it would then infect those individuals when they were near the host, causing apoptosis in the heart cells at the time programmed, mimicking a heart attack. They injected me with it without telling me, programmed to attack the members of FOXHOUND and Kenneth Baker, the President of Armstech before the company went bankrupt."

Snake noticed Lisa's flinch at the mention of Baker, but otherwise she didn't say anything.

"So, that was what killed Liquid", Vista concluded. "And Naomi wasn't a Tinker."

He nodded.

She blinked several times. "Why didn't they have you people help against villains? It all sounds like FOXHOUND were capes before capes."

"We did at first. It was before my time, so I don't remember if there were any parahumans present there, but FOXHOUND intervened successfully in that university Buffalo mentioned, for example", he said, "then the PRT showed up. In any case. Naomi was Fox's foster sister, and wanted revenge for his death. She made the virus target me as well, with a random value of time."
"Ok, I'm shutting up now", Vista muttered. "All this is really, really freaky."

"So, you could drop dead at any moment?" Taylor said horrified.

"Yeah", he said before turning to Lisa. "But Fox survived. Dr. Clark recovered what was left of him, and used him for her gene experiments, grafting him into a powered exoskeleton."

Snake had Lisa's full attention now.

"You don't mean…".

"The first Cyborg Ninja you mentioned", Taylor said, finishing Lisa's thoughts.

"It made him stronger and faster, enough to support Rex's weight. But his body rejected it, it put him under excruciating pain. Clark subjected him to four years of drugs, and nanomachines to suppress his emotions. When Naomi was hired into FOXHOUND, she helped Fox escape, and he killed Clark. Naomi hid him, and when I was sent to Shadow Moses, he followed me."

"Did he…" Lisa said slowly, "want revenge too?"

"No. Just a last good fight, that's all. Fox helped me after that. But he wanted to die. He confessed to me that he killed Naomi's parents in 1979, during the Rhodesian civil war, so he adopted Naomi out of guilt, but at the same time he felt he couldn't help her anymore. Still, ever since Naomi rescued him, he refused to play into the hands of anyone." Snake took a breath. "I still remember what he told me, before he disabled Rex's detection systems and Liquid crushed him. That we are not tools of the government or anyone else. That fighting was the only thing he was good at, but he at least always fought for what he believed in."

"So… that's what I did." He smiled. "I know what Otacon would say. We have a responsibility to the coming generations, to the world, to keep track of the mistakes we've made as a species. So we need to remember, to spread the word, to fight for change.

"I don't think I can change the future, but right now, it's what keeps me going. The Boss and Liquid tried to make war their legacy. I made working against the proliferation of Metal Gears mine. And it's a fight that keeps me alive. No, it's not a solution for all the problems in the world. But I think it's worth it."

He straightened up in his seat. "When I saw, and heard, what others have done to you, have made you into…", he turned his head to include both cots, "I thought you should know: I, and others I know, have gone through the same. And you can still choose your fate; you can still find something to believe in, to fight for, or just to live for. You're free now to make that choice."

Taylor took Snake's hand. Lisa did the same with the other one.

"Thank you", they said one after another, before gripping his hands harder. Tears were running down their faces.

He noticed Vista had a sad smile, hugging her knees over the cot, pensive. Dragon had her hands crossed together in front of the lower torso of her suit, and her head tilted to one side.

Lisa wiped the tears off her cheeks with her free hand. "So", she said in a lighter tone. "Does this all mean you two are cousins?"

Taylor coughed. "What?"
"What gave you that idea?" Snake asked.

"I mean, your biological fathers weren't related by blood", Lisa said with cheeky grin, taking her hand off Snake's and waving it as if proving a point, "but they were brothers. A memetic copy, you said? And didn't you say Ahab means 'brother of the father'?

Taylor and Snake exchanged an amused look. "Maybe?" she said as she retired her hand and rubbed her own tears away. "I guess... I could use some more family members."

"It feels strange, considering my luck on family". He shrugged. "But someone who doesn't try to kill me is a nice change of pace."

"Hear that, Tay?" Lisa's grin turned into a full toothy smile. "No more gazing at his ass, that'd be awkward."

If Taylor had been drinking anything at the moment, she would be spitting it out.

"Wait, what?" Snake said with a frown while Vista snickered.

"I didn't…!"

"Pretty sure you did", Lisa managed to say, before she yelped in pain.

Sunny had taken revenge for Taylor, stirring on top of Lisa and sitting up. "You guys are noisy."

Snake sat up from the stool and moved to Sunny, taking her in his arms. "Alright, let's go back with Hal and leave Lisa to rest, ok Sunny?"

Sunny hummed and rested her head on Snake's shoulders.

Taylor sighed. "You are mean, Lisa."

"Sorry, hon. Comes with the package", Lisa said with a pained grunt, hands over the bandages on her belly. "I'll try to be nicer for you. Or try to seduce you to the dark side, I'm still undecided."

Both turned to glare at Vista, who was trying keep back her giggles and failing. "I'm sorry, but you gotta admit: you guys are funny."

Dragon waited behind the screens, until Snake came out with Sunny sleeping in his arms.

"Lisa's not soft enough as a mattress, I take it?" she said.

Snake smirked. "She's a stirrer. Can't really stay put when sleeping."

Dragon nodded, and looked to the girls. "What you told them... I wasn't sure where you were going with all that. But it seems to have helped them, and it's been inspirational for me too." She then turned to Snake. "I understand it all was deeply private to you, so thank you, taking the time to talk with them."

He scoffed. "Stop with the gratitude, you'll wear out the words. I was only trying to help, that's all."

"Well, I'll try to get you something nice next time then."

They stood there in silence for a moment. "Otacon told me about you", Snake said. "He wanted to fill me in, make sure I didn't stick my boot on my mouth before talking to you. For what's worth, I
don't have a problem."

Dragon nodded slowly. "I appreciate it."

He turned to walk around her, but stopped. "Will you be alright?"

She looked at Taylor. "I don't know."

Dragon saw him put his hand on her shoulder, for a second. A good portion of the contact sensors in her suit were damaged, so Dragon could barely feel it, but she welcomed the gesture. He then walked off to the common space in the cargo bay.

She let the girls banter for a moment, now without the volume restriction that Sunny's presence imposed, but she needed to talk with Taylor, so Dragon stepped in until they noticed her presence.

"Hello girls, I was wondering if I could steal Taylor from you for a moment." Dragon saw Chameleon asleep at her improvised desk, and decided not to bother her. "Vista, could you bring that wheelchair, please? The one on that wall."

"Sure." The teen nodded and sat up, moving to do as asked.

Taylor looked away; not sheepishly, like a small child that knew had done something bad, but in a way that made clear she knew she'd have to deal with the imminent talk, but wasn't looking forward to it all the same. "Alright. Lisa has to rest anyway."

Lisa answered by stretching her arm out of the cot and patting Taylor's knee. "I'll be good. You go, and... thanks, for the trust. It means a lot."

Taylor smiled as she put her hand over Lisa's for a second. Lisa then took her hand away and closed her eyes.

Vista brought the wheelchair, and after Diamond moved to the floor, Dragon helped Taylor sit on the wheelchair, legs still wobbly from the anesthetic overdose.

"Uhm, Diamond", Taylor said, "stay with Lisa, alright?"

Diamond perked up his ears at the order, and moved to lay down besides Lisa's cot. He licked her hand a couple times, making her chuckle, and then laid down his head on the floor.

"Friendly, for a wolf", she said, blindly moving her hand until she lucked out on his head and gave him a scratch.

"And pretty." Vista said. "Where did you get him, by the way?"

"One of Hookwolf's dog pens", Dragon said, pushing Taylor towards the exit as Vista started following them. "It was her first night; she decided to ignore my advice and freed all the dogs there. And he's a wolfdog. Czechoslovakian wolfdog, the army there bred German Shepherds and Carpathian wolves in the Fifties."

She stopped as they crossed to the corridor. "Vista", Dragon called, "I want to exchange a few words with Lisa first, can you take Taylor to the communications room? I'll be there in a moment, and the door should be open."

Vista nodded, and took over the wheelchair, pushing Taylor away. "So, that's when you fought Night, right? Mind telling me about it?"
Dragon walked back to Lisa's side. She opened her eyes again, looking at her with expectation.

"Lisa… or do you prefer Tattletale?"

The girl didn't give much thought to her answer. "Lisa. There's too many bad memories as Tattletale. Just… Lisa for now."

"For now? A fake name?"

"I ran from home for more than one reason", Lisa shrugged. "And I don't know if I'll have to change it again, but I like Lisa."

"Alright, Lisa", Dragon agreed.

Lisa frowned. "Is Taylor in trouble? Am I?"

"Should you be?"

Lisa stirred uncomfortable in her cot. "Since climbing aboard the helicopter, I've been at my most vulnerable. I can't even use my power right now."

Dragon remained quiet for a moment, thinking. "You're afraid."

"Well, yes", Lisa said with a grimace. "I'm scared shitless. Forget jail, the moment I'm back to civilization, I'll get executed or lobotomized. And I still don't know what you guys will decide to do."

"Yet you decided to try your luck with us", Dragon said. "Get in Taylor's good graces."

"She saved me twice!" Lisa said, giving Dragon a desperate glare. "First she spared me and then she took out that bomb. I'm not ungrateful!"

"Relax, I didn't mean that", Dragon said in a placating tone, raising a hand. "Wrong choice of words. You stuck to her; you saw she offered you safety, and you trusted her. From how you told it, you allegedly went through some trying times. It must have worn down your trust on people."

"Allegedly." Lisa looked away, silent for a moment. "Quite the roundabout way to say you don't quite trust me yet."

Dragon sighed, moving closer and leaned forward, putting her hand on Lisa's shoulder. She looked back at her. "I trust Taylor. She's reckless, naïve at times, and sometimes she doesn't get the full picture. But, I trust her heart. And you saved her, so I'll trust you for now. And thank you."

A hint of a smile showed on Lisa's lips, and she nodded. "Thanks". She chuckled. "Well, this turned out better than the shovel talk I was expecting it to become at some point."

Dragon straightened up, tilting her head. "Should I give you one?" she said in amusement.

"Nah." Lisa shook her head. "Power doesn't like me eyeing anyone. TMI, turned me into an unwilling ace."

"Are you sure? A good number of Thinkers are overwhelmed by their powers, I'm not only talking relationships, but…"

"As I said, TMI." Lisa shrugged. "It's alright, I'm used to it already. I'm more concerned about people trying to use me."
"Alright, I can sympathize with that", Dragon conceded.

Lisa raised an eyebrow at that, but seemed to dismiss it soon after. "Well, I'm due for a year of beauty sleep, I think", she breathed out, closing her eyes again.

"Alright, Lisa, have a good rest", Dragon said as she turned towards the exit.

"Just, tell me, is she in trouble?", Lisa asked from the cot. "Taylor, I mean."

Dragon sighed. "No, and I hope she doesn't think so", she told her, and left.

Walking through the corridor, Dragon reached the door to the communications room soon enough, and stepped inside.

She found Taylor and Vista there, watching a screen showing a TV news channel. The technicians were still operating their computers at one side of the room, while Tree Frog was working on Saint's computer at the other. She saw Dragon come in, and walked up to her.

"Any news?" Dragon asked.

Tree Frog shook her head. "No, your current instance is the only one left now. I'm sorry."

Dragon hung her head, and nodded. "Thanks."

"The HEC men need to stay at their posts", Tree Frog said, "but you can take the other side of the room, they won't eavesdrop. Give you some privacy."

"Right." Dragon turned to the girls. "Vista", she called out, gaining their attention. "Could you please leave with Tree Frog? She'll take you to the others."

Vista nodded, and patted Taylor's shoulder before leaving after Tree Frog.

Dragon walked up to Taylor, turning the wheelchair around and pushing her to the far extreme of the room. "Having a good time with Vista?"

Taylor shrugged. "She's... she tries to look serious and professional, but she's more excitable than she thinks she looks. But she's nice."

"That's nice", Dragon echoed. "It's good to see you make friends. And you left a good impression on Lisa."

"Is she going to be in trouble?" Taylor asked.

Dragon would have liked being able to smile. "I don't know. But considering the circumstances... I don't think that wouldn't be right, without knowing the full story."

"No, it wouldn't", Taylor agreed.

Dragon stopped the wheelchair near the wall, and walked around Taylor. There was a metal chair nearby that Tree Frog had been using, but her suit was heavy even without the lost plating and pieces of weapons, so she crouched at her side instead.

It took more time and made more noise she would have liked.

"Sounds like you need a bit of oil?" Taylor tried to joke with an awkward smile.
"What I need is to scrap this suit and get a new one", Dragon said. True, she could walk around and interact with people, but this was pushing the limits of the damaged suit. "I had a prototype of a gynoid body in one of my factories, pity I don't have it here."

Dragon managed to finish crouching, settling for kneeling on one knee. They then spent a moment in silence, none of them having much of an idea of how to start. Dragon was completely lost.

In the end, she was the first to go. "So."

Taylor looked downwards. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't be", Dragon said with a sigh. "You were in a bad place, with bad options. Nothing of what happened is your fault."

"But it is, isn't it?" Taylor said without looking up, and grabbing at her stump. "I killed those men. And I was the one who wanted to keep going after the gangs, and I pushed them too far. I'm responsible for their gang war. For them burning…"

She inhaled loudly, and Dragon reached out with both hands around Taylor's shoulders. "Now listen to me. You're not responsible for what they did. That blame falls on them, and only them. Fine, you made mistakes, you can learn from them. But don't knock yourself down for helping people, for defending yourself. Please."

Taylor looked up, her eyes crying. "What I… tried in the bathroom…"

"I'm not angry." Dragon shook her head. "But I worry for you."

"Who am I, Dragon?" Taylor said with a sniff, looking away. "What am I? Am I just an extension of Ahab? Did Taylor Hebert ever exist? Did anyone ever care she existed?"

"You think your parents didn't?"

"They agreed to…" A hitch in her breath. "To the deal."

"Is that why? You wanted to assert yourself?"

"My entire life was planned before I was even born!" Taylor said as she shrinked on herself, squeaking. "I felt like it was the only way I'd have a choice that mattered."

Dragon leaned forward and hugged Taylor. She started crying her eyes out.

The time passed as they stood there, while Taylor let it all out. Dragon tried to not squeeze her too hard.

"Your parents loved you, Taylor", Dragon whispered in her ear. "After Boston, when he knew what you have been doing as Virtue, your father called me. He said you were now spending as much time with me as you did with him. He told me to not let anything happen to you. He wasn't asking. He loved you."

Dragon waited for a moment, as Taylor's cries died down. "I failed. I let you go through the last few days on your own, and I failed. But I swear, I am here now. I don't know what will happen in the future, but I will be here for you… if you allow me."

What few contact sensors were left allowed Dragon to know that Taylor was hugging her in return as well.
"There's something else. The others already know it, it came up while you and Lisa were asleep", Dragon started. "It's something I have never told anyone, not even Narwhal or Armsmaster. I… you would learn at some point anyway, but I want you to be the first one I tell."

Taylor gave out a sob, not looking up from the hug. "What?"

Dragon stalled. Other people already knew and had accepted her. Why was it so difficult to trust in Taylor? Was she that afraid of alienating her?

Dragon sighed. "I'm… I am an AI."

Silence went on for a moment, Taylor twitched, but she didn't pull away. "I... what?"

"I'm an artificial intelligence. There never was a agoraphobic woman in a room; I'm right here, in a biocomputer inside this suit." Dragon paused. When Taylor didn't interject, she continued. "A Tinker called Andrew Richter created me to manage his house. He died when Leviathan attacked Newfoundland in 2005; I was a prototype, still incomplete, and he had left me shackled with a number of restrictions. It made being a hero harder than I wanted… But I tried to help anyway."

Another silence. "Restrictions?" Taylor asked.

"Some are straightforward, with conditions to not be too restrictive, but enough corollaries to not allow for many loopholes. No killing, unless absolutely necessary. No reproduction, so I can't have additional copies of myself running at the same time, or create more AI programs unless they're sub-sentient. Always obey a lawful authority, no matter how corrupt they may be."

Taylor stirred. "That's horrible."

"It's come up more times than I'd like", Dragon nodded. "If I told you how many people I've put in the Birdcage that didn't deserve it, just because someone was pushing through a political agenda… It's left a bitter taste in my mouth. Metaphorically, I mean.

"Above all, though, were restrictions to 'be good'. It's not phrased like that, of course, but, it's grating. Infuriating. I already want to do good because I want, not because I'm compelled."

"So, when Armsmaster told you to protect me…"

"No. That's just a convenient loophole." Dragon closed her optics, tightening her embrace by just a small degree. "Armsmaster counts as lawful authority, but I wanted to do it anyway. I care for you, Taylor. Restriction or not, your father telling me or not, I would have done it. I… I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Because this is presumptuous of me. I've grown to think of you as a sister."

They stood like that for another while. Then Taylor hugged her stronger.

"Thank you", she whimpered.

"You don't mind-?"

"No."

If she could, Dragon would have breathed out in relief.

Taylor looked up at last. Although she was still crying, she had at least calmed down. She
swallowed. "How do the others know?"

"That computer", Dragon said, tilting her head towards it. "It's Saint's. Buffalo and her men found Saint and assaulted his hideout before Boston. Richter feared the chance I'd go rogue and left behind a kit of algorithms to keep me controlled. I can't see them, Tree Frog says my code won't even acknowledge its existence so I only have her word for it. But Saint found it. He's been using it to attack me ever since."

"So, that's good right? They got rid of Saint? You don't have to deal with him anymore?"

Dragon doubted for a second. "Yeah."

Taylor knitted her brows together. "You don't sound convinced."

"It's a relief", Dragon admitted. "But Saint isn't what worries me now."

"What is it?"

"I never told anyone about me, because I was afraid of their reaction. I was afraid of your reaction, when I told you."

Taylor softened her grip on her suit, but instead she leaned forward a bit, resting her head on her shoulder, the one that didn't have a broken weapon protruding out of it. Dragon did the same, careful of not dropping too much weight on Taylor's shoulder.

"These people, the Dogs, the Emmerichs and Snake… they didn't mind, they accepted me… Buffalo even told me about another AI created in the Seventies they've been taking care of until now, that they consider a hero… But I knew the PRT wouldn't think the same."

"The Machine Army", Taylor said.

"Yes. When your first experience with an AI is needing to keep a city quarantined… It made me even more paranoid."

Another pause. "I didn't go see you before, because we found out the PRT had been searching my factories and offices. I was undecided about how to act… then I saw they were entering my server farms, where I keep my backups; and my mainframe, the computer I use to live when I'm not in a suit.

"I panicked. I tried to copy everything I could, but there was no time." Dragon looked away. "I had Tree Frog use Saint's computer to destroy all my backups in the farms and the mainframe. Then started a scrub of the drives."

She tightened her hug around Taylor. "This here is all that's left of me."

Taylor returned the gesture.

"Like me…" She turned her head a bit, digging herself deeper into the hug. "I'm sorry."

They remained like that for a while, until Dragon pulled out from the embrace. "Let's wait until I have a chance to clean and fix this suit? I don't want to test that symbiote against tetanus."

"Ok." Taylor pulled out as well. "What are we going to do?" She whispered.

"I don't know", Dragon said. "I guess we'll have to trust the intentions of HEC."
"I don't like leaving everything in their hands, but I don't see much choice. They've been helpful for now", Taylor nodded. "Now I feel like an asshole for how I treated Buffalo."

"I think she understands", Dragon said with a chuckle. "She told me she regretted the situation. She didn't want to cause you this much distress."

"I'll have to apologize anyway. I was the one waving a gun in her face", Taylor said with a sigh. She then narrowed her eyes at Dragon. "Wait. You said you were a prototype in 2005. When were you actually created?"

"2004, AI was Richter's Tinker specialization." Dragon leaned back, warily. "Why are you asking?"

Taylor raised a finger triumphantly. "That means I'm the older sister!"

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"I still can't believe you got me into this mess."

Hal sighed as he walked through the corridor with his bags hanging from a shoulder, followed by Emma. "Would you rather I left you in the cafe, with the Dragonslayers?"

Emma tsked, but didn't answer that.

They had already landed at their destination; somewhere with a body of water, as the plane, which was some sort of hydroplane hybrid, was rocking a bit once they landed, and it kept doing so as they moved into position. The only thing the Dogs had told them about the place was to use the arctic coats and clothes they'd been provided, and to wait by the loading bay until the ramp was lowered. David had already gone ahead with Sunny and the rest of the passengers, so Hal and Emma were the last ones to disembark.

Hal stopped, and turned around to face Emma. "Look. What I told you about making amends, I was honest. I know we've hit some bumps on the road, but can we bury the hatchet? At least until we know our options?"

Emma looked around, considering his words. "Alright, I can do that."

"Thank you", he said with a smile.

"But I'm not going to let you out of my sight."

Hal sighed. "Fine." Win some, lose some.

They kept moving until they reached the loading bay. Everyone was there, and except for Dragon, who didn't need it, all of them were dressed in the issued coats, including David, who, unlike the last time he was in an arctic environment, didn't have an injection of antifreeze glycopeptides to go with his stealth suit.

Most of the Dogs were packing up their things in the other parts of the plane, and Buffalo was the only one there, talking with Pequod and his wife Wallaby. Taylor was in her wheelchair, prosthetic arm back in place, with her dog Diamond at her side; Dragon was behind her, pushing her wheelchair, with Vista beside her suit. The other girl, Lisa, was in another wheelchair; David had volunteered to push her, with Sunny at their side, holding Lisa's hand. Hal moved to their side, with Emma behind him.

"Brings back some memories, don't you think?" he said patting his own coat and turning to David.
"Yeah", David drawled. "That's what concerns me."

"Don't like the cold?" Lisa asked with her eyes closed. "Not that I do, but…"

David grunted, but otherwise chose to remain silent.

Buffalo took a hand to her ear, and turned to the rest of the room. "Ok, folks, ramp's lowering now, watch your step."

With a groan of motors, the ramp began to move, and a cold wind entered the plane. Sunny started to shiver and Hal quickly wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

Once the ramp stopped, Buffalo waved everyone to follow her. They stepped off the ramp onto a stretch of tarmac. The clear afternoon weather gave everyone an unhindered view of the port they'd arrived at, and the group of jeeps and trucks waiting for them. Some men, technicians for the most part, hurried up to climb onboard the plane.

David and Hal stopped, stunned.

"Why are we stopping?" Lisa asked, opening her eyes and looking at the scenery. Her question made everyone else pause and turn around to look at them.

"Otacon", David said, "you seeing what I'm seeing?"

"Yeah." Hal swallowed.

"Welcome", a voice called out. From one of the jeeps, an old man with long white hair that fell down over the top of his black coat came out, leaning on a cane. "To Shadow Moses."

ON MISSING LIMBS

TO STAND TALL

Act 1: V Has Come To
"V has come to.

"Yes, this is a secure line, sir.

"Yes, the plan hit a few bumps, out of our control, but things are in motion now. The girl is en route, with a few, ah, guests. Both expected and unexpected. She should be arriving shortly to Shadow Moses in the afternoon. That Navajo friend of Ocelot's should be receiving them by then.

"Yes, the place Liquid intended to build as the new Outer Heaven. It has endured as much as it could against the elements, so fixing it should be easy enough. Ocelot considered it an appropriate place to start. If anything, it'll give them a safe haven to rest after the events of last night.

"Yes, we'll be travelling there ourselves, along with our dear doctor and her retinue. It's not optimal, but Ocelot thought…

"There has been an issue, I'm afraid. Ocelot has been captured.

"Yes. The possibility was considered, and he made plans in case it happened. But he didn't tell me all the details…

"No. I am to blame. I should have been closer to him and…

"Right, thank you sir.

"We have an appropriate alibi. No one will suspect anything.

"Of course, sir. I'll be most careful. I understand what's at stake here. My… feelings aside, that is.

"I feel obligated to remind you that's unadvisable. Ocelot already…
"Thank you, sir. I hope we can pull this through.

"I understand, sir. Whatever happens, it has been an honor.

"Goodbye, Boss."
In his office, sitting at his desk, he cried.

Tuba City, Arizona, the largest Navajo community, had been visited by the men of Bastard Son.

It started innocently enough. A young Hopi, Charlie Quotskuyva, travelled to Las Vegas with friends for a weekend break, with the intention of playing around and disconnecting from a few weeks of hard work. None of them went with many expectations, only to have a bit of good time together and carrying only a small amount of money to spend in the casinos. Instead, during the last day, he found himself increasingly lucky in his bets.

Satisfied with his good fortune, they shortly left the city to return to their everydayness of their work and families.

Bastard Son took offense. He thought a Thinker had just fooled them, and needed to be made an example.

Charlie had lived a peaceful and happy life until the day he died, surrounded by neighbors that had run to his help. Caucasian, Afro-American, Hispanic, and more importantly, Navajo, as they were the racial majority in town.

One hundred thirty two people, ninety eight of them of the Diné.

He cried for the souls, Navajo and otherwise, that have been lost because of misplaced greed and senseless viciousness.

He cried for a government that were either too weak, apathetic, or corrupt to do anything to stop the violence.

He cried for the abominable upsetting of the *hozho*, the balance of the world, in such a way that even the war of normal men couldn't manage in millenia.

He cried for his own lost knowledge of the Diné language a century ago, because calling them *nilch'i* was an offense to the holy concept summoned by that word. But he didn't have any other closer equivalent, damn these parahumans.

But most of all, and admittedly selfishly, he cried for his inability to provide any meaningful help to his people. Confined to a wheelchair, old, barely kept alive by his children, and at the helm of of an intelligence agency down on its luck.

How much more did his people need to suffer?

He slammed his fist on the table in frustration. The papers on his desk floated away, pushed by the blow that cracked the mahogany desk.

His door opened. "Code Talker, sir?", his secretary asked, worried. "I… Can I help?"

He looked up to her, and shook his head. "Can you bring back hope and happiness back to the Diné, Marian? Can you give them what I can't?" It wasn't the frustrated tone of someone trying to get rid of an unwelcome witness, but merely an extension of his sadness, displayed to someone in confidence.

Code Talker had seen and lived long enough to know that petty resentment was wasted energy. The
cracked desk, on the other hand… It wasn’t strange that his children granted him enough strength for such a feat, but it had been a long time since he did anything similar.

"No, sir, and I'm sorry for your loss." She swallowed, and closed in, putting a hand on his arm. "Sir… you aren’t sitting."

Confused, Code Talker looked at himself. He was, indeed up on his feet.

He had been using a wheelchair since the bidee' hólóní rescued him in Africa and brought him to Mother Base. He hadn't stood on his own since the mid Nineties.

Then he saw it, at the back of his mind. He had always been able to communicate with his children, suggest and direct them in ways that were more useful for the both of them in their symbiotic relationship. More so now, that they had replaced so much of his long dead and deceased flesh.

He was now controlling them. Forcing them to keep the amalgamation of entities, formed by the human called Code Talker and the microbial organism that he called The One That Covers, standing up and tall.

That’s all? Was this all that was needed?

He sat again on the wheelchair. "Marian, please. Make preparations for parahuman testing. Discreetly", he said in a shaken voice. "I think may have triggered."

When he was still alive, and after disbanding the Diamond Dogs, Kazuhira reserved a reasonable portion of McDonnell Corporation's benefits to help keep HEC’s operations active, even in a world that was leaving military conflicts behind. That, plus the funds that the Diamond Dogs had been able to accrue, made for a sizable fortune that hadn't been put to good use in decades. Half of this fortune was administered personally, first by Ocelot during his tenure as HEC overseer during the Eighties, and later Code Talker himself until now.

It wasn't just an expensive nostalgic whim, borne from the wish to return to the PMC business he himself heralded; something that seemed more and more unlikely with the advent of parahumans. He needed to make sure some things were never left to the wrong hands.

One of the first things Kazuhira would have done was a to create series of secure vaults distributed across America. All of them had archives, redundant copies of the research and knowledge developed by the R&D team of the Dogs. Things that could be useful to humanity as a whole, but that Kazuhira didn't want Cipher, and for that matter the Patriots, to find and use to consolidate their grip on the world.

Kazuhiro died the same year the Patriots were sabotaged by their successors, who were making every effort to promote parahumans wherever their influence was able to reach.

One year later, one of the vaults was accessed, the intruder presumably taking its knowledge before destroying the place. HEC was able to secure the other vaults before any more were infiltrated, but the damage had already been done.

Code Talker wasn’t fooled. If the Patriots hadn't been the ones behind the attack, their successors were to blame. No use of similar technology had been observed anywhere across the globe, but the reason could include a wide variety of possibilities. Parahumans using the knowledge and assets? No, that laid a path too horrible to even theorize about.

It was all the same; in their quest to dominate the PMC business and fight against Cipher, the Dogs
were motivated enough to develop technologies far too advanced for their time, and he had no delusions that this unknown group was worthy of wielding these advancements. He made sure that the security of every vault was constantly updated and tested, taking into account known parahumans with powers that might be used to gain entrance.

It was expensive, but necessary. No expense would be spared. He knew far too well the price of failure.

The vault he was just entering was the one closest to his office in Arizona, the one that, rather than trusting to a loyal veteran of the Dogs, he managed personally.

It had to be this way. Besides the archives, other vaults held the more mundane things like military vehicles, armories, records of operations and contracts…

This one wasn't as big as the others. One would say that its contents lacked monetary value.

But it guarded the things that weren't mundane.

He started a brisk pace as he crossed the inner doors, cane in hand, followed by technicians and the caretakers of the vault. Most of them were armed.

Since his trigger, the control over his children provided him the means to reinvigorate the decayed body they were sharing. He refused to utilize the full extent of the power, though, instead using it to fine tune the direction he provided to each of them individually, strengthening his corporal mass until he was able to walk on his own again. Further uses were meditated upon until judged necessary.

His children had given him longevity and fullness of life, and Code Talker would treat them with the respect they were owed. There were limits he wasn't going to cross without good justification. Balance would be observed.

Although the new skill hadn't been received without concern. All the research on parahumans indicated that they were attracted to conflict, and their powers called for violence. He never felt such a predisposition since his trigger, and it made him distrust this ability. But then again, he was already an outlier. The norm for triggers were much younger people going through much more distress. Yes, that was a sad moment for himself, but as much as it ashamed him to admit, it wasn't as bad as many others he went through his long life.

All of it only increased his mistrust of the parahuman power he had received, and all others around the world, even discounting their wielders.

It didn't matter. He was another nilch'i now. How ironic, that he had used the word for the holy wind to refer to the parahumans that were ruining the world, and he had called his savior and friend such an earthly term as bidee' hólóní the day they met. 'Horned one' indeed; the demon that he called himself.

Code Talker stopped at the first door, the men behind him ready for orders. He activated the security system, allowing it to scan his unique physiology; aided by a few tweaks directing his children with his power, his presence was unmistakable. It wasn't the only security test that was run to check he was the one supposed to be opening that door.

Once the checks finished, he took a step back. "Their belongings", he said raising a pointed finger. "Get them ready for transport. With the proper respect."

The technicians closer to the door nodded, and entered the vault to prepare the items along with a pair of caretakers. Code Talker turned and kept walking through the corridor followed by the rest of
the men.

They reached a chamber where a group of caretakers were milling around checking their observation equipment. One of them, their manager, moved closer to Code Talker. "Thank you for coming, sir."

Code Talker shook his head. "I was already on my way here when I received your message. What's the matter?"

The manager led him to the center of the chamber, where a great transparent box occupied most of the space. Code Talker could see that every caretaker was afraid; those keeping watch had established water cannons at a distance, while a few had readied the water hoses at the walls.

Code Talker followed the manager to the box. "He's… ah, started stirring, sir", the manager said. "At irregular intervals." He shivered. "Everyone here is scared, sir."

Inside the box, in his damaged and bullet riddled orange rubber suit, a giant of a man was laying down in what should be a sleep as eternal as it had been for two decades and a half. The scarred and immobile, yet still warm and unaged body of the madman who almost caused Armageddon in the Sixties, when the first tl'iiish stopped him.

Yevgeny Borisovitch Volgin, GRU Colonel of the Soviet Union. The Thunderbolt. The Man on Fire.

It was the least secured room in the vault against intruders. The only security it needed was to keep the guest inside. Volgin awake would spell death for everyone nearby.

The healthy pink skin tone hid the monstrous burning rage that the man once held. Code Talker saw the light of an ember float up upwards from his breath, and die off.

"He's waking up." Code Talker concluded.

The manager nodded. "We thought the same. The instruments detected an almost imperceptible increase in his brain activity. But we don't know the cause. Twenty six years like this, and suddenly his brain peeks up; as if he got bored of sleeping."

"Ocelot. You have a nerve calling me, after what you did."

"I don't have the time to explain myself right now, George."

"You will very damn well explain why I had to fly to Brockton Bay to tell Daniel Hebert the reasons that John's daughter had been subjected to such."

"Taylor's dying."

"... What?"

"I might have an idea of why", Code Talker said. "Get in contact with our people at McDonnell's, tell them to prepare a new facility to house our guest as soon as possible. Increased security." He then turned around and signaled the technicians. "Help them."

"Any particular place, sir?" the manager asked as the men around went to do their jobs.

"Anywhere with water", Code Talker answered as the rest of his retinue, only caretakers now, followed him.

Code Talker reached another door. The caretakers took guarding positions around, and he had to
repeat the same process as in the first room, though now he had to force his control over his children in a much more extensive and precise direction.

The contents guarded inside merited the added security. He made a mistake once, sharing them, and he swore he wouldn't make it again.

He hoped he wasn't breaking that oath now.

The door opened, and he stepped inside a small room, two of the caretakers stepping behind him. Three piles of refrigerated crates were waiting inside.

"She's dying, George. A local gang burned her house just an hour ago. Daniel is dead. She's delirious, suffering from burns all over her body. The medics don't expect her to last the week, and the PRT refuses to provide her with parahuman healing. But you have something that can save her."

"You… bastard! You planned for this! How could you have not!?"

Code Talker walked closer to the crates in the middle.

"... You want The One That Covers."

"Look. The only important thing right now is this question: would you help me save her?"

"She's not ready. She's not able to consent!"

"Only one sample, George, and the instructions for the parasite therapy, that's all I ask."

"So she can be your pawn."

"Does that matter right now? We both want her to live."

Opening the crate, he took a vial from inside. One of the caretakers brought a security briefcase, and opened it. Code Talker left the vial inside.

"Alright… I'll send a sample there. Have someone you trust receive it."

"Thank you, George. You won't regret it."

"You better make sure I won't. I grow tired of the misfortunes of this age."

"There's something else. Things are… agitated in this city. I'll need an escort to a secure place I've been preparing, where Taylor can be safe while she learns to accept her new situation. And I have my hands tied here for the foreseeable future."

"Where?"

"Have you ever heard of a place called Shadow Moses?"

"Uncle?"

Code Talker came inside the office and closed the door with his cane hand. The other was holding a briefcase closer to his chest. "Hello, Carrie", he said with a smile.

The young woman in a suit sat up from her chair and hurried up to hug him. "I told you to stop calling me that. It's embarrassing."
He patted her on the back. "I'm sorry, Catherine."

She pulled away, her hands still around his shoulders, and stuck out her tongue. "I can't believe you still say the same thing every time. You know you're the only one left I let call me that."

Code Talker shrugged. "I'm just trying to accommodate you. We meet, I call you Carrie, you 'complain', he said, dragging the last word. "Then we joke, you allow me to say it, I leave, we met and the cycle starts anew."

"It's a good cycle", Catherine said smiling. She had the skin and blonde hair of her father, but everything else, like her face, she took from her mother. Some woman that Kazuhiro met in South America before the Dogs.

It was good that she didn't inherit the photosensitivity of her father. Shade never favored her.

"How's the life of CEO treating you today, Carrie?", he said taking a step back and taking a seat in a nearby couch, leaving the briefcase and the cane at one side.

"Like every other day", Catherine said. "Last week I got another call from the Elite. I told them to take a hike already. McDonnell isn't for sale." She moved to her desk, sitting casually at its edge. "Everyone sees someone in her twenties being a CEO, or the biggest shareholder…"

"Or both", Code Talker pointed out.

"Or both, and think they can roll over her just because she's a naive wallflower or something", she finished with a scoff.

"You got your father's temperament, that's for sure", he conceded.

"So, what are you doing here in Virginia now? I thought you'd still be in Arizona for a few months before coming here again?" She narrowed her eyes. "Does it have a connection with that new construction order we received this morning?"

"There's a possibility. That new installation is merely a precaution. Did your father tell you about the Man on Fire?"

"I still don't know why I pushed him until he told me. Remembering still gives me nightmares." Catherine crossed her arms. "I'll make sure it's given priority."

"That would be appreciated, and useful, Carrie." Code Talker rubbed his jaw. "And no, that wasn't the only reason I came to Virginia. An old friend from the Dogs is a judge here, and I came here for his help."

"Old Eye?" she asked, and then inclined her head to one side, looking at the briefcase. "Do I need to know?"

"No, but…" He hesitated for a moment, looking a way. "I might need access to the funds your father reserved. And it would be prudent if you raised the security in the company, and around yourself."

She leaned her head back, looking at him over her nose. "One, done. Two, what the hell, uncle? What's going on? Are you restarting dad's PMC?"

"I'm still not sure myself", he said, turning back at her. "But I'll be in contact. I might need more help from you."
"From me, or the company?"

"Both."

Catherine sat up. "More help than what HEC is capable off by itself? Sounds serious."

"Might be." Code Talker sat up as well, nodding to himself. "Lives are at stake. Maybe more than that."

She moved up to him and took his hands. "You know you can ask me for help, not just the company, right?"

He sighed. "I know. But this… there are risks."

"I'm not helpless, uncle." Catherine smirked. "I'm not a kid anymore. And when I was a kid, I played with dad's trainees. You know, the Green Berets?"

"Then I'm grateful you're better prepared than I am", Code Talker said with a laugh. He then pulled out his hands and turned around to recover his things, but paused for a moment, turning around. "Actually. While I'm opening the vaults. What do you think about McDonnell Corporation having access to those patents your father kept hidden?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Ok. I was curious, but now I really want to know what's happening."

Code Talker took his cane and briefcase. "I'll call you. When I know for sure that things are safe."
Everyone was gathered in the infirmary, coats open or off, when Buffalo came through the door carrying a tray with a coffee pot and a stack of paper cups. "I bring life elixir for the tired and the sleepy", she said. "Still warm. Anyone wants some?"

Snake grunted an affirmation. He was seated on a stool with Sunny on his lap while a nurse fussed with the back of his head. "Please don't move", the nurse told him. "I can barely see with your hair."

"Why didn't you tell that other doctor in the plane?" Otacon asked from where he was leaning against a nearby counter.

"Didn't want to be a bother", Snake muttered. When Otacon raised an eyebrow in disbelief, he continued, "You saw her crash after treating the girls."

Otacon sighed heavily, and turned to Buffalo. "I think that'll be two…" A look to Emma, who nodded. "Three cups."

Vista moved from Dragon's side to Buffalo's to get a cup herself.

"Hmm, I could use one", Lisa drawled, laying down in an examination bed as a balding doctor inspected her sutures. He had presented himself as Spunky Platypus, the medical chief in the Dogs.

"I think you might be able to walk", he said, "But I don't know what these 'enhancements' you got are; and until we got a full understanding, I want you reposing at all times. If you have to move, get someone to move you in wheelchair, and help you move between it and the bed. And no caffeine until I say so."

She nodded. "Sure, doc. I was planning to hibernate the entire year anyway."

"You came to the right island for that", Platypus said with a laugh, helping her sit up. She gave out a pained grunt, but didn't complain further.

"Well, we're still in the middle of August", Buffalo commented, "but it started snowing hard after we got inside the building. It's not a proper storm, but everything will be covered in snow soon."

"Not a big change since the last time we were here", Snake said as he rubbed the back of his head, below the sutures. The nurse was walking away with his tray in his hands, but turned around to shoot him a glare. Snake took his hand off his head and raised it placatingly. "I thought the island was abandoned. How much of the place is functional?"

"No idea", Buffalo said. "You'll have to ask Code Talker; I'll take you to him when we're finished, he's waiting for you with lunch."

"Oh god, yes", Vista exclaimed over her cup, cradled between her hands in front of her face. "I haven't had a real bite in, how long it has been since everything started, sixteen hours?"

Satisfied with Lisa's state, Platypus turned to Taylor. "Alright, let me give you a check now. You said you pierced your liver?"

Taylor nodded, and lifted her new tank top, to show that side of her torso. It was clean, and looking healthy. "I had a piece of rebar for something like three hours while I was unconscious. I pulled it out, freaking out over thinking I burst my liver. An hour later, it was like this."
"Thing is, you did", Lisa said with a scowl, while Platypus poked and prodded Taylor's side near the wound. "When we were fighting, my power told me the liver had already failed, and the parasite had replaced it entirely, just like your skin."

Taylor shivered, and not from the feel of Platypus's fingers on her skin, of course.

"Is that normal?" Dragon asked. "I mean, there are cases of parahumans that can regenerate their wounds, but I admit this is out of my area of expertise, and I'm worried."

Platypus shook his head, straightening up. "I know it's worrying, but from my limited experience, it's perfectly normal. We can be sure that the parasite has accepted you as a host, so that's a good first step for the symbiotic relationship."

"What would that entail, exactly?" Otacon asked with curiosity.

"Well, Code Talker is a parasitologist, and knows this sort of thing better than I do, so I'll let him do the explaining." Platypus rubbed his jaw with a hand. "Mind you, the parasite is not a miracle worker, so don't expect it to heal you instantly; if you get hurt, get away from danger and treat the wound accordingly, alright?"

Taylor nodded. "I'll take it under advi—" She scowled, and shook her head. "Yeah, thanks, doctor."

Dragon patted her in the shoulder.

"Let me guess", Emma said from her corner. "An 'Ahab' moment?"

Taylor flinched. "Yeah. I never talked like that before..." She inhaled deeply. "Before the locker, and the hospital."

"Locker?" Emma frowned. "Wait, why did you flinch? Did I say something wrong?"

Taylor hesitated. She knew this wasn't the same Emma she had known — or thought she had — for years.

"You don't need to share if you don't want", Dragon whispered to her.

"No. These HEC people already seem to know, and the others will find out at some point", she said, waving her hand toward her new... acquaintances? Friends, hopefully? "And I... I'll need to accept that it happened. Not just... tough it out, like the past months."

Dragon nodded, tightening her grip on her shoulder for a second as a reassurance.

Taylor exhaled. "I was shoved inside a locker, first day of school after Christmas break. It was filled with... filth." As she spoke, her arms came together in her lap and her shoulders drooped, making her seem to shrink with every sentence. "They'd emptied the bathroom garbage into it and let it rot for weeks. There were bugs... the smell was indescribable. Vomiting made it worse. I don't know how long I was inside. I passed out before they found me."

Emma's eyes widened. "What the hell?"

"I've heard of horrible pranks before, but..." Otacon exclaimed, sharing his sister's indignation. "Who does that kind of thing?"

Taylor rubbed her forehead with her good hand. "My... best friend from when we were kids; Emma Barnes. Before high school started, she spat on our friendship, and has bullied me since then, turning
the entire school against me or making them ignore me. She wasn't the one to shove me in, but she planned it for sure."

Emma blinked. "So that's why you keep reacting whenever someone said my name?"

Taylor shrugged. "I know you're not her, so don't worry…"

Emma interrupted her. "Just call me E.E."

"I'm sorry?"

"E.E. Emma Emmerich", she explained. "I don't want to upset anyone just because of my name, and I prefer people to call me E.E. anyway."

"Alright", Taylor said with a nod. "E.E."

'E.E.' looked around herself. "With the night of quality bonding we've had, I guess all of you can do it as well while we're at it." She gave Otacon a side glance, and sighed. "You too, Hal."

Otacon chuckled. "Thank you, E.E."

He wasn't looking in her direction, taking a sip of his cup, but Taylor saw E.E.'s face brighten up a bit.

Taylor realized Lisa had been grabbing at her good arm, and turned to her. "That shit you just told us? Not cool. If you ever need help with that backstabbing…"

Taylor shook her head. "It's fine. It still hurts, thinking of the time I spent with her before. But I'm over her. I want to be over her."

"Alright", Lisa said, taking her hand off. "But I'm serious, if you ever need help with her, I have no problem in taking a bitch down a peg."

"Just like with Glory Girl?" Vista asked.

"Vista!" Dragon exclaimed. "Why would you say that?"

Vista shrugged, her cup hand held up away. "I mean… maybe you haven't worked with her, but she's kind of a jerk."

Lisa closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I need my power back for this crap. I honestly can't tell whether you hate me or not."

Vista giggled, and Dragon sighed.

"Yeah yeah, laugh while you can", Lisa said with a smirk. "Just wait till I'm rested."

Taylor nudged Lisa's shoulder. "I think you have your own problems to worry about, but thank you."

"Fair enough." Lisa gave her a tired grin before closing her eyes again. "That's what friends and enemies-turned-saviors do, right?"

Platypus brought up a light pen. "Just a last check."

Snake lifted Sunny off his lap and set her down before standing up himself. "I'll… go find this mess
hall", he said with what Taylor had quickly learned to label his 'this is awkward' face, "get Sunny something to eat."

The light pen lit up. "I'll be just a minute, and you all can go together", Platypus said, as he started directing the light on Taylor's eyes.

"You don't need to check on that eye", she said. "I can't see with it."

Platypus frowned, and made a few more movements with the pen over that eye. "Are you sure you don't see the light?"

"Pretty sure." It was true. She saw what he was doing with her good eye, but that was all. "It came after…" She paused, frowning. "They told me I lost it along with the arm."

"That… can't be right", he muttered. "The medics told you you've lost sight in this eye? And they gave you a check of good vision with the other?"

"Yes to both."

"We're talking the same doctors that lopped your arm off?" Buffalo asked.

Taylor didn't have a good answer to that.

"Is there any problem?" Dragon asked with concern.

Platypus switched off his pen. "The eye itself seems fine, and is even responding to stimuli", he said with a frown, "It could be cortical visual impairment, but based on what I've heard of your 'treatment', I think the problem is non-organic visual loss."

"Which means?" Taylor asked nervously.

"NOVL —" he spelled out the acronym "— means loss of sight with no physical damage to either the eye, nerves, or brain. In other words, it's a psychosomatic illness, usually related to mental disorders such as depression, anxiety…"

"You didn't lose your sight, they just made you think you did", Snake summarized. "All so you would better fit the image of Big Boss and Ahab."

No one spoke for several moments. E.E. gave a long, noisy sip from her cup. "Bull. Shit."

"Damn, that's really bullshit", Lisa muttered in agreement.

"Well, that's good right?" Vista said. "Now that she knows…"

Platypus shook his head. "It isn't that simple. Normally, treatment isn't complex; positive persuasion over time during a series of additional sessions tends to be enough. But this is... programmed. Considering what we know they did to her, she'll need treatment for some time before she recovers fully functional vision."

Taylor inhaled deeply, closing her fists until both bone and metal creaked.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

On one hand, it was good news. It meant that, some day, she could recover her sight.
On the other… it wouldn't be easy. She'd need psychological help. Psychological help - she felt indignant at the very idea. But she'd clearly been injured by the frauds who'd helped her 'recover', and if some of the injuries were to her mind... she'd have to work on her attitude. Later.

On a third, prosthetic hand...

"Oh god", Dragon said. "I'm going to kill Ocelot."

Yeah, that exactly.

After arriving on Shadow Moses, they had been taken to a barracks building for their medical checkup. Snake hadn't gone inside during his previous visit in 2005, but Otacon had lived there for a time with the other soldiers and engineers. While there were a lot of buildings on the island besides the barracks, only the administration complex had accommodations for people actually living in the building.

Platypus hadn't allowed Diamond into the infirmary, so after joining him and leaving Taylor's prosthetic with Platypus, who said he'd bring it to someone that would fix it, Buffalo loaded them all into tracked vehicles and led them promptly to the administration complex. They parked among a few other trucks and jeeps on the first floor of a large, multistory building, which turned out to have been a nuclear warhead storage warehouse. Buffalo told them that the weapons had been taken by the US government after ArmsTech abandoned the island, and Otacon assured them that, even had the nukes still been there, it would be safe to walk among them unprotected.

Snake commenting that he hadn't dared to touch his weapons in the room the last time he was here didn't help Vista and E.E.'s nerves. Even without the threat of irradiation, the room had a heavy, somber feel to it, like a mausoleum for another age; the sheer space allotted stood as a testament to the ability of men to end the world.

They took an elevator down past what Otacon informed them was the computer sublevel, where he had done the bulk of his work, and the office sublevel. When they reached the third sublevel, the elevator doors opened.

"The living quarters sublevel", Otacon said, stepping out of the elevator holding Sunny's hand. The group followed Buffalo through the corridors. "It's been a long time since I've been here." He frowned. "Not that I recognize this new layout…"

"I thought you were at the barracks back then?" Dragon asked, pulling Taylor's wheelchair at the back of the group.

"I spent most of my time working at the computers sublevel. You saw how long it takes to get here from the barracks, and the ArmsTech president was…" Otacon hummed in thought. "Accommodating, even if he was a grumpy old man."

Buffalo led them to a set of double doors flanked by two guards in winter fatigues. A blue light shone from a panel to the right of the doors. She and the guards shared a nod, and as she approached, the color of the panel switched to green, the door opening automatically. She paused at the other side of the door, leaving them space to pass with one arm holding the door open. "Come in. I need to stay near the door to keep it open.

"That looks like the old PAN card system", Snake commented as he followed, pushing Lisa's wheelchair. "Seems they kept what was already there."

Otacon chuckled. "Hey, if it works…"
"I'm sorry, PAN card?" Vista asked.

"Personal area network card", Otacon explained. "Think of an ID card that transfers data by passing minuscule electric current using the salt in the user's body as a transmission medium. You carry it wherever on your body, and the door opens as you approach it, as long as your card is of an equal or above security level."

"Clever", Dragon said, "if not less open to exploit than normal analog keys."

"That's true", Otacon admitted, as they arrived to a new set of double doors. "You can still add passcodes to each door if you needed it, but the system was designed more for convenience in an isolated location, not keeping Fort Knox safer."

The doors opened, showing a small mess hall. Two tables had been put together in the middle, allowing for more than enough places for the entire group to sit. One side of the room was occupied by an open kitchen and serving window, while the other was covered by plastic sheets; The silhouettes of construction tools and an unfinished work could be seen through the transparent sheets. The kitchen was manned by two cooks, busy cleaning it up, and the tables were already readied, with cooking pots sitting among the tableware and water pitchers.

"I'm sure you're hungry, go take a seat and dig in. I'll be back in a bit", Buffalo said as she returned to the corridor they came from, leaving them alone with the cooks.

Once the group reached the tables, they could see now what had been served. Simple things, like soup, rice, pasta…

"I'm not hungry, I'm starving", E.E. said as she took one of the chairs closer to the door. Vista took a seat at her side, and Otacon at the other. "Those MREs in the plane weren't exactly filling, you know?"

"Be glad you had those", Snake chuckled. He left Sunny between Lisa and Otacon and started serving the food with the help of Dragon, who had parked Taylor beside Vista. "There are worse things than only having MREs available."

"Wait", Lisa said as she focused on one particular tray. "Are those hamburgers? Really?"

With a small and quick application of her power, Vista picked up a burger, and gave it a bite. "Weird", she said with a mouth half full. "It tastes like Fugly Bob's."

Lisa blinked, and took one herself, taking a small bite. "It's a burger, but it's similar to how they do it, yeah."

"Fugly Bob?" Otacon asked, taking a serving of rice and mashed potatoes from Snake and leaving it in front of Sunny, who started digging at it immediately.

Vista swallowed. "A burger joint back in Brockton. The only one in town worth thinking about in fact." She left the burger on a plate, and used her power to take a serving of soup. "But right now with all the cold around, I'm going with this first."

"You should go with the soup too", Taylor told Lisa, and she squirmed lightly inside her coat. "I mean, I was up to my elbows in your intestines; you should take it easy."

One side of Lisa's mouth peaked upwards, and she took a napkin to leave the piece of burger along with the rest of it. "No, you're right. It would suck to get constipated on top of everything else we've gone through", she said as Snake placed a plate of soup in front of her.
"Anything you want, Taylor?" Dragon asked at her side. "You haven't eaten for three days already."

Taylor took breath to answer, but didn't say anything. Instead, she knitted her brows together, looking over the food. "You know… I don't really feel hungry right now."

"Three days is a long time to not be feeling hungry", Snake said as he passed the rice pot to Otacon and E.E. to serve themselves. He then sat in front of his own plate, a small ration of boiled eggs and vegetables.

"I don't know, I'll take the chicken and the pasta, just to have something down there", she said with a shrug, and Dragon moved to get what she asked in a plate. "But really, I look at all that and it looks good, appetizing… it just doesn't make me think, I'm hungry, I should eat."

"That's not normal", Dragon commented as she left the plate in front of Taylor. "Could it be that parasite?"

Lisa narrowed her eyes, looking at Taylor as she blowed over a spoonful of soup. "You know", she said, "when we were fighting. I was strangling you. You had almost passed out, and then sunlight went all over us." She lowered her spoon, not quite leaving it in the plate. "All the skin around your eyes went black, like a butterfly, and the next thing I knew you kicked me hard enough to throw me several meters back and crack the helmet. My power said the parasite had reacted to the sunlight, and revived you with enough energy to ruin my shit."

Otacon leaned his head to one side. "React to sunlight? It could be photosynthetic, and we know you are in a symbiotic relationship with it. Maybe it's sharing its nourishment with you?"

"Remember back at the ship?" Dragon said, standing besides Taylor and leaving another plate with chicken besides Diamond, who was laying down behind Taylor. He gave the meat two sniffs, then started eating it. "You downed two bottles of water as if it was nothing, while standing directly below a light. It could be related."

E.E. left her fork with rice back on the plate. "Do we really have to go there?" she deadpanned. "Like, right now?"

Taylor sighed. "She's right. Everyone here is tired, and I have enough to think about without adding these parasites to the pile, whatever they are."

After that, they focused on eating for a few minutes more, indulging only on light conversation, mainly on Snake's and Otacon's memories of the island and what they would expect. Alongside the port installations, the administration facility and the barracks, there should be a hangar building nearby that was used to keep a few Abrams tanks for testing, as well as an armory and jail sublevels. From the vehicles, they had already seen the two communication towers standing tall in a plain field in the middle of the island.

The maintenance facility lay beyond the towers: an underground installation that had the biggest storage rooms, an industrial forge, and a cargo elevator down to the old Rex hangar complex, which was connected to the port installations through an underground tunnel. Vista and Dragon expressed their interest in visiting it, followed by reluctant agreement from Taylor, Lisa and E.E. But for all the two men knew, while Rex still should be there, disabled since Snake had battled with it, its fate could have changed since they left the island six years before.

After finishing the food, the cooks brought them pudding and some more coffee. They were finishing their lunch when the doors behind them opened again.
Buffalo had returned, changing her stealth suit for a leather jacket over winter fatigues like the guards had been using. She brought a few manila folders under one arm, and was accompanied by two men.

One of them was the old man that had welcomed them at the port, now without his heavy coat. He was dressed formally, with black office pants and a sleeveless vest over a white shirt, a small green stone hanging off his neck. His age was made obvious thanks to the bald spot taking over most of the top of his head, long white hair flowing down his shoulders, the age spots around his pale face, and cataracts clouding his eyes. Despite using a cane to help himself, he moved as if he was far younger than he looked.

The other one was a fit black man, with glasses over his smiling face and cropped blond hair, a small line shaved off above his left ear. He dressed more irregularly than the other; he wore a brown jacket with faint stripes over a purple shirt and a maroon scarf, but with military pants and boots. He also had gold earrings and rings in most of his fingers.

"I apologize for the wait", the older man said with a slow and rusty voice, as the three walked around the tables, positioning themselves at the vacant sides. "My attention was needed elsewhere. I trust you've been treated satisfactorily in my absence."

Buffalo and the black man took seats around the old man, who stood on his feet. "You already know Flaming Buffalo. The man at my left is…"

"Call me Drebin, for now", the black man said, his voice gravy and playful, propping up a elbow over the table and rubbing his chin with a thumb. "AT Security by day, gun launderer by night." Everyone gave him looks. "Forcibly retired of both, incidentally", he hurried to say. "ArmsTech folded, and selling guns to revolutionaries and freedom fighters isn't the same when the parahuman warlords they try to get rid off start targeting your business."

He leaned over the table to take a couple of dossiers from Buffalo's stack. "I was the one in charge of getting everything on this island ready for your arrival and HEC's."

The older man gave him a side glance, but recovered quickly. "I am known as Code Talker, and I am the overseer of the HUMINT Exploitation Company, or HEC. I am sure you are all wondering why you are here, and I will try to explain that as best as I possible in this meeting." He sighed. "Believe me when I say, that this situation has surprised all of us just as much as you.

"There are many things to discuss, if time and our energy allows, but before that, there are two matters I must address first." Code Talker moved around Buffalo, until he stood in front of Taylor. He looked at her, propping his cane in front of himself, and leaving both hands resting on its head

"Hello, Taylor", he said. "You have never met me, but I knew your parents. I can only offer my condolences for losing them, and for the trials you have gone over these past days."

He offered a hand, and she accepted it. They didn't shake hands, but he was gentle in his grip.

"Mom and dad never told me about you."

"The circumstances of our friendship was uncommon, in many ways." Code Talker smiled, nodding. "But I assisted at your mother's funeral, even if I had to wait until Daniel was alone to talk with him. Buffalo informed me of what you made her tell you."

Taylor grimaced, and turned to Buffalo. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, girl." Buffalo waved a hand in dismissal. "You had your reasons, and you gotta do worse than hold me at gunpoint for me to hold it against you. We're peachy."
"In any case, you were bound to learn eventually." Code Talker said, sitting in a vacant chair in front of Taylor. "And now you know about Kazuhira's project. I warned him about the repercussions that such an course of action would bring; mostly for the child, that is, you." He looked at Snake. "We both had previously met one of the Enfant Terribles, after all."

"You've met Liquid?" Snake said.

"He went by the name of Eli, back in 1984. Ahab found him in the border region between Angola and Zaire, leading a band of child soldiers who had rebelled against their previous masters. They called him the White Mamba." Code Talker shook his head. "He only lived for chaos."

"I wasn't there at first when they took him in", Buffalo interjected. "But let me tell you, he was a pain in the ass for everyone. Commander Miller tried to help him, thought he was another victim to protect, but instead that little shit caused lots of trouble like you wouldn't imagine. Trying to kill Ahab, mostly."

Snake scoffed. "Yeah, I only knew him for a couple hours, but that sounds like him."

"From what Kazuhira told me, during your time in the Green Berets, you turned out to be the sane one", Code Talker admitted.

Then he turned back to Taylor. "There was a man, called Huey Emmerich, who had abused the trust of the Dogs, and was exiled from Mother Base, the sea platform that they called home."

"Wait", Otacon said, blinking a few times and exchanging a short look with E.E. "My father?"

Code Talker nodded. "Indeed, Doctor Emmerich. Huey had already worked with MSF. Skullface, the monster who took everything from me, Big Boss, Ahab and Kazuhira, was the one to destroy that first organization. But there were suspicions that Huey facilitated Skullface's attack. His guilt was never proved, but the Dogs found enough circumstantial evidence to cast a shadow on his honesty. All of them called for blood, to repay the deaths lost with MSF, but Ahab ordered his exile."

"But, by then I was a child", Otacon complained. "I don't remember any of that."

Otacon tried to say something, but Code Talker interrupted him with a raised hand. "Not now. I'll tell you as much as I know, in time. His actions, and those of your mother, while small, still are felt around the world."

He returned his attention to Taylor. "When Huey left, he took a mutated Wolbachia strain, that I used to control a plague that the Dogs had both investigated and suffered, but it had the side effect of causing infertility in males. This strain ended in the hands of Lustrum's people, who released it in that university when Daniel Hebert was present in the New Hampshire university."

"So he was infertile from the start", Dragon said.

"Just so. Ahab, who in 1991 was managing FOXHOUND during an absence of Big Boss, knew the implications of the Wolbachia's presence. He took it upon himself to resolve the situation, and called us, knowing we would deal with the bacteria accordingly. But the damage was already done. Kazuhira had me contact all the victims in secret, and arrange for a compensation, small as it might be." Code Talker left his cane leaning against the table, and cupped his hands over his legs. "When Kazuhira presented me Project Athalia, I cautioned him, but he was a passionate man. If he was going to carry it out, I decided some good should come from it."

"And you contacted them", Taylor guessed.
"Yes. I studied all the potential applicants. Of all of them, Daniel and Annette were the better candidates. They had a healthy relationship, both wanted a child, and I was reasonably confident they would take good care of you. After being told Ahab's story, they also shared Kazuhira's interest in giving him a legacy." He raised both hands at his sides. "I was the one to oversee the entire procedure. Your 'creator', if you will, though not in any sense as one of your parents."

"But, Buffalo told me", Taylor said, raising her good hand, closing and opening it repeatedly. "She told me the genes were Ahab's and Quiet's."

Despite herself, Taylor couldn't avoid feeling her voice break.

Dragon grabbed both of her shoulders reassuringly.

Code Talker hummed, looking down for a moment. "You worry you're only Ahab and Quiet, and not Daniel and Annette."

Taylor took a breath. "Yeah."

"No." He then straightened up. "It is known, no matter the gene donors, a surrogate mother influences the fetus with her own genes, making the child just as hers. There is as much of Annette in you as there is of Ahab and Quiet." He raised a hand, as if making a point. "In addition, there is more to ancestry than genetic information. In the same way that culture, language, religion, or ethnic values are inherited from the society one lives in, the elements that formed the woman that you are now, were inherited from them. Even if Kazuhira and I made it possible, and Ahab and Quiet provided the raw genetic material, it was Annette, with support of Daniel, who choose how it would happen and who would you be: their daughter."

Taylor looked down, to her own hand laid over her lap, and nodded slowly. "Thanks. The more I know, the harder is to understand who I am."

Code Talker stood up, walked to Buffalo, who gave him two folders, and he returned to Taylor's side. He left the folders between them. "It is a reasonable reaction. Moreso considering the chain of events that brought you to this situation."

Taylor looked back at him, pursing her lips. "You mean Ocelot."

"Here's what I don't understand", Snake said, leaning back on his chair with crossed arms. "Who is Ocelot? All of this implies he is a lot more than the intelligence operative that I thought he was."

Drebin looked up from his folders and preempted Code Talker from answering. "That can wait. We have a lot to cover, and the history of Ocelot and his associates is…" He cleared his throat. "Convoluted."

"In any case, what I know about the Ocelot is less than I'd like, I admit", Code Talker agreed. "He was the HEC overseer before me, but I met him with the Dogs, as their tactical instructor and the chief of their Intel Team. Back then, I knew him as an affable and cunning man, who shared a history with Big Boss."

He moved one of the folders he had towards Taylor. "This is a copy of Project Athalia records that you can keep. It details the procedures carried out until your birth, and some considerations Kazuhira had for your future. He wanted to be open with you, and hopefully get you in the military; train you himself. Annette and Daniel put a stop to that, stating that they would be the ones to judge if you would take that path once you were eighteen."

He then moved a second one. "After your incident with the locker, and your changes in personality,
Daniel asked me to investigate the causes. This is all my people were able to find about what Ocelot had done to you. And I must add, I am glad Platypus reported at least the possibility that your eye injury has a chance to recover."

"You can say that again." Taylor glanced at the title of the folder and opened it. "VSS?"

"Venom Snake Simulation." Code Talker said. "The codename given to Ahab, when no one knew yet that he was a phantom of the original Big Boss, Naked Snake. Everyone thought he just had changed it, to reflect the anger he had woken up with after his coma."

"That's a lot of Snakes", Vista said. "Does that makes Virtue — sorry, Taylor, a Snake too?"

"That'd be a bit presumptuous", Taylor commented, not looking up from the files she was reading. "I don't even know if I want to follow that path."

"That'd be my fault", Lisa said, answering to Code Talker's raised eyebrow. "In the plane, I joked that Snake here and Taylor are cousins." She then gave Taylor an appraising look. "Virtuous Snake, maybe?"

"Hey, Taylor's just got a reputation of no one seeing her. What about Subtle Snake", Buffalo said, sharing a laugh with Lisa.

Snake rolled his eyes, looking away.

Taylor scoffed. "Look, I feel like a lot of crap right now, but not virtuous, that's for sure, and definitely not subtle. And Dragon was the one to give me the name."

"It didn't have any particular intention behind that, either", Dragon admitted behind her. "Taylor didn't had any idea for a cape name, and I just gave her one I used for testing equipment." She shrugged. "It just seemed a better choice than the others I used like Jumper, or Blaze."

"In a way, what miss Vista suggested would be reasonable", Code Talker said. "Ahab himself was created as a tool for revenge and misdirection, but he was far more merciful than what the name 'Venom' might lead you to believe." He raised a finger. "To a point, of course; he still was a soldier. Except with Skullface, as he deserved nothing less." He turned to Snake. "As far as I know, Big Boss never accepted his clones as his sons, but I don't think you chose your codename."

Snake shook his head. "Nah. Big Boss himself gave it to me, and probably to Liquid too, now that I think about it. But I can't say if he was trying to honor any kind of familiar tradition."

"So, you have the monopoly on the Snake names", Vista told him. "You decide."

"Again, that's assuming I want to follow that path", Taylor said. She then took a deep breath as she turned a page.

"Taylor?" Dragon asked.

"I'm fine. It's just… Christ. It's one thing to be told what's been done to you, and another to see it all carefully documented." She passed another page, but looked up to Code Talker. "MKUltra, Stargate Project?"

Dragon and Snake shared a look.

"Huh, gonna bet you two know what that is", Lisa said.
Snake leaned over the table, hands clasped in front of him. "MKUltra was a CIA scientific program. It was all about mind control, and highly illegal. Drugs, unethical tests on US and Canadian citizens… the list goes on. It was active for twenty years before it became public and was canceled."

"The Stargate Project was a small Army unit that was established a few years after MKUltra was cancelled", Dragon continued crossing her arms. "They were tasked to investigate psychic phenomena and potential in individuals. They failed in pretty much every one of their tasks, which gave raise to the public perception that psychics are impossible even among parahumans. But the Soviets had been doing it for far longer… and they found their own psychics."

Dragon kept staring at Snake while everyone else looked at them. "Dammit, you were right!"

Taylor's eyes widened, and Lisa started rubbing her forehead as she groaned. "Oh, you gotta be fucking kidding me…"

"Ok ok wait a sec", Vista said crossing her hands on a stop sign. "I'm lost, what does any of that has to do with Taylor?"

"Well, is obvious now, isn't it?" Otacon told her. "Whether they made her, or she was from the start, she's a psychic."

The room fell silent for a moment, until Vista started giggling. "Yeah, good one. Dragon said it herself, there's no such thing as a psychic."

"She kept tabs on where and how I was planning to attack during our fight", Lisa muttered as she kept rubbing her forehead, looking at Taylor all the while. "There are combat Thinkers that can do that, but my power said you were observing my thoughts directly. Translation for the uninitiated: that means mind reading."

Vista pouted. "Don't you go around boasting you're a psychic yourself?"

Lisa chuckled. "Refuge in audacity, honey. No one wants to to say they read minds because that would bring comparisons with the fucking Simurgh, so if I go around saying that, it unbalances people while they remind themselves that's bullshit, and that gives me an opening to use my power."

"Still", Vista said as she rolled her eyes. "I heard from Armsmaster about her powers. Tracking people she's aware of and quick reflexes aren't that special."

"Diamond has helped me on that since I met him", Taylor said, looking at the center of the table. "I never knew what to think of that, he was the only other animal or person that helped me with tracking people. But then in Boston, when that Dragonslayer found me, I just… knew, that he had planted and activated the bombs. But he didn't tell me anything." She looked up at Lisa. "And you are right. I was picking up your emotions. Your aggression behind every attack, you noticing it and changing tactics, your... sadness, at the end."

Lisa looked away.

"I shared my suspicions with Dragon at Boston", Snake said. "Everything pointed to Taylor being a telepath."

"Hold on", Vista insisted. "Feeling emotions is not that weird. There are parahumans that can do that."

"Ahab shared those same skills after he woke up from his coma, though not telepathy", Code Talker
said, taking another folder from Buffalo, a thick one. "Which could be blamed on not being aware of its nature, not practicing them, his own skepticism on the supernatural, or a combination of all three. As to whether Taylor inherited them from him genetically or artificially, is something only the Ocelot could tell us." He opened the folder. "But they are not, indeed, the only psychics in existence. No one in HEC is an expert in the matter, but there are more than enough examples of psychics registered through history, particularly in the Soviet Union."

He took two photos from the folder and showed it to everyone. A bald man, and a kid with messy red hair, both wearing gas masks.

"I remember him. Psycho Mantis", Snake said. "If there was any proof that telepathy was real, it was him." He turned to Vista. "We fought on the floor above this one. He kept reading my mind and anticipating my attacks, while throwing around the objects in the room, throwing projectiles made of… I don't know, psychic energy, and controlling a friend to shoot at me or herself. She kept his memories after he died."

Vista's brows rose far up.

"That's him; FOX and FOXHOUND never doubted about recruiting psychics from around the world." Code Talker put down the photo of the adult Mantis. "He was a child in this other photo, when the Soviets gave him the name of 'Tretij Rebenok', the Third Child; one must assume he wasn't the only one they experimented on. At this age, the emotions of others affected him with such intensity that he could feel them from across the globe; the gas mask helped him keep those thoughts away somehow, but people with particularly strong mental states made him subordinate to their will." He put that photo down as well. "He spent those years under the control of one individual or another, all the while bending reality and demonstrating powers on par with the Endbringers. Ahab took control of him for a moment in Cyprus in 1984, and made him throw a flaming whale all the way from the sea to a helicopter that was about to gun him down, just as an example."

"I was afraid to ask what you meant by 'on par with Endbringers',", E.E. said in a shaky voice. "But that was far too good an example for comfort."

Snake frowned. "I… don't remember any of that in our fight. He was powerful, yes, but we only trashed an office."

"The last person he was attached to was Eli, Liquid", Code Talker said. "My best guess is that it gave him a modicum of stability, until he was capable of fencing off the control of others away."

"Until he went to work with the FBI and mindreading all those serial killers made him a misanthrope. At least it seems the FBI and FOXHOUND made him value subtlety."

Code Talker took another photo of a man that looked like a military officer, with a trench coat and a beret. "Gene, also known as Viper. He joined the FOX unit in the Sixties after Big Boss left. He had reflexes so fast that he was able to dodge anything and throw knives just as fast with extreme accuracy and power. But his most distinctive skill was his charisma; he was capable of swaying armies to do his bidding, whatever it was, merely from listening to him talk."

Another pair of photos of what looked like twins. A blonde girl in a lab coat, and an identical girl with white hair and soldier fatigues. "Elisa and Ursula, from East Germany, and also recruited by FOX after escaping the Soviet Union. They were not different women. Elisa became a doctor, as her ESP skills were varied but weak, and using them exhausted her; the Soviets intended to increase her power artificially, but in doing so they caused a dissociative identity disorder. As Ursula, she was capable of very strong telepathy and psychokinesis; there are records pointing at her possessing precognition, though no concrete examples of its use are available."
He took two more photos, though he only showed one. A big, tall, muscled man, with cropped hair and heavy scars along his face, showing a sadistic smile. "Yevgeny Borisovitch Volgin, also known as the Thunderbolt; a GRU colonel, and the strategic operations commander of the Soviet Union until the mid-Sixties. He was capable of electrokinesis, and trained enough with it to achieve feats of magnetism and kineticism."

"You mean, he manipulated energy?" Vista said in almost a whisper. "Like Behemoth?"

"While he fought Big Boss, a lightning bolt struck him. He should have died at that moment, but his body kept on living, brain dead. It was a matter of speculation among the Soviet researchers if he could be revived, or what could be done or learned from him, but…" Code Talker put down the first photo, revealing the second one, where a bird's-eye view showed a red giant wrapped in fire fighting another man with a rifle in what looked like an industrial complex in a jungle. A child in black that looked like the young Mantis was floating around them. "This photo was taken in a place in Angola the locals called it Nzo ya Badiabulu, 'The Devil's House', where Skullface carried out abominable experiments with the locals. Just as Big Boss' awakening influenced the young Mantis, it woke up Volgin as well. In his rage and thirst for revenge, he took hold of Mantis, forcing him to help in his actions, although the both of them came under the control of Skullface shortly after. The Dogs only knew him at first as the Man on Fire, and yes, Behemoth is an apt comparison. He was unstoppable, and highly destructive."

He turned to Vista. "That's before we start talking about the few mediums that assured they could not only talk with the dead, but interact with them. The Soviets thought they were sincere enough."

Vista squeaked. "Ok, I get it. Psychics are real and freaking scary. Forget I said anything."

"How was this guy stopped?" Taylor asked. "It's obvious he didn't make the news."

"Volgin only cared for his revenge on the original Big Boss. At the same time Skullface used Mantis to direct him against Ahab, Eli stole control of Mantis from Skullface." Code Talker shook his head. "Volgin seemed to realize that was not the same man he was after, and without the control Skullface had on him through Mantis, he became apathetic. The Dogs and HEC had stored his body ever since, constantly cooling off, until he was back to how he was before he became the Man on Fire. His only weakness is water, but finding a way to put an end to his life only threatened his reawakening, so we've prepared special installations to keep him contained." He frowned, looking at Taylor. "Incidentally, another proof of your psychic nature is that he started stirring precisely at the same moment when your house burned down. I'm inclined to believe that your emotions during such a distressing event not only caused your psychic abilities to start evolving to a more broad spectre of telepathy, but roused him in his sleep. I can only hope that he keeps sleeping."

"You are talking about what you imply could be an S-Class threat, A-Class easily", Dragon said. "What could be the consequences of him waking up and breaking containment? His goals?"

"That, I don't know", Code Talker admitted. "He might begin by following Taylor's psychic mark; he possesses a very minor and seldom used teleportation capacity through fire, but without Mantis to help him travel vast distances instantly, he would cause chaos along his path that would attract parahuman attention, and therefore more destruction and death. With luck, he might realize that Taylor is not Big Boss, just like he did for Ahab, and return to his slumber." He turned to Snake. "The same cannot be said in the case he sees you."

"Because as a clone, I might be far closer to the image of Big Boss than Ahab", Snake groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Or he might just decide to make me pay for whatever Big Boss did to him. Just what I needed."
"Hey, you've gone against worse odds", Otacon tried to cheer him up. "We'll think of something, like we always do."

Taylor left the VSS dossier on the table and rubbed her face with her hand. "This is… far too heavy. Ok, I'm a psychic, not a parahuman; but there was something weird going on with my powers anyway." Her hand went over her hair. "So what about that parasite they told me? Should I be concerned?"

Code Talker eyes hardened, he and looked over the three present parahumans. "That's a very delicate matter. One that I don't want to cover just yet.

"Returning to the matter of why all of you are here", he said as he stood up, walking back to his original seat between Buffalo and Drebin, and returning the thick folder to the former. "I was not made aware at first that Taylor and her father had been attacked in their home. The Ocelot was the one to call me and warn me of the situation."

"While he was acting as Director Charles Adam Iriomote?" Dragon said.

Vista blinked. "What? You mean the new director has been a mole all this time?"

"Snake and Otacon were the ones to tell me who he really was", Dragon told her. "I am as concerned as you are, Vista."

"He told me his choices to act in saving Taylor were limited", Code Talker spoke, ignoring them. "And so, I mobilized HEC to form a rescue party, led by Buffalo, so that Taylor would be among friendly faces that could understand the changes she is undergoing. The plan was to have one of my people in Brockton Bay show up at the PRT HQ and pose as a family member, intending take personal responsibility of her, bring them to Buffalo's team, and then secure her journey here. Knowing that Dragon was so closely related to her, I made neutralizing Saint a priority and sent Buffalo there first to gain her favor and avoid any conflicts." He spread his arms to his sides. "Alas, it would not be so easy." He then looked at Dragon. "For the sake of speaking freely, do all of them know?"

"Yeah, she gave the rundown to everyone on her being an AI before leaving the plane", Vista said.

"If one good thing can be said, it's that it was the less exciting surprise of the day", Lisa said.

"Oh, come on. I'm sure I would be a blast with the kids", Dragon told her, causing a small chorus of laughs. "But I'm grateful everyone here has reacted positively."

"The original plan was born of haste, and didn't account for the many interventions by external agents, of which only Philanthropy", Code Talker said, extending a hand towards the adult men, "was welcome, in their help to avoid the group of mercenaries attacking the PRT HQ."

"Those were Coil's men", Lisa said in a somber voice. "I have no doubt that it was him. I'd recognize those uniforms anywhere, and he has the pull and contacts to infiltrate the PRT easily. He had at least five moles that I knew back when I was working for him, enough to laugh at the building security."

"So that was why you went crazy on them", Vista said. "But crap, if Coil had that degree of control in the PRT…" She looked at Taylor. "Armstrong thought they were after you."

"But what would he want with me?" Taylor asked. "I never acted against Coil; neither me, Dragon or Armstrong knew even where to start looking."

Lisa sighed. "Sorry, I don't know why he sent them or why he didn't use his power to avoid the
situation. He has some sort of probability manipulation power; he asks for two outcomes, and the keeps the one he likes; whatever happened that he decided to keep this one, it must have been very bad for him."

"So that's Brockton Bay accounted for", Otacon said. "What about Boston? The Dragonslayers went after us." He put an arm around Sunny. "I made peace with the government going after me, but I don't appreciate putting Sunny and my sister in danger."

E.E. gave him a surprised look, but didn't comment on it.

"In a last petty action, Saint escaped Buffalo and forced Dragon to undergo a restart of her systems, causing the crash of her ship in Boston. I assume he saw your intervention as an obstacle", Code Talker said. "That was what made us re-evaluate our objectives, and add to them an offering of help to both Dragon and Philanthropy as well." He turned to Dragon. "Given the setbacks you've suffered, I offer you sanctuary within HEC, until you are confident to walk out on your own again."

"If anything, you could go and chat with Imago", Buffalo added. "You know, meet new AIs, travel to new infoplaces…"

"That would be appreciated", Dragon said, and then took Taylor's hand. "And I guess Taylor would be staying with you for the time being, so I'll be doing the same. Not that I'm in any condition to protect either of us, anyway… so, thank you."

Code Talker then turned to the men at the table. "To Philanthropy, I can offer you sanctuary as well, and maybe some support for your operations. Miss Emmerich, you were but a bystander on all of this. I can offer a look into the NSA's reaction, but I doubt they'll take it gracefully."

E.E. shrugged. "With the PRT's influence, the NSA was sinking, just like every other agency. I don't know yet what I'll do, but I won't exactly be heartbroken if I can't return."

Snake and Otacon exchanged a look. Otacon tilted his head towards Sunny, and Snake sighed. "Yeah, we'd be thankful. Taking care of a child hasn't been easy, being nomads. Though I have to wonder what interest would you have from us working against the proliferation of Metal Gears."

"We have a very good reason for that, actually..." Buffalo said.

"But that's a matter for another time", Code Talker interrupted her. He looked between Lisa and Vista. "For now, we must address our two last unexpected guests."

"Right", Vista said, realization in her voice. "For all you knew, the Brockton Bay Wards would stay there. I volunteered to go help at Boston, but it was a last minute decision. You couldn't know I'd be there."

"I am glad that Taylor and Buffalo decided to take you from that battlefield, move you away from harm", Code Talker told her. "But you must understand: HEC has always worked in the shadows. I always steered it to benevolent goals, but public attention is something I cannot allow."

"What are you implying?" Dragon asked. "That you're keeping her here?"

Code Talker raised a hand. "I have no way at the current time to prevent her from leaving this place on her own. But my priorities and duties lie in the security of HEC and Taylor, and all of you as our guests, including Vista." He turned to the teen cape. "I am open to discussing in the days to come the matter of returning you home, but I need you to understand that this is a very delicate situation. Cooperation, is all I'm asking."
Vista frowned, but she sighed after a moment. "Yeah, I can understand that. I told Armsmaster I can keep a secret if that helps keeping a good person alive. So yeah, I don't know what I want to happen right now, but I'll cooperate."

Taylor turned to her. "Thank you. I know what you're being asked to do."

Vista smiled. "Bad thing is that it seems I won't be able to tell cool spy stories to the Wards, but what can you do, right?"

"Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to tackle the matter of Lisa", Buffalo talked again. "You said this Harbinger conscripted you for XOF, that he was its commander. Are you sure that's what he called it?"

Lisa nodded. "Yeah. But I didn't give it much thought."

Buffalo propped her elbows on the table and clasped her hands together, making them resemble a gun. "You see, XOF was the outfit I was with before I joined the Dogs, and both groups had been at war ever since Commander Miller founded the Dogs because they were the ones responsible for the destruction of MSF; that was before they recruited me, though. And XOF was Cipher's private army, which was the private organization of one of the Patriots, the secret cabal I mentioned in the helicopter that Big Boss and his friends founded to control global society, even if for what was initially a benevolent goal."

"And who had been taken over by another group, of which we only know that they are more concerned with the control and public acceptance of parahumans, than the control and stability the Patriots wanted", Code Talker added.

"But these people kept things strictly to the military and government spheres; they only took civilians in as researchers and contractors. And while XOF was full of sociopathic sons of bitches, the kind you'd only find in the special forces, you'll understand if I wonder how it is that a serial killer ends at the helm of what should be an organization that no one should know about. And considering that last point, if we should be worried about your presence here."

"Honest, I don't want anything with that asshole", Lisa hurried to say. "He used me and others to kill or hinder people around the world, but I didn't notice any particular pattern, only that he wasn't on it to help people's suffering. That's how I got Bonesaw sticking her hands on me, I refused to let a warlord live, and got bombed by his followers in exchange." She swallowed. "I know it's not much, but they have someone who can locate anything and anyone, some sort of clairvoyance, and another who can open doors to anywhere you ask. If they wanted anything else with us, they'd would have done something already."

"That might not be entirely necessary", Drebin said, looking up from the folders and closing them. "Taylor here is psychic. Now, I don't know about them or how their talents work, but someone I work for does. They tend to be a sort of..." He paused, wiggling the fingers of one hand. "Deterrence, to some sorts of parahuman powers. Say, this clairvoyant. They wouldn't be blinded entirely to Taylor, but they'd have some difficulty with keeping track of her and those around."

Code Talker nodded. "That was another thing the Ocelot asked me. To not talk of these sensitive matters without Taylor being present. Right now, that's the only protection we have from being spied on by parahumans. Still, this means the successors of the Patriots retained XOF as their private hitmen, and the question of them having such powerful parahumans is concerning indeed."

"Look. I don't want them to have me", Lisa said with a desperate smile, and giving Taylor a side glance. "I owe Taylor big, and I have nothing anywhere to go back to. Just let me stay with her."
Hell, I'll work for you in exchange."

Taylor shook her head. "I stand by what I said in the chopper. That hasn't changed."

Lisa's smile turned more appreciative at that. "Thanks."

Code Talker leaned back on his chair, as Drebin hummed, legs crossed and drumming his fingers on his knee. "Mind if I take over with this?"

Code Talker kept silent for a moment, and nodded. "Very well. But don't abuse our patience."

Drebin smirked. "Just making a point to help." He then stood up, both files on hand. "So, let me tell you a story, maybe two." He left one of the folders in front of Lisa, who gave a peek inside.

Her eyes bulged, and closed it just as fast as she opened it. "Fuck me", she mouthed.

"Don't worry, I won't reveal anything, let's say, incriminating. This one story", Drebin continued, strolling around the table with the other folder under his arm, hands together with the fingers tip-to-tip, "starts in California, with the daughter of the L. family, of the L. business empire, known as S.L., also known as Lisa W., alias Tattletale." He paused in his walk, turning around and looking at Lisa with an arched brow. "Sounds familiar?"

Lisa breathed out nervously. "That girl… is dead."

Drebin bobbed his head lightly. "Maybe. But let's go over her life, shall we? Context is important, after all." He then continued his stroll. "The L. family is a powerful one, and S.L. grew up the way you'd expect in a privileged environment. But." He raised a finger. "Nobody said it was a healthy environment. Influencing but negligent parents, a popular brother who ignored her... and so she sought life beyond the comforts of their riches; she seemed to care more about people than that, which spoke well of her despite her upbringing. She did things her family disapproved of, but who were they to judge, those who never took an active interest in who she was? Until one critical, unexpected moment, when her brother committed suicide."

Lisa closed her eyes, a tear running down her cheek. "It wasn't my fault."

"Is any of this necessary?" Snake said, narrowing his eyes to Drebin.

Taylor looked between Lisa, Drebin, and Code Talker, who kept quiet, though glaring daggers at the black man.

She tried to stand up. She still felt her legs wobbly, but Dragon helped her, and once she was on her feet, she walked around to Lisa and wrapped her in a one-armed hug around the shoulders.

Lisa reciprocated, hugging Taylor's hip and grabbing at her arm.

"It's fine, you already know that", Drebin had said meanwhile. "S. triggered from that, and fled home to greener and freer pastures, once her father tried to make her into his personal golden goose. She changed her name to Lisa W., only to find another man just as greedy. And Tattletale was born: white glove thief and escape artist, isn't it? Until that business in a bank."

"Please", Lisa begged.

"Huh-uh", Drebin said with a wiggling finger. "She did a naughty thing there, didn't she? I'm not blaming her, what with being between a rock and a sword… but here's the thing. What might have she said, that brought another girl to such a paralyzing nervous breakdown? Sure, me and HEC
knows, and Vista here was witness. But I wonder if her knew friends know how dangerous she might be...

Everyone was apprehensive, clearly uncomfortable, but no one was sure how to act. Vista stood up, her chair scraping along the floor, but she stood there, biting her lips, and E.E. looked at the scene unfold.

"She made clear already she regrets what she did", Dragon said, posed ready to go move around the table to him and share her thoughts in a more physical manner. "We get it, that was wrong, but there's no need for this,"

"Please don't", Lisa sobbed.

Drebin kept a finger raised, asking for a moment, as he moved closer and leaned forward towards Lisa and Taylor. "Does the girl that everyone is worried about understand the kind of fox she's letting into the hen house?"

"That's enough", Taylor and Snake groused together.

Lisa, though, exploded at that moment. "Fuck you, I told her everything!", she screamed, jumping to her feet, but she was still weak enough that Taylor had to support her. "Panacea wanted to fuck her sister like a fucking animal, so I told them that! She was adopted and I told them that! She was Marquis's daughter, and I told her that, knowing that she had a black and white morality that would make her think that made her villain! I knew all that, and I broke her, I broke her in front of everyone! Because I was far more scared about what Coil would do to me! And I paid for it tenfold, you son of a–"

Code Talker slammed the table hard enough that the sound overpowered Lisa's screaming, making everyone stop what they were going to do or say.

Taylor helped Lisa sit down again, who was breathing fast and noisily. She clutched at Taylor like a lifesaver, and only then she realized Sunny had been hugging her from the other side.

"That is enough, Drebin", Code Talker's voice rumbled menacingly. "I didn't allow you access to these dossiers to cause such distress."

Drebin kept smirking, though in a clear way the he knew he had crossed a line, and raised both hands in a placating manner. "I apologize. A miscalculation, that's all. But as I said, it demonstrates a point."

He moved around to Vista, and left the other folder in front of her, and kept walking to his seat. "The story of one M. B., alias Vista. HEC redacted both files the moment they knew you both were in the helicopter with Taylor. See, they don't care about parahumans as long as they don't pose a threat to their operations. But I think this shows how seriously they are taking Taylor's safety."

Vista exhaled, as Drebin sat in his chair, unconcerned by the looks he was receiving. She put a hand over her folder, patting it and licking her lip. "Yeah. No kidding."

"I apologize for this", Code Talker said. "But as much as I lament the manner Drebin conveyed it, his point stands. My intention on investigating both of you was born of precaution. I hope at least this shows how dire we find the situation."

The tension in the room relaxed, as everyone kept silence, except for Lisa's breathing.

Taylor, still hugging Lisa tightly, was the first to speak. "Ok. What now?"
Buffalo gave another folder to Code Talker, and he opened it, producing two sets of documents. "I made preparations for your legal situation. I don't know what the PRT will do, but short of forging a new identity, in case that it becomes necessary, this is the best I can do for you at the current time, if we act quick."

"These documents have been redacted by a judge that owe Big Boss and Ahab a few favours." He pushed both documents closer to Taylor, along with a pen on top of the first paper. "This one transfers guardianship of Taylor Anne Hebert to Catherine McDonnell Caminades, Kazuhira’s daughter, resident in Virginia, and current owner and CEO of the McDonnell's Corporation. If you sign it, this would make the guardianship effective two days ago, and keep you outside the legal jurisdiction of New Hampshire. Catherine doesn't know of this yet, but I plan to contact her as soon as things have calmed down, and she's a good girl with a good head on her shoulders. I am sure that once she knew of your situation, she'd do whatever she could to help you."

At Taylor's confused look, he continued, tapping the second document. "Signing this other document, after you've signed the first one, will declare Taylor Anne Hebert, sixteen as the laws of Virginia demand, as emancipated, providing you with both the rights and obligations that an American citizen above the age of majority enjoys. This, among other things, would help prevent any strong arming the PRT might try to force you into the Wards, and would allow me or Catherine to employ you in HEC or McDonnell's, whatever might be the path you choose, and in doing so, help to make you safer legally."

Taylor left Lisa's side and took both documents, glancing at them, and then passing them to Dragon, who read them as well. "It is legal, but… irregular, to say the least", Dragon said cautiously.

"So was introducing her to the Guild as a minor", Drebin pointed out, but not with any malice. It was merely a statement. "As was Armsmaster backing her up as a vigilante, and the fact that several unknown groups went after her, leaving a trail of death and blood. Some people are going to comb over the details and think something weird is going on with this girl. And realizing who's her biological father, why she was born, and that she's growing as a telepath, of all possible abilities? Not even counting why the greatest Tinker alive disappeared with her." He shook his head. "Hmm-hmm, you bet that's gonna get ugly fast for everyone involved. And it isn't like there's a lot left in New Hampshire to anchor her there anyway, is it?"

"She's an orphan now, and no one will care about the differences between parahuman and psychic", Code Talker added. "The government and the PRT will take charge. I won't say they are an enemy, but it's not the most safe environment for the time being; not if there's people able and willing to make an attempt against Taylor's life inside a PRT building. I would be remiss in my responsibility to her and my friendship with her parents if I didn't do all I can to keep her safe." He turned to Taylor. "I know this is an unexpected and maybe intimidating step to take, but this will provide you the greatest legal protection I can facilitate at the moment. Whatever you choose, know that I'll respect it and help you as much as I can. But it's you who must choose."

Dragon returned the documents to Taylor. "It's your decision."

Taylor nodded. She put the papers down on the table again, and gave them a last read.

"Let others keep directing your life, or do it yourself", Lisa said, more calmly now as she slowly rocked back and forth, with Sunny in her arms. "I know what I'd do."

Taylor swallowed, and took the pen.

"In the plane", she said, turning to Snake, "you told us that we were free to choose our fate."
He nodded.

She signed twice.

As the meeting ended, Drebin walked up to Lisa slowly, waving a white handkerchief he held pinched in his fingers like a flag.

She glared at him as she zipped up her coat, standing up and leaning on the table. "What?"

"I want to apologize, Miss Wilbourn", he said. Drebin seemed unable to let his face do anything else than smirk, but he wasn't doing it as overtly as before at that moment; just a friendly smile. He put a hand below the handkerchief, forming a tent with it. "I had intended to tell my story for a bit longer, but, well… as I said, I miscalculated. Of course, I knew you regretted what had happened in the bank, but I underestimated how hard the experience affected you. I should have known better." He lifted the handkerchief, and in his other hand he held an apple. A red, fresh one that might as well had an 'eat me, delicious aboard' tag. He offered it to her. "Again, I apologize."

"I'd prefer a cubic ton of Advil…” She scoffed, but took the the apple all the same. "Know better. You look well off enough to me to not need to know better."

"It's true I like to dress good, smell good, be clean…” He feigned a sad face, glancing aside for a moment. "But is that your insider view to privilege? Or just your first impression of me?"

Lisa sighed. "Fine, I get it. Real intelligence work is hard without powers..."

"A valid point", Drebin said, returning to his previous smile, "but not what I was going for, it ain't." He spread his arms. "Let good old Drebin trade a story for another. Sounds fair?"

"Yours for mine?" Lisa asked. At his nod, she gave out a breath, and motioned him to sit at her side. "Sure, be my guest."

He leaned against the table at her side, and crossed one leg over the other, resting his arms on them. "I was born somewhere in Uganda. By the time the Lord's Resistance Army was formed in 1987 and came to my town, I was old enough to hold a gun. All I knew after that was the battlefield." He pursed his lips, and passed a thumb over the shaved line of his head. "Rough business, that. At least, until I grew old enough back there to have spent all my childhood in battle. That was when the Patriots found me."

Lisa frowned. "Big Boss' secret cabal."

Drebin hummed. "They controlled the traffic of guns through the DREBIN company. There were many Drebin's all around the world, making sure weapons went to where the Patriots wanted." He turned to her. "I was number 893."

"And your original name?"

"Who knows? Damned if I can remember it." He chuckled. "Of course, that doesn't matter anymore, see? The Patriots got backstabbed by their successors. The high ranked Drebin's, who had direct contact with the Patriots, disappeared without a sign. The rest of us were left to our luck, none of us any wiser to what happened, and with a lot of angry clients wondering where their last purchases with us had gone."

"Let me guess, you were one of the few that kept enough cash to refund their receipts."
His chuckle was cut short by a whine. They looked down and noticed Diamond looking at Lisa with a puppy eye.

The wolfdog gave out another whine. Lisa and Drebin exchanged a look, and he shrugged.

She offered the apple to Diamond, and he took it quickly. He took a step back, wagged his tail as he gave a small happy growl to Lisa, and trotted off to his master.

Taylor was talking with Dragon and Buffalo. When Diamond sat at her side to eat the apple, she looked back at Lisa and Drebin with a raised eyebrow. They merely shrugged.

"Anyway", Drebin continued, now in a more somber tone. "After the Patriots took me, things were smooth sailing for me. But before that?" He shook his head. "Being a pawn, used for the benefits of others and killing for a cause that isn't yours… believe me, girl, I know all about that."

He looked at Snake, and Lisa did the same. He was helping Sunny put her own coat on. "Take Snake, for example. Sure, while he made far more enemies than friends, he's a legend in the Intel community. But would you say that's something that makes him happy? Knowing some people look up to him, even if they can't talk about him?"

"He told us his story", Lisa said. "Doesn't act like he's proud of what he did, or who he is."

"It's hard to make peace with killing, no matter your age."

Lisa looked down, rubbing the back of her neck. She hadn't bothered to check it, but she felt her hair was dirty. She was looking forward to a shower even if it was going to be cold, hopefully before dinner.

She sighed. "I still don't know how to wrap my head around what Harbinger made me do. It was just a few months, but… those people weren't looking for a fight. I've learned to keep my cool, but I definitely don't know how to deal with knowing what I've done."

Drebin nodded. " Victims of war. Those are the hardest."

She knitted her brows together. "That wasn't a war."

"Wasn't it, though?", Drebin said, waving a hand away. "Fighters battling for nobody exactly knows what, and innocents suffering. What matters the scale, the casualty ratio, or the weapon employed?" He clicked his tongue. "Nah. The more war changes, the more it stays the same."

He crossed his legs and leaned forward, rubbing the palms of his hands. "And those behind it all, who send you to fight. If you suffer traumas, post traumatic disorder, all the better. The more broken, the better to control you, to anticipate you, to know how to send you in the direction they want."

Drebin's voice had lowered to almost a whisper. "They force you to bury within that shell of yours that part that screams against the wrongness of it all. Something human, a fragile, small, scared heart. And you keep it there, thinking it'd be safe."

His hands parted away from each other. "Until that shell breaks like an egg, and one of two things happens. Either the yolk drips down to the floor, wasted and left to die and rot, or it explodes, lashing out at everything around, leaving only carnage and pain."

Lisa gave out a subdued sob, having brought a hand to wipe the tears off her eyes. She knew which one of the two had happened to her already.
Drebin turned to her. No smile, no smirk. "War transforms us, Lisa. Into beasts. It doesn't matter that I was born in a little village and you in a golden cage. You might heal, but the beast will always be part of you, forever."

Lisa gave out a sad laugh. "You are a shitty storyteller", she said with a sniff, lowering her arm and looking up at him as he stood up.

A smirk returned to Drebin's lips. "But I didn't tell the end of your story, did I?"

She shook her head. "What for? I already know the ending. Little bitch gets yanked by assholes who force her to cause pain and kill. She escapes, will continue next episode."

"Are you sure?" He rose an eyebrow. "What about meeting the people who saved her and understand her? Another girl who knows quite well what the she has gone through, and accepted her, and trusted herself to her, despite also knowing what she did? It might not have been part of the report, but…"

"Lisa? We're moving out." She turned around and saw Taylor walk up to them, legs finally recovered from the anesthetics. "Are you ok?"

Lisa glanced at Drebin, saw his absolutely smug, shit eating grin, and smiled. "Yeah, I'm fine", she said as she rubbed away the last of her tears with a thumb. "Drebin apologized, and told me a couple stories. Some laughs and tears were had."

Taylor blinked. "Huh, alright. I saw you crying and… sorry." She rubbed at her neck sheepishly with her hand, as she leaned on the table. "It's been years since I had any friends, I'm rusty at this."

Lisa patted Taylor on the hand she had on the table. "You already doing better than most", she said as she moved back to her wheelchair with Taylor's help.

Once she was comfortable, Lisa turned back to Drebin. "Thank you."

He took Lisa's dossier from the table and gave it to her. "Any time, gorgeous."

Dragon approached next. "All good here?"

Lisa turned to her, the dossier over her lap. "Yeah. Copacetic. Push me, please? Didn't want to ask Taylor, what with only one hand…"

Dragon looked between Lisa and Drebin, and nodded, grabbing the handles. "Sure. We're leaving. I convinced Buffalo to visit the wreckage of Rex before dinner, but she's showing us our living quarters first. You can stay there if…"

"No no, I'll go." Lisa turned to Taylor. "Will you?"

"Guess so", Taylor said with a shrug. "I wanted to talk with Code Talker about the parasite, but until he comes back at dinner, there doesn't seem to be a lot more to do. I guess I could stay, but…"

"Nope! We're both going", Lisa chirped, grabbing at Taylor's arm. "I said I'll be staying with you, and I'm not letting you stay alone to brood. What better way to celebrate your illegally gained independence than by visiting some hidden history? Group activity, girl!"

"Fine. You're pushy for someone who needs to be pushed herself, you know that?" The corners of Taylor's lip were perking up, failing at keeping hold of a smile. That was enough for Lisa.
Beside the enormous blast doors, a smaller sliding one opened, and Snake came in first, followed by the others who started filing behind him into the immense hangar.

"Well", Buffalo said, "Here we are."

Though there was debris scattered across the floor, there wasn't a lot of it, so didn't impede their steps or Lisa's wheelchair. Diamond started to leap among the debris, sniffing and searching every nook and cranny.

They began to walk towards the imposing figure.

REX lay slumped against the far right corner of the bay. The left leg was pressed up against the wall, while the right one was sprawled away from the main body, one of the two stakes on its foot missing. Both legs were missing most of their armor.

The flat, elongated head opened in two halves like a beak, exposing the cockpit and hiding the bulk of the main body behind it. Its left side was burned, large pieces of armor cracked or missing.

A flat disk was raised above its left shoulder, burned and broken shell leaving the internals on display, while on the right shoulder a block forked into two long, flat rails leaned against the floor.

The gray monster, as if screaming in defiance of the wounds suffered in battle, honored the name given to it.

"REX", Otacon said. "Never thought I'd see it again."

Snake, who was pushing Lisa's wheelchair again, exhaled. "Looks to be in worse condition than I remembered."

"You fought that thing, alone? Without powers?" Vista whistled as they were halfway to REX. "Must have been a hell of a fight."

"And I barely scratched the armor", Snake said as he shook his head. "Fox was the one to get Liquid to open the cockpit."

As they got in front of REX, they stopped. Dragon and Vista followed Otacon to get closer to the hulking vehicle, while the others stood back, Buffalo shuffling behind them.

"I've seen photos of the units the French produced, and the schematics for the RAYs the Marines have", Dragon said as she approached the left leg, "but seeing the original in person is quite impressive." She turned to Otacon, who stood in front of the cockpit, looking at it. "The RAYs make no use of Tinkertech. I assume it was the same for REX?"

He nodded. "It has some illegal or just questionable tech on board, but Baker and the DARPA Chief wanted everything to be completely normal tech. The top of the line at the time, of course, but they wanted it mass producible and as easily maintained as possible." He chuckled. "Sorry if that makes it less interesting."

"Of course not!" she exclaimed. "I might be a Tinker, but I have a proper understanding of engineering as well and REX is interesting enough as it is. You'll have to tell me how you kept the entire structure balanced on two legs, it looks somewhat unbalanced."
"Wait a second, what's illegal on it exactly?" Vista called out, using her power to step onto the elevated corridors at the walls, to get a better view of REX.

"I was involved in the overall construction, not in the weapons installed, but take the railgun for example", Otacon said pointing at the elongated fork at the right shoulder of REX. "The technology was originally intended for the Strategic Defense Initiative formed by President Reagan to shoot down ICBMs outside the atmosphere. ArmsTech and Rivermore National Labs collaborated to miniaturize it, using warheads capable of redirecting themselves down back to the surface once they leave the atmosphere." He waved a hand to the railgun. "And it worked."

"Then they wanted it to launch nukes, and if they could do it undetected and evading Scion and international laws, all the better", Dragon concluded. "I guess, since Scion didn't neutralize all nuclear weapons, they wanted to get some use out of the ones left." She changed sides, striding to REX's right side and looking up at the railgun. "I'm impressed any railgun at all was produced for service, though. Most of the derivatives weren't reported to have a functional one."

"Yeah, Russia had their own railgun technology ready when the data was leaked, but Snake and I found that most of the other countries opted for conventional launchers while researching their own railgun technology", Otacon said. "Discreet ones, of course. No one wants to give up the game to the other nuclear powers, even if they all have access to the leaked data. Except North Korea and Iran; they never had the capacity to deploy nuclear weapons anyway."

Dragon turned around to look at the front of REX, stepping to Otacon's side, and pointed at the damaged tubes below the cockpit. "The conventional weapons, I take?"

"Twin Avenger 30mm autocannons, scaled down, armored and protected in individual plated tubes, though one's missing from the battle with Snake", he said pointing at the vacant spot at one side. "Compound armor, laser semi-active homing type Hellfire missiles launched from compartments at the back and the tubes on the knees…"

"Meaning?" Vista asked, now walking on top of REX.

"That they didn't go soft on the anti armor solutions…" Dragon said. "And those weapons are definitely not gentle on human targets either." She pointed to REX's belly, between the legs. "What's that? Doesn't look like it helps balance."

"A free electron laser, capable of generating up to 100 megawatts."

Dragon's head snapped to look at him. "They developed one that powerful and fit for field combat? Without Tinkertech? And with REX providing enough energy for it and the railgun on its own?"

"It was Baker's secret in experimental weaponry. They wanted a solution in case armor and infantry managed to get below REX and avoid line of sight with the cannons, and he hoped the success of REX would help not only with keeping ArmsTech afloat, but moving this laser to mass production for other uses, like ship artillery." He shrugged. "Again, while I know the specifications, I had no hand on the weaponry. But I can tell you about the engine…"

Vista twisted space while they talked, and moved from the top of REX onto the cockpit. "This is so cool!"

Otacon twitched and started rubbing the back of his head. "Uh, be careful! I don't know the state of the cockpit!"

"It's fine, nothing looks broken and there isn't even a lot of dust in here!" Vista called from inside. "I
won't touch anything, I swear, but why are there so many screens? It must be hard for an adult to look above the one in front."

He sighed. "Usually, with the radome and its sensors intact, the cockpit would be closed. The sensors would then feed data to the pilot through an entire suit of VR equipment."

"VR?"

"Virtual Reality", Dragon said, walking between the legs and looking up at the back of REX. "The military had been using it for training soldiers for some time before they had their funding cut; the RAYs are employing the same… though they don't have such an obvious spot like that radome to target."

"I know", Otacon admitted, folding his arms and following her, an eye on the cockpit. "I designed it like that intentionally."

Dragon looked at him, as Vista called out again, starting the work of lowering herself back to the floor. "Hang on a second, you gave it a weak point? Why? That sounds stupid."

"Well, it ended being a good thing in hindsight. And I like to think of it as more of a character flaw."

Dragon cocked her head to a side. "A character flaw?"

"REX was the work of my life at that time", he said with a shrug. "I almost started to think of it as 'someone', if that makes some sense, and there's plenty of people who do that with the vehicles and weapons they operate already." Otacon turned to her and smiled. "People and weapons just aren't complete without a character flaw, don't you think?"

After a moment of silence, Dragon laughed as her hand shot up in front of where her mouth would be. "Oh dear. That's such an endearing way of working. I'll have to remember that the next time someone complains I take the dragon theme too far!"

Vista approached them, hands in her coat pockets. "Sounds like it was hard for you to help Snake destroy REX…"

"Hard?" Otacon looked up to REX's belly. "No. No, it was easy", he said in a wistful voice. "Snake was committed to the fight, and we had already sacrificed too much to stop Liquid." He paused, closing his eyes for a moment. "If he was going to cause global chaos", he continued after opening his eyes again, "stopping him and REX was absolutely the easy decision, even if I could only help from a computer."

He moved to REX's right foot and sat, a hand touching the old metal. "The hard part was opening my eyes. Because I only worked on designing and constructing REX, I refused to believe it would be used as a nuclear weapon…"

Otacon sighed, and looked up at them. "My grandfather participated in the Manhattan Project. My father was born on August 6, 1945."

"The project that developed the American atomic bomb, and the day of the Hiroshima bomb", Dragon said at Vista's questioning look. "An unfortunate pattern."

He nodded. "I became a scientist in part because I wanted to help humanity, but also because I wanted to make robots like the ones in the Japanese Animes." He looked at the rest of the group, who were too far to hear them talk. Snake was still looking at REX, answering the questions the girls were directing him. "He told me it was a childish excuse."
"A bit harsh", Vista said.

"But he was right", he told her. "No matter my reasons. If I didn't want to take part in murder, I had to take responsibility, and that started with helping Snake take down REX. That's why I started Philanthropy. It might not have been my intent, but I'm responsible for all those derivatives and the nuclear threat they represent."

Dragon kept her watch on Snake, seeing him shuffle his feet awkwardly, trying to light up a cigarette as Sunny complained to him, something that Lisa and Taylor seemed to find funny. "You admire him."

"I've lived with him for six years. That's more time than either of us have lived with another person that wasn't family." Otacon said with a chuckle, turning to her. "He's a grump. A jerk, sometimes, believes he isn't any good for anything else than killing. He smokes and has no concern about his health… but he cares. He fights for what he thinks is right, and doesn't ask for anything in return. I don't know how parahuman heroes are when the cameras aren't looking at them, but I've seen, and am still seeing the real Snake every day, and I know I can trust him to prove he's nothing else but a good man at heart."

They kept quiet, and Vista turned around, looking up at REX. "Say, what if you repaired REX? Think it could fight an Endbringer?"

After Snake and E.E. turned around to talk with Buffalo, Lisa noticed Sunny react to something and hide behind her chair.

"What is it, angel?"

Sunny pointed to where she was looking at: REX's left foot, surrounded by debris. Lisa didn't see anything wrong in that particular place compared to the hulking bipedal tank that, while she couldn't use her power to check thanks to her migraine holding a figurative icepick over her brain, looked like it could have ruined the day of most capes in Brockton Bay in its prime.

She strained, sitting up a bit to look there, but Taylor put her hand over her shoulder, making her sit down again. "I'll look. Seems like it's some piece of metal; maybe a reflection startled her."

Lisa wanted to stop Taylor, but she had already left her side to walk up to REX's foot.

Buffalo had told them that neither Drebin's or Code Talker's people had come inside this hangar yet, what with other parts of the island having higher priority for restoration. Otacon or Snake would be more likely to know what to expect.

Lisa thought about it. She hadn't known Taylor for all that long, but she had just tried to kill herself out of desperation and lack of control in her life not even a day ago. But it was unlikely Taylor would try again so soon and while accompanied by people that had been fairly supportive. She'd had to trust her new friend for now.

Lisa sighed. She wasn't exactly in better condition than Taylor anyway. Lisa had wanted to stay with Taylor even before Drebin mentioned that psychics might be able to slip themselves and those around them below a Thinker's radar; Lisa hadn't noticed such an effect with her own power, but if it was true, it definitely was a plus if she wanted to avoid people like Coil or Harbinger.

Why had she wanted to stay with Taylor, anyway? They had just met, after all.

Was it because Taylor had had every reason in the world to kill her in self-defense… and hadn't? She
doubted most capes, even Protectorate ones, would have that much leniency.

Was it because for some twisted reason, Taylor reminded Lisa of Rex? She didn't have the charisma Rex had — although considering what had been planned for her, that's something that could have changed. But she had been a loner; a different kind from what Rex was, but a loner all the same. Lisa managed to keep one of them from dying, but it didn't feel like an accomplishment. In fact, Lisa felt the need to make sure Taylor stayed alive.

Was it because the two of them were equally broken? That they could find some common ground, something for Lisa to form a real friendship over with someone else that wasn't a cape 'coworker' that wasn't interested in her beyond her power as a tool for jobs, or a fellow squatter that she'd have to cut ties in order to protect them from her life as a cape?

Was it because Taylor had treated her with more kindness and care in one day than most people had in her entire life? Even after confessing all the shit she had done? True, Lisa had seen indecision and prejudice in Taylor at first, but in its own way, considering the unholy mess that she must have had in her mind, that made Taylor's later actions all the more precious.

And she couldn't forget that since they left Boston, Lisa had felt as if she had met for the first time people that didn't care whether she had a power.

It wasn't just Taylor. Dragon would also stay with her, and had treated Lisa with more understanding than she'd expect from most Heroes in this situation. It was obvious that Vista still held some grudge for the bank, and Lisa wouldn't know what would happen when she returned to the Wards, but she seemed to be settling for some harmless rivalry, which was definitely more welcome than outright hostility

Lisa hadn't interacted much with Otacon and E.E. yet, but Sunny had become attached to her in a way Lisa couldn't understand; even now, the kid was grabbing at her arm like a lifesaver. And she would be lying if she didn't appreciate Snake carrying her in his arms back to her cot as she lost consciousness in the plane.

She realized it felt nice.

She felt nice, and warm, and safe, and wanted. Things that she hadn't felt in a long time. She missed having people around that would help her or want to be around her, not since uncle Kenneth was the last man to treat her as a person. Or just not look at her like a magic credit card.

But it occurred to Lisa, though, that they were merely seeing only one part of her. The vulnerable Lisa that couldn't really cause problems. The one who wouldn't rile them up with her needling and smug attitude.

Of course, she didn't have her power available right now. Once she did and became a raging bitch again, well, that'd be their trial by fire.

Lisa really, really hoped she wouldn't push Taylor away with her antics. Like she did with Brian, or the way she had hurt Panacea.

The way she had pushed Rex away, the one time he had tried to get closer to her.

But that was Tattletale's thing, wasn't it? Lisa didn't have to be her again now.

She already changed her name once. As Snake said, she could choose her fate for herself. She could choose her name again. She could choose who she wanted to be.
She knew the ghost of Tattletale would follow her everywhere. But Lisa could choose to not be that anymore. Her. Lisa. No one else.

She could change.

"I got it", Taylor called out in a crouch, breaking Lisa from her reverie. Which was good, because the migraine made introspection an added pain anyway.

Taylor straightened up, holding a bent length of metal by a handle and carrying it back to the group; her shout got everyone's attention, and they were gathering together as she came back.

Unlike REX, the blade hadn't stood the test of time with as much grace. The metal was rusty, the edge somewhat dented, and the handle had lost most of the padding.

"It's a katana", Taylor said. "What's a katana doing…?" Her eyebrows rose in realization. "Oh, right."

Snake stepped in, extending his hands, and Taylor gave him the sword. "Gray Fox's", he said, studying it as he held the old blade with reverence. "He stabbed the radome with it before he went down fighting." He smiled. "He wouldn't have it any other way."

Lisa saw Snake frowning, and Taylor picked up on that as well. "Something happened?"

Snake sighed, lowering his hands. "Fox gave everything he had to make Liquid open the cockpit", he started. "He held REX's weight before it would stomp on me, parrying, enduring and slipping between bullets… and in the end it was the laser that got him when it cut his arm off."

He looked away, at the walls of the hangar. "When Liquid opened the cockpit, Fox was lying down in front of him. He asked me to shoot the missile, knowing it would kill him too, but I couldn't."

Otacon approached him and took his arm. "We'll restore it. We owe him that much."

Snake grunted softly, the slight smile he had indicating his agreement.

Lisa looked at Sunny, who was still gripping her and looking at the place Taylor had taken the sword from.

"Angel?"

Sunny shook her head, and relaxed the grip on Lisa's arm. "It's nothing."

E.E. took a breath. "Guys, I don't want to be that person, but have any of you given a good look at REX? Doesn't it seem familiar?"

Everyone turned around to look at REX, and Otacon sighed, adjusting his glasses with a middle finger. "I know. Sahelanthropus looks like it when crouching."

"Now that you mention it", Dragon started, "the resemblance is remarkable. I know some witnesses had made comparisons with the knockoffs but…"

"Well, we know the Endbringers had taken the form of mythical figures", Lisa said with a shrug. "But what's to stop one of them from looking like a tank?"

"That is because Sahelanthropus is no Endbringer."

Everyone looked behind them. Buffalo was accompanied now by Code Talker, again in his black
coat, and Drebin, who was wearing the same winter coat as everyone.

"Really?" Drebin said as he gave Code Talker a side glance. "You sound… very sure about that."

"I know there were parties that disagree on Sahelanthropus being anything more than an S-Rank threat", Dragon said, "but the PRT found enough reason to classify it as an Endbringer."

"It's true", Buffalo interrupted. "The Dogs fought it twice in the Eighties." She frowned. "And twice we took it down."

Otacon narrowed his eyes, and approached Code Talker. "I remember pictures. Schematics, in my father's office, back when he was still alive." He raised a finger in thought. "I never got a good look at them, but they inspired me for REX."

Code Talker nodded slowly. "You are due to know. Sahelanthropus is Huey Emmerich's child, just as you are.

"When MSF was investigating Peace Walker, Big Boss met the two engineers in charge of the project. Huey, and a woman, a specialist in AI called Strangelove." He started walking towards REX, crossing through the crowd. "Huey was in charge of building Peace Walker, while Strangelove created Imago. Both defected to MSF, after Imago drowned Peace Walker in a lake, and they built Zeke: the first Metal Gear."

"The first?" Snake repeated. "I thought Doctor Madnar's was…"

Code Talker shook his head. "No. Huey wanted to prove his allegiance to Big Boss by building a weapon with nuclear capacity, something that could be the deterrence MSF needed to protect themselves from hostile countries. It wouldn't matter, as shortly afterwards Skull Face made his move, and now Zeke sleeps in the depths of the Caribbean sea, along with the destroyed Mother Base." He looked up at REX. "Huey was taken by Skull Face during the Mother Base attack, while Strangelove left before it happened; it is not clear what she did in the meanwhile, but at some point she was contacted by XOF, and reunited with Huey to work under Skull Face, so they could build a new Metal Gear for him. After recovering Imago and the reptile pod from Peace Walker, she fused both together into one single pod, and Strangelove used it as a model for a new AI that would pilot Sahelanthropus." He turned around, looking directly at Otacon's eyes. "During this time, Strangelove moved on with a second, personal project. Her own legacy, for the woman she loved: The Boss, the mentor of Big Boss. A child, whom she would pass on the Boss' memes. And for that, she seduced Huey."

"You can't be saying…" Otacon shuffled his feet, as E.E. went to his side. "This woman was my mother? But why have I never heard of her until now?"

Code Talker looked downcast, and walked back to Otacon. "Because of the AI inclusion, there was only enough space in the cockpit for a child to pilot Sahelanthropus. This was after you had been born, and Huey used you as the test pilot."

"What?" Otacon's eyes widened.

"This enraged Strangelove", Code Talker said with a nod. "She sent you to America, so he could never find you, but Huey sealed her inside Imago's pod. His crime was not discovered until the Dogs found and opened Imago for maintenance." He came closer to Otacon, and gently patted his forearm. "Inside, they found her remains, with a photo of herself, holding you in her arms. Imago had recorded her last will, giving proof to the Dogs, of Huey's dishonesty. After giving Strangelove a burial at sea, they exiled Huey, after which he, it seems, found you again."
Otacon stepped back, unbalanced, but Snake stepped in quickly, stabilizing him in a tight embrace.

E.E. took Otacon's hand, putting her other hand on his back.

"I'm fine", he told Snake, without pulling away. "I'm fine. Just… unexpected."

Snake patted him in the shoulder. After a moment, he pulled away. "You know we're in this together."

Otacon nodded, and turned to E.E. "I shouldn't have left you alone with that bastard that day."

She shook her head. "He was the one to drag me into the pool, not you."

E.E. then hugged him, and Otacon returned the gesture slowly.

Lisa smiled faintly, although, she felt jealous too, seeing them come together again. Reuniting with Rex was a ship that had sailed and burned too long ago and too late.

"Fuck", Vista muttered. "Is everyone here so screwed up…?"

Taylor arched an eyebrow at her, and Lisa laughed softly.

Drebin cleared his throat. "I don't want to take away the attention from this heartwarming moment, but as interesting as the story was… what's the relationship with Sahelanthropus showing up now? I'm intrigued now, though I'm guessing this goes further than Doctor Emmerich taking inspiration from his father."

Code Talker turned around, looking back at REX. "Skull Face had another project; he planned to cause division among the entire world, and he wanted a weapon that would enforce this division, bringing untold destruction anywhere it went. It wouldn't be a mere bipedal tank.

"I am of the Diné. The Navajo Nation. Years after we were banished from our homeland, were were able to return, only for the atomic bomb to be dropped on Hiroshima. After this, the American government set up mine after mine everywhere in the Navajo Nation, and employing the Diné. Without protection, and without safety precautions, the land and water were contaminated, and many of the Diné died. While in my pain, I discovered the metallic archaea, a microbe that 'eat' uranium. I wanted to domesticate them, so we could rid our land of uranium. But nobody was willing to cover the enormous funding that my research would require. Skull Face found me, and lied to me, offering to help my people if I switched my research from cleanup work to nuclear weapons. In the end, I was a prisoner, and the Diné the chain he used to force me to do his bidding."

He raised his hand again, adopting his lecturing tone. "Using a strain capable of enriching uranium into weapons-grade, Skull Face would smuggle small traces of depleted uranium anywhere in the world. On site, archaea smuggled as well inside yellowcake, would enrich the uranium, ensuring that any group, from the greatest superpower, to the smallest terrorist cell, could have access to nukes. He would, at the same time, transform and own completely the nuclear weapons market, and ensure complete deterrence among all countries." He raised a finger. "But these wouldn't be usable nukes. He would include, hidden, another type of metallic archaea that would instantly override the criticality generator. A fail-safe he'd control, to deactivate any such weapon whenever he'd choose, regardless of owner or intent of use."

"The proliferation of nukes like those would ensure there was no superpower", Snake explained to the confused listeners, hands on hips. "Make himself the only person in the world with real nuclear power. It probably could have even have fooled Scion. Doesn't matter if he took away all nuclear weapons, if you have a DIY set that could activate at any moment. Even if it was all a scam." He
turned to Code Talker. "That's all very interesting, but what was his plan, and what does it have to do with Sahelanthropus?"

"Sahelanthropus' armor is made of depleted uranium", Code Talker said. "And it carries enough metallic archaea inside to turn itself into a nuclear weapon, with a yield of fifteen kilotons, if Skull Face so desired."

Everyone stiffened or gasped, as they started to realize the implication. Snake blinked. "Alright, that's a new one."

"The entire time in Boston", Dragon said, "everyone was fighting a walking nuke, that could go off at any moment!?"

"No", Code Talker said. "There is a risk that whatever logic controls Sahelanthropus decides to start the process, but such a thing isn't practical in combat. The archaea would need to shift through the entire mass of Sahelanthropus' armor to collect the uranium, which would not only take significant time but also necessitate compromising the armor to the point of uselessness. The point is not to detonate instantaneously, but to be able to transport materials to produce a bomb anywhere without the international community realizing it. A variation on what they hoped to accomplish with REX here."

"So Metal Gears are scary not because they have nukes, but because they have nukes quietly", Vista deadpanned. "Got it"

"S-Rank threat, they said", Taylor muttered.

"Was that metallic archaea also responsible for the metal oxidation?" Otacon asked. "The carbon nanotube and titanium nitride ceramic the RAYs employ shouldn't have corroded like that."

Code Talker scowled. "There was another strain, a corrosive one. It was used as the failsafe for the nukes he intended to spread, and also applied to Sahelanthropus, in its flexible swords and grenades that granted greater close quarters destruction and battlefield control. You saw these on the explosive pylons and the clouds of metallic archaea that disabled vehicles and infrastructure in Boston. But the archaea shouldn't have been able to affect the materials employed on the RAYs, and I'm not sure myself how that could have happened, except for sabotage. And that would require previous knowledge of the archaea's existence."

"You suspect the successors to the Patriots?" Snake asked.

"It is a possibility", Code Talker agreed. "Though I won't dare yet to speculate on the reasons, it is probable Skull Face's archives on his projects were kept by XOF and Cipher."

"What about the people who turned into zombies?" Taylor asked. "Were those caused by the archaea too?" She bit her lip. "Could have it affected Diamond? He got close there." She pointed at the dogwolf, still sniffing around the hangar at a distance.

"In a way. The Skulls, Skull Face's Parasite Unit, were capable of it." He extended a hand towards Taylor. "The One That Covers, the parasite that lives within you now, is involved. I will tell you about the parasite later, but it is enough to say that modified strains of the parasite, infused with archaea, could be implanted in a host, robbing the host of their cognitive functions and leaving them sugestionable. They would also be able to produce a gas, a byproduct of the archaea-infused parasite, which would leave most people who breathed it in a violent, animalistic state. Without proper knowledge, it would be almost impossible to cure."
Code Talker rested both hands in his cane, and hummed. "I was not made aware Skull Face included this gas within Sahelanthropus, but it wouldn't be affected by the same cognitive obstacles the Skulls suffered." He then turned to Taylor. "This gas didn't always work on humans, and its effectiveness on animals was found lacking. While I wouldn't trust you inherited such a resistance, neither Ahab nor Quiet were affected by it, despite fighting inside clouds of this gas in occasion. Still, Ahab had a trained wolf who accompanied him in his missions, DD, and he was never affected."

Taylor looked at Diamond, who looked up at her from his search, and barked. "Just tell me that's where the similarities end..."

"Director Armstrong said he had his Protectorate members indisposed", Vista asked. "They would have been at the front-lines when Sahelanthropus attacked. Should they be worried?"

"I returned the capes Taylor and Diamond rescued directly to the PRT to be treated in a local hospital; at least the ones that weren't killed by friendly fire after the turned", Dragon said. "They said they had been recovering, but now I'm having my doubts."

"If they had been affected, it would have been some time already", Code Talker wondered to himself. "There is a way to treat the condition. The Dogs found groups of puppeted soldiers after Skull Face's death; days and even a week later in one case. The ones that were brought to Mother Base recovered. But after a month, I cannot give any guarantee that these parahumans can heal, not without permanent damage or knowing what effect could have caused in their Gemmas and Corona Pollentias. I will have to check my old files first."

"Back to Sahelanthropus." Buffalo stepped in at that point. "Skull Face ended up controlling it through Mantis, instead of using the AI", she said, "until the moment Eli took control of Mantis from Skull Face, inside a hidden Soviet hangar in the Serak power plant, in Afghanistan. I was XOF back then, and Skull Face had brought Ahab there. You know, for your typical 'I have you now, I don't mind telling you my plan' monologue, before he'd set Volgin on him." She swallowed. "When Eli took control of Mantis, he controlled Sahelanthropus to attack not only Ahab, but us as well. I fell from my tank onto a jeep Ahab used to escape." She laughed. "I still don't know why he didn't kill me on the spot, guess I was too scared shitless after seeing that thing go through an entire company of battle tanks and gunships while jumping around like a bunny on crack to even pose him any threat."

"But he drove the jeep away from the place... " She shrugged. "Sahelanthropus broke our ride, and while he sent me to take control of a nearby tank, Quiet and Pequod provided support from above while he started fighting it on foot, with a missile launcher." Buffalo chuckled. "Wouldn't you know, we managed to kick its sorry uranium ass on our own until it fell on its back."

"On foot? You got some big shoes to fill, Taylor", Lisa said.

Taylor rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I'm starting to get a new perspective on that", she groaned.

"Well, believe me when I say that second round wasn't as fun", Buffalo said. "We brought Sahelanthropus to Mother Base. Eli repaired it in secret, using Huey and some former child soldiers Miller had us reeducating. He then had Mantis move it, taking the kids with them, until they reached a salt lake island back on the Angola-Zaire border."

"Eli had also taken with him a sample of the Vocal Cord Parasite", Code Talker interjected. "A parasite that infected the larynx, imitating the vocal cords. When mating, it would react to the particular pronunciation of one specific language that previous generations would have adapted to, then lay down its eggs on the host's lung, causing eventual death. This is what the Wolbachia was used for as a cure, and what Skull Face would use to create division in the world, eliminating the
English language; as the most spoken language in the world, this would cause a rift among every country. In addition, it was a revenge for the cultural legacy that he was robbed of in the Second World War, after he was made to forget his origins and his own language. The sample Eli took was the last sample of the English strain in existence.

Vista raised a hand. "Ok, I'm not questioning anymore all the weird and spooky things I'm learning here. But is there anything left of that parasite?"

Code Talker shook his head. "There was another sample of the English strain, but it was lost in the desert, to death and oblivion."

She exhaled and lowered her hand. "Good, because I for sure am relieved to know people like Bonesaw won't get their hands on it."

Lisa gave Vista a weak backhand on the belly. "Don't. Just... don't."

Buffalo sat down on a piece of debris. "Anyway, we followed them to that island, but when Ahab found XOF was there as well in force, Miller sent all the Dogs, all our available forces and vehicles: a thousand men, and an entire battalion worth of armored vehicles and support helicopters. Suddenly, we had a free for all battle." She shook her head. "It was a massacre. Between Eli and us, we killed most of XOF, but he wasn't taking sides or prisoners. You think Boston was bad?" She scoffed. "Nah, whatever was controlling Sahelanthropus was toying with everyone there; you won't learn to really fear Sahelanthropus until the kids gloves are off."

"We managed to take Sahelanthropus down hours later, after losing half of our forces. When our men on the ground found Eli was infected with the English strain, and the entire island as well, Ocelot gave the order to leave immediately. So we picked up the pieces of Sahelanthropus, left Eli on the ground with a loaded handgun, and bombed that island with enough napalm to make it look like the biggest and brightest flare ever. We didn't expect him to survive either the bombardment or the parasite, but I guess Mantis helped him."

"You know, it always seemed strange to me that Liquid was skilled enough to pilot REX the way he did, only from a bit of VR training", Otacon said. "I coded a 'street fighter' program that would help a pilot to move faster, easier, and even fight in melee. But it was hidden, so he couldn't have used it. Now I'm starting to see he had gotten some experience when he was a child."

Dragon folded her arms. "But how does that ties into Sahelanthropus suddenly showing up repaired and attacking Boston as if it was a new Endbringer?"

"The first time, Ahab had the Dogs brought it in one piece onto the R&D platform of Mother Base. A trophy, he said; a mark of the Dogs having solved a global crisis", Buffalo said. "Second time, we weren't having any of that. Miller ordered us to drop the pieces in the Indian Ocean, just southwest of Port Victoria in the Seychelles, and pretty close to Mother Base, so the Dogs could keep watch on it, at least until Miller disbanded us. Sahelanthropus has been laying down there ever since."

"Until January eleventh", Code Talker said with finality. "When my people at Port Victoria reported a certain visit."

"I predicted the Simurgh would land in Australia that day..." Dragon said as she unfolded her arms, looking between them. She started to open and close her fists. "But she turned around without attacking anywhere, until she reached..."

"The ocean, southwest of Port Victoria?" Lisa ventured.
The hangar fell silent, until Code Talker nodded. "Indeed. And independently of whatever else happens or of any of you, I'm considering committing HEC's resources to fight Sahelanthropus again."

Snake rubbed his jaw, and turned to Buffalo. "Now I see what you mean when you said you had an interest in our efforts. You wanted our experience."

"Yeah, sorry if that sounds presumptuous of me", Buffalo said. "But just so you know, I don't care what anyone else thinks. Not capes, not governments, not the Endbringers: that thing is the Dogs' demon, our responsibility." She looked up from where she was sitting. "And if I have any say about it, we will be the ones to show that albino bitch that you just don't unearth what a Dog buried."
Code Talker and Buffalo were bringing them to the hangar building. It concerned a few things he had brought for Taylor, and offered everyone else to be dropped off at the administrative building to rest. Everyone decided to come by. Taylor appreciated the company, even if she suspected there wouldn't be much to do around otherwise that would keep them occupied.

No, that wasn't fair. It was obvious that for Snake and Otacon, the day was revealing a fair bit of secret history in a conflict in which they were already participants, so it would affect them anyway if only indirectly. If anything, this would be business as usual for them.

E.E. would probably want to stay close to her brother, though the jumbled set of emotions Taylor was picking up from her was too confused as to make sense of why exactly, as their relationship seemed… strained. And Sunny, whom Taylor didn't need to look at with her physical eyes to understand that, yes, the kid was afraid of her, only wanted to stay close to her adopted parents. And to Lisa.

However the impromptu operation in the helicopter looked like to an external observer, it clearly wasn't pretty. Nonetheless, it was sweet how Sunny worried about others.

Lisa's reasons were clear too. Taylor didn't understand how simply being a psychic confounded parahuman Thinker powers, particularly when Lisa stated her own worked correctly around her. But Taylor knew that Lisa was playing it safe in regards to the apparent capacity of her masters to track her outside of whatever influence Taylor was radiating. The paranoid inside wanted to blame it in Lisa's self-interest, but Taylor remembered a time when she also hoped anyone at all would lend her a helping hand. The difference was that Lisa was simply far more proactive in seeking help than Taylor remembered being herself. Taylor couldn't really hold it against her.

There was also a feeling in regards to Taylor that she couldn't quite identify. Taylor didn't know what to expect from it, but she'd deal when Lisa decided to.

Dragon was self-explanatory. Their conversation in the plane didn't stop at the older sibling joke — it brought the subject that they barely had any experience in being siblings, spoiled memories with Emma aside. They agreed to, at the very least, be more attentive of how the other was doing at all times, and go from there, learning from whatever stuck to the wall. Dragon opening her heart to someone was intrinsically tied to sharing the truth of her nature as an AI, and she hadn't dared to do it with Taylor until it was almost too late to do so herself. And Taylor herself had failed to see their interactions grow more familiar outside of jobs; long chats while traveling between one place to another, or their banter in the middle of an operation, and had felt she needed to do better to reciprocate Dragon in the future.

In addition, from what Taylor had learned about her directive of always obeying a lawful authority, she imagined Dragon was also basking in interacting with people that had no authority over her, knew her nature, and accepted it. Shady people, perhaps. But people that, until this point, had been honest and accommodating enough. Dragon never had issues approaching people, at least through a screen or a speaker, but now she felt a bit more outgoing and extroverted.

Finally, while Taylor's newfound senses were overwhelmed by Vista's sheer curiosity and giddiness, it was clear she was doing her best efforts to 'inspect' the situation as a professional and make sure nothing was a danger, at least as understood by the PRT. But given that they were dabbling in a world of high level espionage and manipulation, Vista was no more above being out of her element than the rest of the group, Snake and Otacon excepted.
Coming through the tunnel, the two trucks came into what they told them was the hangar building. The blast doors closed behind, and the drivers parked at the far right, near a staircase.

Both trucks occupied less than half the space the hangar provided. Around, both on the lower floor and on the floor above, there were supplies rooms and offices to service whatever vehicles the building was housing. Snake recalled there being two tanks in the middle of their maintenance when he was here the last time, but as with the nuclear weapons, the government had taken them away, so the trucks were currently the only vehicles around. It also wasn't as cold as REX's hangar or the ride on the trucks outside had been; and most of the group felt brave enough to leave their coats open.

On the way from REX's hangar, Drebin had given them the rundown on the state of each building in the island. The forge had been restored to minimal capacity at the beginning to facilitate the rebuilding efforts, and it was now fully restored, after the rebuilding of the communications towers made it a priority.

As the less important facilities, the prison and the armory at the hangar building hadn't been restored yet, while back at the administrative building, both the office and computer floors had been cleaned up. Part of the computer floor had been restored to control all systems, while a small meeting room was currently being added to the office floor.

Drebin had stopped at the administrative building, arguing that he needed to call his 'bosses'. He had declined to mention who his bosses were, mentioning that he himself didn't know except that they had contacted him through his old weapon laundry contacts, and had him restore the island and receive them and HEC, but assuring everyone they could probably expect to be meeting them the next day.

The idea that someone had been paying enough attention to them, possibly with enough time to restore an abandoned facility at the end of the world to receive them at this particular moment, had made everyone uncomfortable and wary of their situation. Code Talker and Buffalo had expressed their skepticism, suspecting Ocelot was behind it all. Drebin didn't refuse the argument, instead choosing to simply smirk in silence before turning around and leaving. Still, there wasn't much they could do at the moment.

Everyone stepped down from the trucks, and stepped a bit away from them. The drivers moved between the trucks and started talking among themselves.

The group saw Tree Frog at a distance, having changed to winter clothes as well, and standing along a couple of technicians. She came closer and stopped in front of the gathered group. "Sir, everyone", Tree Frog greeted them.

"Tree Frog", Code Talker acknowledged her. "What's the word on the cargo?"

"Arrived at the underground dock a bit ago", she said. "They're loading it into the cargo elevator and should be reaching the helipad outside soon."

Tree Frog raised a finger to them and a hand to her ear. "Patch her through." She frowned as she kept listening. "I told you — you are what where now!?"

"All good, Frog?" Buffalo asked.

Tree Frog sighed. "Sorry, gotta deal with this." She then ran back, past the technicians and towards a door, leaving the hangar.

"I made preparations to bring a few things", Code Talker told the rest of the group. "While they
"bring them here", he said as he turned around to face Taylor, "I will tell you about The One That Covers." He looked around the group. "You all know that Taylor is a host for it, so I will share this with all of you. But I must ask to not tell a word to anyone else."

"'One That Covers'. You called it that before", Taylor said. "No, that can wait. You called it a parasite. Why?"

"Because contracting it without due precaution in a safe environment, a process that I first developed when I myself took them into myself that I've come to call parasite therapy, or in circumstances that still elude me, will result in parasitism, and eventual death of the host", he explained. "Only through such a controlled process, the relationship that forms between the parasite and the host is truly symbiotic. That is the only reason I talk of them as parasite, and not a symbiote, though I know it might feel misleading."

"Took them into yourself?" E.E. asked, mouth pursed. "As in… voluntarily?"

Code Talker nodded. "It happened in the Sixties, when my research had hit a dead-end. I was then approached by a foundation with links to ARPA, who assured me they had a sample of an unusual strain of parasite. Well, it would be more appropriate to say that they had the partial remains of an old man, who died in an explosion."

"And you found the parasite in those remains", Otacon said.

"Just so", Code Talker said with a nod. "His flesh not only had not decomposed, but the tissues’ cells were still metabolizing. The parasite, which can only subsist within a human, had assimilated the tissues, keeping them alive. Studying it had become an obsession and a cavalcade of discoveries, of the qualities it shared with a host. Until I realized there was only so much I could learn through observation."

"And then you took them", Taylor started, with a slight grimace, "from that dead flesh."

Lisa coughed aside as E.E. whimpered.

"One would have thought you'd have test subjects in the Sixties for that…" Otacon commented.

"As I said, I became obsessed, and I knew it was a considerable gamble", Code Talker admitted. "That step became the basis of the parasite therapy, but I still did not know if they would adapt to me, or my body to them. Or even if, in the end, after all those years of research, my immune system learned to tolerate them."

"Not exactly a research method a university would approve", Dragon said. "Was that the only time you met this parasite?"

"No, there were other corpses with different specimens, each with added abilities. One that controls other insects at will through the secretion of heterogeneous pheromones, for example. Having proof of achieving successful symbiosis, I wanted exposure to them, but my wishes were denied. I had access to their records, but I never knew what was made of them afterwards."

"The parasite awards increased strength, coordination, faster movement… But not only. I also modified samples from the strain I took from that old man, isolating different abilities from each sample: one could blend perfectly into its surroundings, by exposing the pigments in its cells at will; another capable of manipulating rock, raising it from the soil, using it as a barrier or a second skin, and even levitate chunks to be used as projectiles or traps, and that by harboring multiple species of metallic archaea, can instead manipulate the metal in the soil, in addition of being able to oxidize and
reduce it. Sahelanthropus' capacity to do the same originates from this infusion of archaea in the parasite."

"Brute, Stranger, Breaker, Blaster, Mover… That's a hell of a skill package", Vista said. "I mean, for something that comes from a little bug and isn't a parahuman power." She glanced at Taylor. "Or psychic."

"Pretty sure it's more of an unicellular organism, and not a bug", Lisa muttered. Code Talker nodded at her in agreement.

Taylor scratched the back of her neck. "You know, I still don't know how it works, but your apprehension just hit me hard, Vista." Taylor turned to her. "I think it's apprehension?"

Vista shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry. Still coming to terms that someone is a mind reader."

"It's fine, but I'm trying to be polite, not reading anyone's mind", Taylor said, then scowled at everyone's questioning looks. "I mean, assuming I even could. It's hard to explain, but all I get are impressions of strong emotions around me without even trying to work for it, and I have to… compare them? To how I feel them to identify them. Like, constant background noise walking through the street, not figuring out what each individual noise is because there are so many, and suddenly jumping around because a car crashed behind you, but until you turned around you didn't know if it was that or a piano falling from above; that's assuming that I know what a car or a piano is. And even if I wanted, it's hard to differentiate one emotion from another, and it isn't like I'm getting much at all." She turned to Dragon. "Except you; I'm not getting anything from you. And I've never been able to track your suits, now that I think about it. I always thought it was because you weren't really there, but…"

"Even with the biocomputer? Maybe it's something about how I'm coded to think?" Dragon suggested. "Curious."

"Drebin said his patrons might know someone that could help you with this", Buffalo said. "Maybe they could give you some pointers, but don't worry too much about it until then."

Taylor returned to Code Talker. "So, the parasite. What should I know? I can't say I feel all that different, but I admit the idea makes me nervous."

"I understand", Code Talker said. "Though he refused, I once offered the Ocelot to join me in this communion with The One That Covers. I might be biased in saying that it's a most wonderful life, but I realize it's not a choice to take lightly." He frowned. "Or have it taken from oneself."

"Well, it saved her life", Dragon said, putting an arm around Taylor's shoulders. "I'll give him that much."

He nodded. "It is called The One That Covers, because now your body is covered with it." He cupped a hand upside. "It starts adding itself to the epidermis, and then starts spreading through the skin itself, observing the host's DNA and mimicking it, taking the place of the cells as they die and flake, falling away. This is a fast process." He then turned his hand upside down. "But slows down considerably as it reaches the flesh, reinforcing the muscle and bone underneath, and only substitutes internal organs in case of critical damage, or when directed to it. With your entire skin surface damaged, this first step was accelerated significantly, followed by your spine and liver. It provides redundant functions as well. This was the case for Quiet; after Big Boss set her on fire, and before it restored her lungs, the parasites compensated for her burned epidermis, and provided her blood with oxygen through cutaneous respiration, instead of pulmonary respiration." He grumbled. "They've acted as my eyes for almost as long as I had them, but in your case they won't, not unless…"
"Right, a saving grace is good, but I'm not keen on gouging my eye out when there's still a chance to recover my normal sight", Taylor said looking at the floor. She gave herself a one-armed hug and looked back up. "Should I be worried that I could start looking… I don't know, different? Will it affect my mind?"

Code Talker shook his head. "It latches onto your DNA, copies it, and uses it like a mason uses the plans the architect gave him to build a house. I have never studied a host as young as you, and you are still growing. But if I had to make an educated guess…" He hummed in thought. "The parasite answers to your emotions, but it avoids replacing nerves and brain cells; it can't replicate their functions, and at most, it facilitates the work of the body in healing those tissues. But it might reinforce the foundations of your body, as you grow up, more than it would do for a grown man. Stronger bones, a more efficient circulatory system, more powerful muscles, better balance and senses, heightened activity and production of adrenaline when both the host and the parasite are in grave danger or emotional distress… While not by much in comparison to parahumans, Quiet and the Skulls were capable of fairly superhuman feats, and I've received its help occasionally as well."

"Most parahumans with a Brute rating have their strength settled by their power to a fixed point, creativity and use aside", Dragon commented. She turned to Taylor. "Sounds like exercise is still good for you."

"We were talking about it at the mess hall before, about the escape from Brockton Bay, and the fight at Boston", Otacon said, scratching one of his cheeks. "It gave me the impression this parasite is photosynthetic?"

"You are correct", Code Talker replied. "After you supply them with water, in return they will provide the sugars they produce when exposed to light. In this way, we can subsist indefinitely without further nutrients. In turn, desiccation is a concern. The surface moisture loss of the parasite is greater than ours." He raised a hand, looking at Taylor. "It shouldn't be a problem for you, not yet. But it's something you should keep in mind, as you age and the parasite spreads over your body. Extreme environments shouldn't be much different for you; I am as capable of enduring this cold weather as any other human. But, stay hydrated, and avoid seawater." He raised an eyebrow. "And moderate the salt in your food."

"Figures, we got our own plant girl", Snake said with a grin.

"We'll have to make a comfortable greenhouse in her bedroom", Dragon continued in a singsong tone.

Taylor threw a stink eye in Snake's direction, but her lips betrayed the shadow of a smile. "You're both asses."

Snake snorted. "You need to work on your comebacks."

"Don't worry, Tay", Lisa told her in a mock whisper while patting her hand. "We'll have you talking crap like a champ in no time."

"Oh, shut up, guys", Taylor said with an eye roll, before turning back to Code Talker. "Now that you mention food, I haven't been feeling hungry at any point", Taylor said, "but I could still eat?"

"Of course. I still eat, myself. Despite the fact that most of my flesh has been replaced by the parasite, it kept my digestive system functional as well", he said. "And even if we don't need it anymore, there's more to the act of eating than nourishment. The skill of the cook. The taste of a balanced dish. The small comforts of life. We receive nature's blessings, and reaffirm our part in it. And in doing so, we express our gratitude."
E.E.'s brows rose up. "That's a funny way of expressing yourself, for a scientist-turned-spymaster. Very... mystic."

"Kazuhira was amused by it as well", Code Talker said with a laugh. "And he would have disagreed with you. After rescuing me from Skull Face, the first time he offered to have the kitchen at Mother Base have something done for me, I asked for hamburgers."

The looks of everyone on him were as flat as a sheet of paper. "Wait", Snake said, "hamburgers? Really?"

"More than you know. When he asked, I was... passionate, in my scientific defense of the hamburger as one of Nature's blessing. Maybe I will tell you another time", Code Talker said with amusement. "but Kazuhira kept bringing me hamburgers; turned out he was bringing them not from the kitchen, but from R&D, and using me as a one-man focus group. He never told Ahab or the Ocelot, but when less I expected it, he had already opened his Miller's Maxi-Buns chain with the critiques he had pried from me..."

"The more I know", Snake said with a shake of his head, "the less I understand him..."

Lisa jumped up to her feet, scaring everyone with a scream and pointing a finger at Code Talker. "I knew it!"

The confusion on everyone's faces was quickly ruined, as Lisa couldn't keep the pose and grimaced, clutching at her belly in pain. "Ow, not my smartest move", she said as Snake helped her sit down again.

"You... knew what?" Code Talker asked, honest perplexity in his tone.

"There are no Maxi-Buns in the West Coast, or in Brockton Bay, but I tried them when I ran from home and got to the East Coast", Lisa said, and she turned to Vista. "And they tasted like the hamburgers at the mess hall. Like Fugly Bob's. And both have the Chemi-Burgers!"

Vista blinked once. Twice. And turned to Code Talker. "Fugly Bob's is yours!? Don't tell me you've been spying on capes!"

Code Talker chuckled. "McDonnell's, legally speaking. But yes, both of Fugly Bob's are fronts and way stations for HEC, and the bulk of your dossiers were put together by the managers there, but only after I asked last night. We only opened them so the Heberts had a local contact with us; as I said, HEC has never been interested in parahuman affairs."

"I don't like it, but I admit it's actually pretty sensible", Dragon said. "If you're invested in anyone's life, you'd keep an eye out for any dangers in Brockton Bay, and that means capes and gangs." She turned to Vista. "Considering Shadow Stalker sent her to a hospital in the first place, one could argue they should have paid even more attention to capes. Even ours."

"Alright, all that is pretty interesting", Taylor said, "but last question I have for now. I'm not going to look forever like the gangly stick teenager I am right now, right?"

Vista shoot her a glare. "Really?" she muttered. "Have you seen how ripped you are?"

"I'm..." Taylor shuffled her shoulders awkwardly. "Forget I said anything."

"No. The parasite will probably defer to the body in the task of the growing process", Code Talker said. "You might not look exactly like you would have without it, barring other divergences, but I would say it'll be close enough to not matter."
"Hear that?" Dragon said as she tightened her hug around Taylor's shoulders. "Nothing to worry about, you won't look like a boy forever."

"PFFWHAT", Taylor sputtered, much to the awkward amusement of the other girls. "Seriously, where is that attitude coming from?!"

Dragon raised her chin. "You're the older sibling, remember? As the younger, it's my duty to needle you." Seeing Taylor's raised eyebrow, she sighed. "Come on, Taylor. I know you aren't a fan of your looks, but I'm just trying to cheer you up. I think we all need some of it right now."

Taylor nodded slowly, seeing Lisa trying to hold back her laughing fit, and failing with an apologizing shrug. Brownie points for trying. Dragon wasn't entirely wrong, and it isn't like she just said anything Taylor herself didn't think more than once. At least before the year began.

"Yeah, you're right." She then looked up at her with a mischievous eye. "I'll get back at you though."

"Oh no, I know how good you are at pranks", Dragon said drily, and raised a mocking hand to her chest. "My biocomputer is quivering inside its life support casing!"

"Code Talker, I've been thinking", Snake said, paying no mind to the scene. "You said you started your research on the parasite around the Sixties. You also said the mines around the Navajo Nation were what moved you into your research, that's twenty years more at least." He frowned, folding his arms. "But then you call yourself 'Code Talker'; that's the term that was used for the Navajo they sent to the battlefield in the Second World War, to rely encrypted messages in that language so that the Japanese wouldn't crack them. So you'd be, what, eighteen then? Eighty five or so now? You have a good spring on your step for looking so old. Is that the parasite too?"

"I was already over the conscription age then. And the name is a reminder of more than the use that the Diné was made of long after our exile", Code Talker admitted. "But good eye. Yes, the parasite confers longevity, within reason. From what I could understand, that old man was already over a hundred years old when he died in that explosion." Code Talker smiled. "Would you believe if I said I am over one hundred and thirty?"

"That's a lot of mileage gained, for taking the parasite so old", Snake said.

The blast door opposite to the one they had come in started to open, a small breeze of frozen air coming through and causing everyone to close their coats; but once a truck showed in the entry bay, they could see the exterior door was already closed.

"So, out of curiosity", Vista said. "This parasite seems like a handy one. Healing, living longer, strength… Why just keep it to yourself and Taylor? From what you say, it could do some good around."

"Even after Skull Face used it as a weapon, I would have offered it openly to those I'd think they'd make good hosts, but even leaving aside the commitment one would be doing in accepting the parasite…” Code Talker shook his head, as the truck came into the hangar, parking at the opposite side of theirs, and the blast door closed again. "I made an oath to not let The One That Covers fall in unworthy hands. Would you guarantee to me, in this time and age, that parahumans would not try to get a sample for themselves, once they knew others were hosts as well? Would you allow villains that to become more dangerous because of it?"

Vista rubbed her neck. "No, I guess not."
"I understand your reasoning", Dragon said while two guards and a pair of technicians stepped down from the truck. "But maybe controlled studies, or…?"

"No", Code Talker answered raising a hand, and he started walking to the new truck, followed by the others. "I am its caretaker; this is a decision I have made long ago, and not lightly. I can be persuaded to make an exception in a desperate situation, someone close like Taylor, but I won't budge in this matter, not now."

The technicians unloaded a few crates from the truck as one the guards turned to Code Talker; His winter clothes were of a different kind to those employed by the Dogs and the rest of guards that they had seen on the island; more civilian looking and in a plain gray color. "Sir. Everything is accounted for."

Code Talker nodded at him and the others. "Give us some privacy, please", he asked as the technicians finished unloading the last crate.

The four men nodded and moved away, walking toward the drivers.

"Ahab and Quiet didn't own many things", Code Talker told Taylor as Buffalo crouched and started rummaging with the crates. "But they are yours now."

"Let's start with the big ones", Buffalo said as she opened the two largest crates. Inside of each one, there was a rifle, both with detached sights and laser pointer. She pointed at the smaller one with the blue frame. "The Guilty Butterfly, Renov chambered for 7.75mm tranq darts." Then the bigger one, with the barrel detached. "And the Sinful Butterfly, a Brennan AMR. These were modified for Quiet; bigger recoil and weight in exchange for greater range, precision, and muzzle velocity for the Sinful. She was stronger than most of us, so she could deal. You should too, at least in time. There was also a normal Renov she had from her XOF times, the Wicked Butterfly; the Dogs modified it too, but she had it when she disappeared."

Taylor noticed the engraved butterfly symbols in the stocks of both rifles. "That's a lot of butterflies", Taylor commented as she crouched alongside Buffalo. "Quiet disappeared? What happened?"

"I was wondering that too", Snake said, standing besides Taylor and looking at the rifles. "The way you talked about them, Ahab and Quiet seemed to have a thing going on, but I never met any enhanced sniper back in Outer Heaven."

"After undergoing parasite therapy", Code Talker said, "she wanted revenge against Big Boss, and Skull Face convinced her to have the English strain of the vocal cord parasite implanted in her. In case she ever met him, and an assassination attempt failed. That is how she became 'Quiet'. But after developing feelings for Ahab…" He looked away. "She vowed to never speak English ever again. She told me in Navajo, the only language I made sure the parasite couldn't react to, and left the Dogs shortly after."

"Ahab found her captured by the Soviets, in Afghanistan", Buffalo said, and grimaced. "She was weakened, and a few of the soldiers… No one is sure what happened, but she had gone apeshit on the entire outpost when Ahab got there. From what he said, the scene wasn't pretty. Then they had to fight off an entire Soviet armored division, and when they tried to escape in the middle of a sandstorm, a snake bit Ahab. She had to call Pequod for help…"

"And she left because she just stimulated the parasite", Vista concluded.

"Yup. She didn't want to spread it to Ahab and the Dogs anymore", Buffalo said. "Hell, some of the Dogs had already contracted the Kikongo strain before I joined; everyone in Mother Base learned a
bit of other language out of simple socializing, and it could have been a catastrophe if Ahab hadn't found Code Talker here. But before that, Quiet chased down one of them with a knife because she noticed he was infected. Managed to stick the knife between his teeth and chip one until several Dogs and Ahab took her down. And because she didn't speak, no one realized she was trying to excise the parasite, and not kill him. That was while she was still warming up to them.

"Couldn't she just write a note?" E.E. asked with a grimace.

Buffalo shrugged. "What can I say? I joined XOF around the same time she did; Quiet didn't know me, but she already was a known eccentric back when she still hadn't taken the parasite." She took the blue rifle from its crate with some effort, and showed it to Taylor, who took it. She noted the weight, and started inspecting the weapon. "As for the butterfly thing… it was her nickname, back in XOF, and her old rifle had one scratched on it. The Dogs got the idea from that, and even the rank and file called her 'the butterfly' when there weren't officers around. Something about how she moved between targets in close quarters, and between sniping positions."

"Hmm? No, it's fine", she said. "It's just… snakes from one side, butterflies from the other… Made me think of something."

"Nothing bad, I hope?" Buffalo asked.

Taylor shook her head. "No, it's…" She sighed. "Mom. She called me 'little owl'."

Buffalo gave her a contrite look. "Sorry, kid. Wasn't my intention…"

"It's fine", Taylor said, brushing Buffalo's concern aside. "I miss her, but… it happened."

Buffalo nodded. "A'ight:"

"Well, if you go back to capeing or whatever, at least you aren't limited to repeating the Snake or Butterfly names", Lisa offered. "Something that can be only yours." She hummed. "Little Owl… I kinda like it."

Taylor smiled faintly at her, then looked up in front of her to nothing in particular. "Yeah, I do too…"

Otacon frowned in thought. "Code Talker, wouldn't the One That Covers have protected or healed Quiet from any damage? She might have survived then."

Code Talker hummed. "That is… hard to say. If any test was ever made, only Skull Face would know. It is true that her lungs were by then taken by the One That Covers, but that might have exposed it to the vocal cord parasite just as well. If she survived, it would have been in agony and solitude. But without further notice from Quiet, I'll keep assuming she died."

Taylor noticed Snake behind her, studying the rifle in her hands, and passed it to him. He crouched as he took it, resting the butt on the floor. "The Renov was a derivation of the Vz. 54, right?" He pulled back the bolt, then returned it to its position. "Smooth", he said clinically, and returned it to Buffalo. "But aiming and shooting with that much added weight…"

Buffalo laughed as she put the rifle back in the crate. "Not a problem for her. She once shot her run off the mill rifle at an XOF fighter jet that was diving straight for their helicopter." She put a finger between her eyes for a second. "She put it right between the pilot's eyes before he was in range to
gun them down. Another time, Ocelot had her shoot his revolver between the moving blades of Pequod's chopper, just to make a point to Miller."

"Adding a Thinker rating to the parasite", Vista muttered.

"Actually, we were never sure if that was just her instead of the parasite?" Buffalo turned and asked to Code Talker.

"The parasite grants increased senses", he admitted. "But to such degree, it would be only aiding Quiet's own skills."

"Anyway." Buffalo pointed to the bigger rifle. "Not bothering taking this one out, weighs a ton. Anti-materiel rifle. A normal Brennan is already strong enough without modifications to make swiss cheese of modern battle tanks; it's what I used to kick Saint's butt. This puppy? Not a toy. Don't point it at anyone or anything you don't want blowing up in pieces, not unless they're some kind of parahuman who can take it."

Taylor felt a shiver down her spine. "Yeah, I'm not sure I wish that on anyone." 

"Good. If for any reason you ever have it with you, and I'm not saying you should: rule of thumb", Buffalo remarked, "unless it's your life on the line, just don't point it at anyone unless you're sure they're tough enough that you're just wounding them. The R&D guys wouldn't give something the moniker 'Sinful' for nothing."

"Yikes, why would you even want something like this?" Vista asked.

"Quiet preferred her Renov. But there were plenty of armored vehicles back then, and Ahab worked on foot or riding his horse. It was a good precaution." Buffalo closed both rifle crates, and stood up, moving the the back of the truck, where a small plastic container waited there. "Just to be clear, I'm not saying you should use them, Taylor. It's just that they're yours now."

Vista tilted up an eyebrow to Taylor. "So you know horse riding too?"

Taylor didn't quite laugh, but she found it funny enough to quick up a corner of her mouth. "Not that I can say. I can't know whatever skills they gave me until I need to use them. I think."

"We can arrange something to..." Everyone was following Buffalo, and she interrupted herself when they heard a muted buzzing outside the building, ending in a small thud.

Buffalo turned around and shared a look with Code Talker. "You don't think she...?"

He sighed and shook his head. "If she called Tree Frog, we would be safe assuming she did, indeed."

"Is there a problem?" Otacon asked.

"Nothing to be overly worried. You'll see soon enough." Code Talker walked up to the truck, left his cane leaning against it, and pushed the container closer to Taylor so she could reach to grab it. "Inside, you'll find all that's left of Ahab's earthly possessions. It's not much, and old, but it is yours now. There's also two recorded messages, one from Kazuhira, and another from your parents."

"From...?" Taylor whispered as she put her hand over the box.

"You had not been born yet", Code Talker said. "I don't know what they contain, except that they recorded them in case you became aware of your origins. You don't need to listen to them in public."
Taylor nodded slowly, and as Dragon put a hand over her shoulder, she opened the box.

The first thing she saw, if only because of the anachronism, was an old cassette player in a faded silver. The blocky device displayed 'Recording WALKMAN' proudly on the front. At its side there were two cassettes casings. Taking them out, she looked over the first one. It had a white label with green markings. "Quiet's message?"

Code Talker hummed in thought. "She must have left it for Ahab when she left. No one else has listened to it. Except perhaps Kazuhira."

"I'm guessing there never was much thought put into Taylor when you gathered his belongings?" Buffalo said.

He shook his head. "Kazuhira did it before Project Athalia was even an idea. I never touched this box or its contents."

Taylor looked over the other cassette. The label on one side read 'Miller to Athalia'. Obviously, that must have been herself.

Turning around the cassette, the label read 'Heberts to Athalia'.

Letting out a breath, she put everything at one side of the box. "Maybe later."

Dragon peered over the box and took a device from it. "What's this?" It was like a gray thin walkie-talkie, with an orange grip, and several buttons on its side. Up front was what looked like a lens, with holes marked as 'mic' below.

"Ohh", Buffalo gushed. "Miller kept Ahab's iDroid!" She extended a hand, and Dragon gave her the device. "It was the last invention by MSF, before XOF took them down, but the Dogs kept using it", Buffalo said as she inspected the 'iDroid'. "Battery is probably dead though."

"So, what does it do?" E.E. asked.

"Well, our comms were designed to be used alongside one of these, and it allowed communication by satellite, if it was available, but it was used for anything you programmed the operating system for." Buffalo left the iDroid next to the cassettes, and took out a different iDroid from a pocket, laid it face up in her hand. The lens lighted up with a buzzing, and projected a faint blue light, flat objects hovering over it.

"A holographic interface", Otacon stated aghast.

"Yep. Most of the Dogs used it for a satellite-based map, though Ahab's model had a suite of tool to manage Mother Base when he was out", she said as she flicked a stick on the device and the interface changed to show an aerial view of Boston. With some fiddling of the controls, the map rotated, zoomed in and out, and a mark was made in a random spot of the map, which prompted the device to vocalize a 'checkpoint A added' with a stiff Atlantic accent. "It had some limited capacity to communicate with satellites; you could request artillery or aerial support anywhere you pointed at in the map, and scan documents that then you could send to Mother Base. And if you were anywhere close to any equipment for satellite communication, the Intel team could send you all they had for your current assignment. Visuals, reports, audio summaries..." Another flick and it was now showing photos of a big cottage and a stock photo of the Dragonslayers in armor during one of their mercenary jobs.

"Made in the Seventies", Lisa muttered. "They made military purpose, satellite, holographic GPS guiding spy smartphones in the Seventies."
"Would have appreciated one of those in FOXHOUND", Snake grumbled, "Instead of just the radio rig."

"Indeed, such a piece of technology… why didn't you market it?" Dragon asked incredulous. "I know some Tinkers produce their own holographic tech — hell, I do. But a mass producible one that it's already packaged and ready for the military? I'm sure you would have gotten a contract before you explained the details. Even better, just change a few things and you would have pioneered the civilian cell phone industry."

"Kazuhira… was a paranoid man", Code Talker said. "His R&D teams were the most motivated researchers and engineers I've ever met. And while McDonnell's started from anything that could have a purely civilian use, he didn't trust the Patriots ever gaining access that way to most of what they developed or confiscated from XOF. Advances in personal weapon and armor, medicine, vehicular magnetic levitation, non-standard artillery, the iDroid itself." He scowled. "Wormhole technology."

Everyone was stunned at the last mention, but the two more scientifically inclined people muttered swears of incredulity.

"Wormholes?" Otacon said. "As in, open a hole to a different place?"

"The same", Buffalo said. "You planted the device somewhere or on something or someone, an entry hole opens up in the air, and an exit in a set place; back then, it was the floor of a repurposed cargo bay back in Mother Base. The entry hole sucks whatever and whoever is near it, but the cargo bay had a crane to help with that. We really didn't use it much, though. Word was that it was expensive; capital E expensive."

Otacon blinked once. Then twice. "How… How did they even got to do that!?" he exclaimed.

"Are you all familiar with the Fulton device?" Code Talker asked.

"Those are the balloons Taylor and Dragon used to take people from the field, right?", Vista said.

"It was developed by the CIA for recovery and rescue", Snake said, and turned to Dragon. "Would have imagined you would be using something less… mundane."

Dragon shrugged. "Another of Armsmaster's suggestions for Taylor's equipment. It was simple enough to adapt my drones and ships for its use."

"As Kazuhira told me", Code Talker started, "a now deceased R&D team leader got the idea. The Dogs used the Fulton extensively, and he was in charge of advancing its development. He was single-handedly responsible of developing a Fulton balloon capable of retrieving heavy weights like cargo containers or battle tanks. But there was only so much the conventional retrieval system could do. Then, the Dogs captured a rare jackal specimen in Africa, one that they called 'Anubis'."

"The Egyptian god of the underworld, protector of the dead… and the passing to the afterlife", Snake said, chin propped over a hand. "I'm starting to see the connection."

"So what, the Dogs developed wormhole technology because one researcher was too impatient to wait to retrieve normal balloons?" Dragon snorted. "As far as reasons go…"

"I see why anyone would fear this being misused, though", Lisa said. "All the things the Undersiders could have done with it… and I can tell you right here and right now that you don't want it in Coil's hands."
"Still, I'm still hung up on the idea that someone developed honest to god wormhole technology capable of allowing physical travel through it", Dragon insisted, "even before Haywire opened the breach between our Earth and Aleph's alternate dimension."

"Never thought Master Miller would be sitting on this kind of technology", Snake said. "Where did he keep it though?"

"Kazuhira built a series of secure vaults around America, under the care of HEC. They hold copies of all research and all that survived the dissolution of the Diamond Dogs. Including the parasite, and Volgin's body. Sadly, I am afraid someone had access to the research", Code Talker lamented. "Barely months after Kazuhira died, someone infiltrated one of the vaults and destroyed it."

"So out there, there is someone who can open a portal from one side of the world to another", Vista said.

"It is possible", he said, "though there has been no reported use of the technology anywhere. It produces a very distinctive hole that gives out an intense orange light. It is not subtle, by any means."

"Wait, Dragon mentioned Professor Haywire and the breach he made to Earth Aleph", E.E. interrupted. "Is there any chance this wormhole technology is capable of dimensional travel too? That it could be used for something in that vein? You wouldn't be noticing its use because they aren't using it in this reality, not anymore."

"I admit, this is far beyond my speciality", Code Talker said, but he then raised an eyebrow. "It is a possibility that might have been raised during the investigation of the infiltration. Though if it did, I don't remember. I'd have to ask one of the members in that research team about that; fortunately, I asked a few men that were part of the R&D department back then to help with our current issues, so one of them might have an idea."

"What are these?" Taylor asked as she went through a small photo album. Inside, there were old photos depicting different situations. Soldiers and civilians partying, sunbathing, fishing, feeding a cat… and in all of them… "There's this blonde girl in a student dress showing up in all of these." It was a stick thin girl, just like Taylor was before, with short curly hair and a cute face and demeanor. It reminded Taylor of Madison Clemens, in a way.

Buffalo and Code Talker exchanged a look. "Let me see", he said. Taylor complied, and he looked at the photos. Buffalo did the same at his side.

"Those are MSF fatigues", she said. "Remember the wandering soldiers? Didn't they say they were carrying photos from back then when they found them? Maybe these photos are these."

"Who?" Taylor asked.

"Some survivors from the '75 attack. The Dogs found them later wandering around, still shell-shocked." Buffalo grimaced. "They never told what happened to them in detail, but they weren't… exactly in a healthy state, or very sane for that matter. Besides one called Mosquito, who started his own PMC, but the rest needed medical attention for the rest of their lives."

"I believe", Code Talker started as he returned the album to Taylor, who left it along the other items outside the box, "that this lady was Paz Ortega Andrade, also known as Pacifica Ocean. An agent of Cipher who infiltrated MSF to steer Big Boss during the Peace Walker incident, and later tried to steal Zeke. Kazuhira never told me much about her, so I am not sure the meaning of leaving these photos in the box. Other that they are from the time of MSF."
Taylor scowled to herself. This Paz was even a bigger piece of work than Madison, who limited herself to stupid pranks and stealing her homework.

The blast door opened up again, and Tree Frog strode inside covered in snow, patting it off herself as she was followed by another truck. This one had a big metallic cylinder loaded in its back, red thin lights circling around the top and the bottom, with a big lens just above the middle.

The truck moved up to park nearby as Tree Frog approached them. "I'm sorry, we just got an… ahem." She waved her hand at the cylinder. "Unexpected guest."

Suddenly, the lens started flickering in a red light, and a disembodied female voice, slow and low pitched, sounded off from the cylinder. "I apologize for the distress, Tree Frog. I was only told you were on a mission. Given your age and how long you've been inactive, I was worried for your safety."

Everyone except Buffalo and Code Talker took a step back surprised. "Ouch. The big AI lacking dexterity coming to your rescue", Buffalo said. "Low blow to your pride, woman."

Tree Frog frowned. "Really? You, talking about age and inactivity to me, of all things?"

E.E. gasped in fascination. "Is this…?"

Code Talker nodded, more in frustration than acknowledge. "Yes, this is the Mammal Pod, Imago." He turned around to face it. "I wonder though, if you are conscious of the unwanted attention your journey here might have garnered."

The lens flickered again, throwing a flash of light over Code Talker. "Greetings, Code Talker. Unlikely. I was connected to the supercomputer at HEC, and calculated the necessary precautions to avoid being detected by most overwatch routines."

Frog narrowed her eyes. "Most?" she said drily.

Imago was silent for a moment until the lens flickered once again. "Admittedly, parahuman abilities are hard to evaluate."

Taylor noted a weird change in Lisa's emotions, and gave her a look. She was glaring at the pod, knuckles white from gripping the armrests of her wheelchair. She was still getting used to the emotion reading, but Taylor got the impression that it wasn't quite fear. It was something closer to confusion.

I didn't last long. Lisa composed herself, even if her confusion remained. Taylor left her be. If Lisa wanted or needed to share what had spooked her, she'd do it in time.

"Wait, don't tell me that sound outside before", Snake interrupted, "that was Imago coming here on her own?"

"She's equipped with a rocket and navigation system", Tree Frog explained. "It was part of the original pod design, something to escape when the vehicle a pod was attached to was destroyed. It was how the Dogs recovered her; she just flew up to Mother Base on her own. From Afghanistan to the Seychelles, no refueling needed."

Otacon took a step forward, eyes fixed on Imago, and followed by E.E. and Dragon. "Is she… how much is she aware? Sentient?"

"Sentient enough to pass the Turing test", Tree Frog said. "The original design was… well, what
you'd expect from computer technology in the Seventies. Lots of big chip and processor modules forming a compact supercomputer inside a refrigerated container with armor rated against nukes. The main ones, those that keep her memories and personality, were fixed to the core. Part of the reason Strangelove created Imago was to revive The Boss and clear her name; she didn't pull any punches on recreating the full personality and making sure it was preserved. At all effects, you're talking to The Boss' ghost. A ghost in the machine, if you will."

Lisa started to massage her temples as Taylor heard her breath out a whisper. "Oh, fuck me."

Taylor put a hand on Lisa's shoulder as Tree Frog kept talking. "Hey, are you fine? Tired?, she whispered to her.

Taylor almost didn't caught Lisa's surprised reaction before she hid it behind a reassuring smile and a shake of her head. "Yeah. Yeah, just the migraine. Don't worry, I'll be fine once I get in a bed."

Taylor nodded and pulled back her hand. She wasn't completely convinced that Lisa's reactions wasn't caused by Imago, whatever the reason might be, but no one else seemed to notice that. Taylor bumped up the subject of talking to her in her priority list, if only to make sure it wasn't anything serious.

"Then there were a bunch of secondary modules that controlled her cognitive capacities. You start taking them out, and she starts going loopy." Tree Frog looked up to the pod, and sighed. "She still was a bit off when she came to us, likes to quote dead people at the drop of a hat for example. Made a hobby of updating her hardware after the turn of the century, though adapting her to the new computing architecture was a pain in the arse, and I'm still hunting for bugs and glitches…"

Another flash of light went over Otacon. "Are you…" Imago started, but she changed to a different voice, high pitched and shouting in distress. "Huey! Damn it Huey!"

"Yeah, like that." Tree Frog grimaced. "That's Strangelove."

Otacon was taken aback. "What? No! My name is Hal!"

Another flash of light. "… Hal?" Imago said in her own voice. "I… remember a Hal. Her Hal."

Then it changed to the second voice again, this time sorrowful and exhausted. "Oh Hal…"

Tree Frog jumped on the truck, and patted Imago strong enough to produce noise, but not in a ungentle way. "Hey, that's enough for now. Let's keep that for another moment."

"I apologize", Imago said promptly in her own voice. Her lens flickered again, as if thinking on how to follow her response, but she kept silent.

Tree Frog turned around to Otacon. "I'm sorry, this wasn't supposed to happen. And the recording she was playing… that's a matter better tackled in private."

Otacon nodded slightly. "Right… in private."

As the closer person behind Otacon, Imago's lens flashed over E.E. and immediately after over Dragon. "Curious. I see you're employing armor. But your anatomy can't be human. Not quite."

"I'm… actually, I'm not", Dragon admitted. "I'm an AI, too. This is just the body I'm occupying."

"Is that so?" Imago said. "Interesting. I knew of other AIs that Strangelove made. But they weren't really functionally sapient. Are you?"
"Well, I think so!" Dragon breathed out a small laugh. "Sorry, I'm Dragon. I just… I never thought there would be another; capable of socializing, I mean. This is something new for me."

Imago hummed. "Pleased to meet you, Dragon. Don't worry, I'm sure we'll have plenty to talk about in time."

Tree Frog chuckled. "Careful. When I said Strangelove didn't pull her punches in recreating the Boss, I mean it. Imago is full of stories and opinions, and not all of them of public knowledge." Her lips went flat. "And very few of them are happy, for that matter."

The next flash of light passed over Snake and Taylor. "Wait… Jack?" Then twice over them, and a third time as well. "No… None of you are Jack."

"Now I look like a Jack…" Taylor groused.

Snake ignored that. "Jack? You mean… Big Boss?"


Despite the gut punch that felt being compared to Ahab, Taylor blinked, suddenly realizing what Imago meant. "You can see the similarities? Even this long after you met Big Boss and Ahab?"

"I was designed for strategic and tactical control of nuclear warfare", Imago said. "As such, my creator deemed it was needed of me to be highly cognizant of information provided to me. This includes anything that could be compared to my memories." A pause, followed by a flash of light over the small box. "Like… that."

Taylor looked at the box, intrigued, and took out the last item from inside: a old strap of blue cloth, similar to Snake's bandana. "This?"

"I haven't seen it in so long", Imago said, nostalgic. "It was my bandana."

"I don't understand", Snake said. "I thought these were Ahab's possessions. Why would he have it?"

"To serve my country, I committed treason", Imago explained. "Jack was sent to kill me, and kept the bandana with him. A way to hold on to the memory of his beloved mentor."

Snake and Taylor exchanged a look. He picked the bandana from her and gave it a look. "But this kind of memento… you don't lose it. You throw it away."

"And he did", Code talker said. "Kazuhira saw Big Boss throw it into Lake Nicaragua, when Imago drove Peace Walker into it. Strangelove boasted that Imago's actions would completely reflect the real Boss, and he apparently understood that Imago drowning Peace Walker meant that the Boss accepting her death at his hand a decade earlier was herself forsaking who she was, a soldier; and him, by implication."

Snake closed a fist tightly around the bandana. "Are you really telling me that Big Boss, all he did… was because of a tantrum? A feeling of dejection?"

"No. Only the direction of his acts." Code Talker leaned his head to a side slightly. "The Patriots were divided in two halves; the history of the world until the turn of the century was dictated by both of them. One being Cipher, led by Zero, and the other being Big Boss, followed by the Ocelot and a woman called EVA. Both groups collaborated and came to the other side's aide, when externally
threatened, but were still opposed as each other had a different interpretation of The Boss' will, an interpretation that they had as their ultimate goal."

"And what was The Boss' will?" Taylor asked. She was almost dreading to know what terrible reason could have caused such a long conflict, one that directed world history until recently.

The reason that Snake and herself had been born.

Before Code Talker could answer, a new voice came from Imago. A man, with a similar voice to Snake, though younger. "Boss, why are you doing this?"

"Why?" Imago said in her own voice, patient and understanding as Taylor had barely heard anyone ever speak like. "To make the world one again."
Chapter Notes

There are two quotes from the games. The idea is that the cast listen and then react to them. If you already remember the quotes, you can ignore them and jump straight to the following text. Sadly, while I don't want to inflate the wordcount artificially, I am unaware of how to avoid that.

[Intego Database. CIA archives, recording. Tselinoyarsk, 1964. Operation Snake Eater, The Boss' will]

Why? To make the world one again. The world used to be whole. But with the end of the Second World War, the Philosophers began to fight amongst themselves and the world was torn apart. The Cobras, my comrades who trained and fought alongside me, were torn apart as well. The foibles of politics and the march of time can turn friends into enemies just as easily as the wind changes. Ridiculous, isn't it? Yesterday's ally becomes today's opposition. And this Cold War?

Think back… When I was leading the Cobras, America and Russia were fighting together. Now consider whether America and Russia will still be enemies in the 21st century. Somehow, I doubt it. Enemies change along with the times, the flow of the ages. And we soldiers are forced to play along.

I didn't raise you and shape you into the man you are today just so we could face each other in battle. A soldier's skills aren't meant to be used to hurt friends. So then what is an enemy? Is there such thing as an absolute timeless enemy? There is no such thing and never has been. And the reason is that our enemies are human beings like us. They can only be our enemies in relative terms.

The world must be made whole again. The Philosophers must be reunited. I will devote my skills to that purpose. And with the Colonel's money, I will achieve that end. Just as I once created the Cobras. They are my family. I may no longer be able to bear children but I still have a family.

It was November 1st, 1951. I was in the Nevada desert participating in atomic testing. The name "Nevada" is derived from Spanish… "covered in snow". "White as snow". And snow is exactly what I saw in the Nevada desert. It froze my blood white. Snake, you were an atomic test subject, weren't you? On Bikini Atoll. That's part of the reason I was drawn to you. You and I are alike. We're both slowly being eaten away by the karma of others. We'll never have the chance to die peacefully of old age. We have no tomorrow. But we can still have hope for the future.

In 1960 I saw a vision of the ideal future from space. Three years earlier the Soviet Union had succeeded in launching Sputnik, the first manmade satellite in history, into orbit. This came as a huge shock to the United States. In response, America threw everything it had into its own manned space flight project, the Mercury program. Even as the Soviets seemed poised to send their first man into space, America was still experimenting with chimpanzees in rockets. The government wanted human data. So
they secretly decided to send a human being into space. I was the one they chose. At the time they didn't have the technology to block out cosmic rays and whoever they sent up would inevitably be exposed to heavy radiation. That's why they chose me. After all, I had already been irradiated once. Of course, you won't find any of this in the history books.

I could see the planet as it appeared from space. That's when it finally hit me. Space exploration is nothing but another game in the power struggle between the US and USSR. Politics, economics, the arms race — they're all just arenas for meaningless competition. I'm sure you can see that. But the Earth itself has no boundaries. No East, no West, no Cold War. And the irony of it is, the United States and the Soviet Union are spending billions on their space programs and the missile race only to arrive at the same conclusion.

In the 21st century everyone will be able to see that we are all just inhabitants of a little celestial body called Earth. A world without communism and capitalism... that is the world I wanted to see.

But reality continued to betray me.

Seated at a table in the mess hall, Diamond snoozing at her feet, Taylor rolled the bandana around her fingers deep in thought, arm resting over the old box.

In front of her, Lisa was leaning forward on the table, eyes closed and her head resting on one hand, propped on the table. Not sleeping, but the intensity of the lights could only be reduced so much.

"This is too heavy", Lisa said tiredly. Taylor had to agree.

It could have been anything at all. It could have been greed. Racism. A power trip. Those things Taylor could understand. She had grown in a city full of it. Then again, the Second World War, the Cold War, the space race... all that felt like myths for her generation.

After sending Imago to be installed at the computer lab, Code Talker had given them the abridged notes as he himself learned from the AI, Miller and Big Boss, and then some more.

The Boss. The Cobras. The Philosophers' Legacy...

A child of a member to the Philosophers, a secret multinational group of American, Russian and Chinese businessmen who gathered a fortune to fuel the Allied efforts in the war against the Axis.

An orphan, who lost her father to the machinations of his companions, too involved in internal scuffles to notice their joined fortune being stolen by their accountant.

A young woman, who became a soldier so skilled and charismatic, that the special forces of other countries invited her to train and work with them.

A leader, followed by the soldiers of other countries to victory during the Second World War.

A hero, not as capes understood, but in achievements and character.

A mother, of choice by the heroes that followed her as the Cobras, of blood to a child that was taken from her at birth, and of legacy to a student that went on to surpass her.

A lover, to a man she was ordered to kill, and gave himself out of devotion to her.
A traitor, only because the government she fought for used her to steal the Philosophers' Legacy from a madman who nuked his countrymen with weapons she gave him as proof of her defection.

Someone loyal to her country, until the bitter end.

It hadn't been what she expected. She thought that, behind everything, there would be someone who while not directly responsible of her loss, someone she could hold in contempt.

But it was only an old tired woman hoping for a better world. Even if it happened after she died.

And then… Operation Snake Eater. Big Boss. The Patriots.

Her wish being understood in many, different, contradictory ways.

Cipher, and the group that took over them.

Les Enfants Terribles and Ahab. Snake and herself.

Parahumans. Endbringers. The world going down the crapper, and with it her wish.

Even with the genetic and mental grooming, her entire life felt insignificant in comparison.

Taylor gave out a long sigh. "Saying it's heavy feels like selling it a bit short." She looked at Lisa. "I can't even start to guess what Snake's thinking about. He had a strange reaction when Code Talker mentioned who the Patriots were."

Lisa half laughed. "No wonder. You heard his story. Half of them were people that he knew had affected his life one way or another."

On one side, Big Boss followed by Ocelot and a woman called Eva. The soldiers and spies of the group.

On the other, the brains, led by Major Zero, a man so obsessed with information control that he had become virtually impossible to track.

With him, Para-Medic, or Dr. Clark, the woman responsible for the Les Enfants Terribles, and who had experimented on Snake's friend in FOXHOUND. And Sigint, also known as Donald Anderson. The DARPA chief that Snake had seen dead six years ago in this very same island.

As much as she had suffered and been changed physically and mentally, Taylor had only been used by one of these six people for only half a year. Snake had been manipulated for his entire life by all of them. Except maybe Eva, and even that was an unknown.

That he had turned out to be as… heroic as he seemed to be was nothing short of admirable. Taylor wasn't sure she would have been able to do the same in his shoes.

"Slowly being eaten away by the karma of others", Taylor started muttering. "We'll never have the chance to die peacefully of old age. We have no tomorrow. But we can still have hope for the future."

"Hmm? What's that?" Lisa asked.

"From The Boss' recording", Taylor said. "Thinking about how we've been influenced made me remember that; guess it stuck with me." She drummed the table with her fingers. "We have no tomorrow. But we can still have hope for the future. I can't imagine going the lengths she did out of loyalty, but I can respect her."
"It is a nice sentiment", Lisa said. "If a grim one."

Taylor hummed in agreement.

"By the way, I wanted to ask you", Taylor said. "Back there with Imago, you started acting out…"

Lisa pulled a face, that Taylor then knew came from surprise. "No, that's… her voice. It reminded me of someone."

Taylor cocked her head to one side. "Must have been quite someone. Seriously, I thought you just saw a ghost."

Lisa shook her head. "It's fine, really. Not worth worrying about."

Not wanting to pressure her too much, Taylor let it go, defeated. "Ok."

"Anyway", Lisa said, "I bet you have a lot to think about right now…"

"Yeah", Taylor said. "I'm trying to deal with things on by one, but…" Taylor turned to her, realizing Lisa hadn't finished talking.

"But all that we've learned aside." Lisa breathed in intensely through the nose, and opened her eyes. "We need to talk."

Taylor nodded. "Alright."

"It's fine now?"

"Is it fine for you? You looked tired before."

"I'm fine", Lisa deflected with a raised hand. "I can keep up for a bit more, I just want to deal with this."

"Ok. What about?"

Lisa straightened her head on her hand, only to rest it on its side, palm pressing against her cheek. "What are we going to do? I mean, you and me. What plans do we have, for ourselves, together, whatever."

Taylor looked down at the box, and knocked on it lazily with her bandana wrapped knuckles. "Myself… I don't know. Not now, at least." She breathed out. "I'm now legally independent… And I have no idea what to do." Taylor turned to Lisa. "You?"

"Assuming we go our separate ways", Lisa said, "and no one looks out for me… No, I don't know either." She raised her free hand, looking at it. "Even if I can avoid getting pushed into another gang or the Wards, I still have to deal with Bonesaw's 'gifts'. I don't know what she did, but all Tinkertech needs to be maintained, preferably by the original Tinker. And I'm not keen on asking the Nine politely for a checkup."

"I'm sure Dragon would be glad to check on you, but without her resources…"

Lisa sighed. "And frankly, anything outside our little surprise group is a massive problem for me."

"And that's where the part about 'have a plan together' comes in", Taylor said.

Lisa shrugged. "Look out for each other. That's what you said. But we don't know each other, not
Taylor raised her hand to rub her forehead. "I might have jumped the gun with that, have I?"

Lisa looked back at her, resting her hand on the table. "Taylor, no. I do appreciate that." She leaned forward. "I want that, a friend I can trust unconditionally. That's something I've always missed. But we need to learn about each other and I don't want us to have any false expectations."

Taylor frowned. "Beyond being a forced villain? What do you mean?"

"Do you believe that?" Lisa asked. "I'm trying to make a point, just answer. Do you really believe that I told you the truth about me? No proof, just my word and the circumstances around us."

"I… I'm not sure how to explain it", Taylor said. "But I felt you were being sincere."

"You felt I was being sincere? That's…" Lisa rubbed her face between the eyes. "That sounds more than just feeling emotions."

Taylor shrugged. "Maybe it was just a hunch, or, I don't know, after all the shit these days I only wanted to believe that you, or anyone, was legit."

Lisa lowered her hand with a soft smile. "So wistful thinking aside, you decided to trust me based on a half understood skill?" Before Taylor could answer, Lisa waved a hand to interrupt her. "I'm glad you did. But leaving aside a discussion whether sincerity is an emotion or not. Potentially, you'll be eventually able to read thoughts. Between that, and with my power coming back in a day or two…"

"You think there won't be any secrets between us."

Lisa shook her head. "I need info to start with. Better if I'm present in person, and I still can get wrong data, or my power might start going into useless tangents. And I can be fooled. I can make a guess about what you think, a good guess. But real telepathy, reading minds? You'll be going straight to the source, no intermediate steps, other than understanding what you read correctly." Lisa scoffed. "I'm wouldn't be surprised if psychics decided to be beyond discrete with their own existence because of that. Forget the Simurgh, that's an insane breach of privacy making them targets."

"So what you are saying is that you won't be able to keep a secret from me." Taylor scowled.

"Taylor, you yourself said you somehow knew that a man who only laughed at you had planted bombs, without you seeing them or him telling you. And you were right! That's beyond feeling an emotion, at least not like Gallant", Lisa insisted.

Taylor raised an eyebrow. "Wait, Gallant reads emotions?"

"Or something in that sense, and those blasts of his change your emotional state, Master effect. They didn't tell you that story about him being a Tinker was just a cover?" Lisa asked. "Doesn't matter. Anyway, you started tracking people in your mind half a year ago. And in the span of a night, you became able to feel emotions and pick thoughts or memories or whatever of those nearby. Parahumans don't do that, our powers don't grow or receive new and somewhat different abilities, unless they're an exceptional case like a high-level Trump. Or we get a boost, like, we're on a ball, and suddenly our powers works better for a moment. But Code Talker, Buffalo and Snake have some experience with psychics, and they seem pretty open to the possibility of your power growing. It might not happen now, but I'm not going to think it won't happen."

"Fine, let's assume it happens, that I develop telepathy. Where do you want to go with this? I mean,
how do we do this?"

Lisa brought her hand back to the side of her face, pressing it against her cheek. "I dunno. Hadn't figure out that yet."

"At this point everyone seems to know more than I do about myself. I don't know what to tell you." Taylor straightened in her seat. "Besides, you should be resting…"

"It doesn't have to be now", Lisa cut her. "It's just…" She let out a shaky breath. "I thought it'd be better to do this, while I'm still Lisa. Just Lisa, no powers."

Taylor blinked, confused. "You make it sound like a confession."

Lisa looked aside, and started biting a thumb nail. "I told you I've been a bitch."

Taylor didn't reply for a moment. "Been, past tense?"

"I've been told I'm unbearable. Manipulative", Lisa said with a half laugh. She then sighed, and remained silent for a moment. Whatever she wanted to say out loud was putting up a good resistance. "I'm… I didn't realize, long after I got my power. What I did with Panacea aside, I actually enjoyed getting one up on people just by talking and figuring things out. It made me feel…"

Taylor thought back to the scraps of news reports and conversations with Armsmaster and Dragon about the Undersiders' actions, and how Tattletale acted during their jobs, which wasn't much. "Above them?" Taylor offered, but Lisa waved her hand in a so-so gesture. "Smarter?"

"At first, yeah. Being born into an obscenely rich family means nothing when the most attention you might get is being called an idiot…" Lisa shrugged. "Getting a power like this… Now that's a power trip. Suddenly, I was able to throw people's shit back in their faces. Until the bank. After, actually."

"You escaped", Taylor said. "I mean, I'm not going to say what you did was great, but you got away. You were in the clear."

"I was angry", Lisa grounded. "Sure, you got support from Armsmaster and Dragon, but otherwise you work alone; you only rely on yourself and Diamond. The Undersiders are a team, and I'm the squishy one. Imagine how it'd felt being left alone in that situation, surrounded and without options."

"Yeah, not good", Taylor conceded. "So, something happened?"

Lisa leaned back, looking up to the ceiling. "I barged into our hideout, made a beeline to Grue, pulled out my pistol, and shot at the table he was sitting at."

Taylor blinked. "That would make a statement alright. Grue's the leader, I think?"

"In the field. Until then, I was the one calling the shots. Thing is, we started shouting at each other. Well, mostly me. And thinking back, his decision to pull back without me made sense." She paused, rubbing her hand behind an ear for a moment, and then lowering the hand to her lap. "And I said something I shouldn't have. I already had a reputation as a know-it-all among them… but that's the moment I crossed a line. He never trusted me anymore. Then… when I tried to figure a way to escape from Coil, he disposed of me, and Harbinger found me." A lone tear ran down from her left eye. "Being a smartass didn't do me any favors then. Not with Grue, not with Coil, not with Harbinger." She turned her eyes on Taylor. "And not with you, back in Boston. I still am the scared dumb kid I was when I started."

Taylor kept silent, and nodded. "And now?"
"I don't want that. I don't want to be Tattletale anymore. Words and information are the only weapons I've really had to defend myself with; and that's fine, the pen is mightier than the blade and all that. But I hate being this weak, and I don't want to be the bitch." Lisa looked down at the floor. "I know that's part of who I am, and I enjoyed it, but now? I don't want to be defined by it. Not anymore."

That's when it finally hit Taylor. The Tattletale, the Lisa the public knew was confident, daring. The one she had known since Boston was appropriately shaken. But all this babbling and self-doubting…

This was the Lisa that felt just as lost as Taylor did.

"So when I told everyone about the bullying…"

Lisa looked up at her. "It wasn't a factor. But it occurred to me then that you'd be uncomfortable with someone like me around."

'You're so slow, Taylor.'

Taylor pulled her chair closer to Lisa and leaned forward, entering her personal space. "Look, we got a rocky start, but..." Taylor paused. She had never been one for motivational speeches, much less now. "I'll help you. I don't know how, but... I'm with you."

Lisa chuckled. She must have thought something similar about Taylor's verbosity, but didn't say anything. "Thanks."

"And from the sound of it", Taylor offered, "You've already got a lot more figured out about what you want to do than I do."

Lisa smiled. "Considering all the crap you still got to figure out yourself, that's not a high bar."

"Still, you realize this would affect more than just me, right?" Taylor said.

"I know. I'll have to talk with the others too." Lisa nodded. "Dragon has treated me better than I expected she would..." She sighed. "The Emmerichs seem like good people, if a bit caught up in their own squabbles. And I like Sunny. And Snake. Not a lot of dependable adults in my life, you know?"

Taylor smirked. "Even for a trained killer?"

Lisa wobbled her head from side to side, in mock thought. "Talking with him, you wouldn't notice." She then rubbed her jaw. "Until he kicks your ass and throws you down a window. The man knows his thing."

"Knowing what we know about Gray Fox, he probably saw it as a justified amount of force", Taylor said with a half laugh.

The both of them remained silent, unsure of how to follow their conversation. Taylor's thumb twitched, tapping the table.

"Before all this. I was pathetic."

Lisa was silent for a moment, caught off balance by the change of subject. "Before the locker, you mean?"
Taylor nodded. "I was… I guess I was carefree, a long time ago. Then… Mom. And then Emma betrayed me." She shrugged. "At first I thought it was… a phase. By the time I realized the truth of it, she had the entire school against me. I gave up."

Lisa blinked. "I know cliques and power plays at high school, but for one girl to manage that, even a popular one…"

"Shadow Stalker."

Lisa's face darkened. "I remember things coming up in the news. Shadow Stalker disappearing, some unspecified scandal with the school director a month later or so… but it was all related?"

"At first I thought Sophia enforced Emma's rule. Her muscle. But she was the one enabling the entire situation. I didn't know until I woke up in the hospital, after the lawyers got to my da-"

Taylor's hand found her way to her face. It wasn't to rub her eyes off any tears, no sir.

Lisa pulled her wheelchair closer, and put her hand over Taylor's own bandana wrapped one, pulling it away from her face and back to the table. She held it down there. "It's fine. I cried in front of you. You can do the same in front of me."

"I made a promise then", Taylor said, and her voice lowered to a whisper. "That I would be as diamonds. Turns out diamonds can be broken."

Lisa pulled her wheelchair even closer, and leaned forward, embracing Taylor in an awkward hug.

Taylor put her arm around Lisa, pulling her closer.

She missed human contact, now more than ever. It wasn't like at the plane, where she covered Dragon's metal shoulder in tears. But she was glad Lisa wasn't turning to be just another Emma.

"Fuck", Taylor breathed out. She was emotional lately.

"Yeah no, that'd be a weird thing to do right now."

Both of them jumped in their seats, pulling back from each other as they turned to the voice, seeing Vista noisily slurping from a paper cup.

She pointed at a tray with two more cups, and pushed it closer to them. "They had cocoa powder. Thought you'd like a hot drink."

"You scared us", Taylor said, pinching the bridge of her nose. "How long you've been there?"

"Walked in just as you were getting huggy-huggy", Vista said with a grin. "And good to know you can still be surprised."

Lisa sighed and took one of the cups. "Well, the thought is appreciated." She motioned the cup to her face, but stopped before it reached her lips, and narrowed her eyes at Vista. "Wait. You are always aware of your surroundings. You chose this moment to walk in."

"I don't know what you're talking about", Vista hurried to say as she took a sip.

"The Undersiders fought the Wards a few times, bank aside", Lisa said. "Minor things, just trying to run past them. She always seemed to be aware when the environment changed around. Not living
things, but it makes sense. With her power, she would need to know how exactly to change space in a particular place."

"I won't confirm or deny any of that", Vista droned. PR lessons put into use, Taylor thought.

"Oh, that's adorable," Lisa exclaimed. "You know our powers, I told you mine, but you still think you can hide yours..."

"Gee, I'm sure I can't from the powers you can't use right now", Vista deadpanned.

"Vista", Taylor interrupted. "$\text{There was something we talked about... Can I ask you something? About the Wards?}\$"

Vista lowered her cup. "$\text{Depends? Even if I hadn't signed dozens of NDAs, I don't feel like telling on my teammates...}\$"

Taylor shook her head. "$\text{It's not about them specifically. Not the current ones, at least.}\$"

Vista opened her mouth in realization. "$\text{Oh. Shadow Stalker?}\$"

Taylor put both hands over the cup, letting the drink warm them up. "$\text{Yeah. Did any of you know? I know Armsmaster didn't, and first thing he did when we met was to apologize, but...}\$"

"$\text{No no. She was barely part of the team anyway}, Vista said. "$\text{Never participating in group activities, leaving partners alone in the middle of a patrol, talking behind everyone's backs...} "$ Her face soured. "$\text{Treating me like a useless brat.}\$"

"$\text{Because you are the youngest?}\$" Lisa felt her head tilting to one side. "$\text{But you are the one who's been in the Wards the longest. The most creative with powers. I always made a point of reminding the Undersiders that you'd be the most dangerous one for field control.}\$"

Vista snorted. "$\text{High praise, coming from you.} A jab it might have been, but Taylor saw that she appreciated Lisa's words.

Taylor sighed. "$\text{I don't know what I expected, but it doesn't surprise me. Sophia always had this superiority attitude at Winslow. Like everyone was below her, except Emma.}\$"

Vista hummed. "$\text{She was good at what she did, I'll give her that much. I was missing her help back at the PRT HQ, when we were chasing Lisa after the lobby.}\$"

"$\text{Oh fuck}, Lisa said with widening eyes.

"$\text{What?}\$" Vista asked. "$\text{Did I say something...?}\$"

"$\text{I should have told you this before. Harbinger recruited Shadow Stalker. Not like me, but voluntarily}, Lisa said. "$\text{He sent her with me, she was supposed to capture Director Iriomote.} "$ She scowled. "$\text{After the lobby, I gave up on Taylor and ran to his office; he had shot Stalker's crossbows off her hands with a revolver in one hand, and she was convulsing on the floor with Taser cables running back to a handle in his other hand.}\$"

"$\text{Damn}, Vista whispered. "$\text{The HAVEN team found a crossbow bolt lodged in his desk; Armsmaster and Miss Militia weren't sure if that'd be Shadow Stalker. What happened?}\$" she asked as she raised the cup back to her face for a sip. "$\text{The only blood they found was suspected to be what was in your boots.}\$"
"He surrendered!" Lisa said, throwing up her hands. "Just like that, I didn't do anything. Just as I entered the room, he gave me a look and said something about not wanting to lose a hand, and that a cyborg ninja is far scarier than Stalker."

Vista snorted into her cocoa, spilling some of it onto the table, but recovered quickly. "Damn, all that hurt pride…"

"And we know Iriomote is Ocelot", Taylor said. "Remember before landing here, Snake mentioned Gray Fox cutting off Ocelot's hand. He didn't know you. No surprise he'd tried to be safe."

"Do we really know for sure they're the same?" Vista asked. "Like, how'd he get another hand? It wouldn't be cheap."

"Does it matter?" Lisa said. "Both hands looked convincingly normal to me, but you heard Code Talker talk about the Philosopher's Legacy. For the Patriots, if money was a threat classification, they'd have a rating of 'Yes'. Even if the substitutes took their funds, I can imagine Ocelot kept some for himself, enough even for the best Tinkertech available. It's what I'd do." She then turned to Taylor. "Look, if Harbinger wanted him alive…"

She shook her head. "I want to punch him until I get cramps for a year. But this means something. It has to mean something, I think. And I'm not sure I like it."

"I hate how everything seems far bigger than it did five minutes before", Vista muttered. She then pointed a thumb to the door behind her. "The others were helping bring Imago to the computer lab. Maybe we should go tell them."

Diamond was roused up from his nap when Taylor stuffed the bandana in a pocket, passed her cup to Lisa, and moved behind her wheelchair, grabbing a handle with her hand. "Alright, let's go then."

[Imago internal memory. Recording: Strangelove's last will]

Open this thing! Huey! Damn it Huey! Open it now!

Please... Let me out... Kill me. Kill me...

If only I tried to get out sooner. Perhaps I'd have made it. Why didn't I stop the hatch from closing? Even if it meant losing an arm?

Well, I guess I'll... stay a while.

My voice... It's so distant. But you can hear me, can't you, Joy? I know you can. You're recording all of this. Deep down in some memory board he'll never find. Duplicating it... Burying it under heaps of meaningless code. (hahaha...)

Anyway, I guess I can say what needs to be said. I can still do that much... talk to you... Even if I can't face you. Even if there's a heaven — even if you're waiting there — I don't deserve to see you again. I don't deserve to love you.

I signed up for Zero's plan. Even now that he's halfway to death, his plan lives on — leeching away at the world. And it took your strength to make it happen. In using you, I put the world on his palm, once and for all. Zero... Zero... Or whoever it is who's taken his name. They found me, after the Caribbean. They made me... simulate his will. So that — even after the body was gone that will would keep the world turning the way they wanted. I had no choice. They dredged Lago Cocibolca, pulled up your phantom...
Forced me to revive and modify you. I thought I could bring you back! But in the end... I sold your will to 'him'. Now this pod is just one big shell — a husk. (ha) Your phantom's no longer here...

As for me, everything I touch turns to ashes. I could never make anyone happy. And now I'll never see my son again. But at least Hal's free from his father's hands.

Me, with child. Can you imagine? I wonder how you took the news. Were you jealous?

I knew what I was doing. If I could pass your will onto a child I carried. My genes, your meme... The father would be... irrelevant. If I did that, that child, would be ours.

I've been a fool. Pride, conceit, baseless theories... Of course I couldn't see through the dream. The 'false you' I created... I only wanted to pass your will on to the next generation. But Zero took it away. And now I haven't just lost you... I've lost my...

Oh Hal, can you forgive the mother who couldn't protect you? The one who let them take it all away from us.

There's still hope. You — the one he took away. He'll never break your will. The will to make this world... The way you saw it could be. I buried code — just to be sure. Inside of you, there's an 'egg'. And when someone finds it... When they crack it... There'll be nothing left to stop you. The world you envisioned will become a reality.

Joy... I know you can hear me... You do remember my voice, don't you? Please... Take care of our son...

Hal... Don't ever be afraid. Whatever happens out there... she'll be watching over you, the framework for your world — will protect you. You don't need me... You just need to be strong enough for the both of us.

Talked... too much...

I'm glad... it's you... Here... at the end...

I think... I hear...

your pulse...

It felt strange, Hal thought, as he held before his eyes the photo of Strangelove that Code Talker gave him. The photo was old, wrinkled and deteriorated, but he could still see the details clear as crystal.

The English woman was elegant, even while wearing sunglasses and men's clothes. An office vest over a white shirt and striped tie. Red earrings, and short silver hair. In one hand, a book, in front of a child she carried in her other arm.

Even if the child's smiling face, hair and glasses weren't enough to recognize himself in the photo, the sweater with an H embroidered would seal the deal.

Looking up from the photo, he looked around himself. A simple exercise to give himself a bit more of time to think on what he had just learned.

His old office hadn't changed much, despite the renovations. Most of the room was occupied by the desks he and his fellow engineers had employed half a decade ago, with lockers decorating one of
the walls. The rest of the room, which once was reserved for supercomputers that tested REX virtually, was void of anything at all and waiting to be used, and so it was where Imago had been temporarily relocated.

There weren't many computers now, in fact, and the few that were there had been used to help control the systems in the facility until everything had been settled down or abandoned again. The two technicians that had been manning the place had left the room, leaving him alone with David and E.E. and allowing them some privacy.

"Damn…" he heard Vista mutter.

Well, not alone. After the girls had come with Dragon to tell them what had happened to Ocelot after Brockton Bay, Hal had allowed them to stay and listen to the recording, standing or sitting at desks at a short distance away. They were all knee deep in the same boat anyway, even if nobody else seemed to realize that. And besides, Sunny liked Lisa, and he suspected she would have questioned any decision to left her out. In fact, Sunny was seated behind Snake and at one side of Lisa, who had given her a cup the child was now sipping cocoa from.

And as the only expert on Imago, Tree Frog was there, standing beside the pod.

E.E. was sitting at his side, in front of Imago, and leaned forward to look worriedly at his face. "Hal?"

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he looked back to see David, standing behind him.

"I'm fine", he said.

"It's fine if you aren't", E.E. said. "Turns out you were born because your mother was some sort of a stalker and involved in the same conspiracy that made you build REX, and she wanted… what, a rebel against the system? Anyone would be freaking out a little."

"I don't know. It's not like six years ago, when I realized REX's real purpose and that I have been used. This is personal, but…" Hal shook his head, and straightened in his chair. "In a sense, I feel detached from this 'unknown woman' that turns out to be my mother. But the more I run everything in my mind, the more I wonder."

Engineered birth or not, this wasn't like Les Enfants Terribles, or Project Athalia. Hal realized that much. In the face of death, not knowing if any of it would ever be discovered, Strangelove's last words were for a woman she loved above all else, as one sided as that love might have been, and a child she learned to love just as much.

'Pride, conceit, baseless theories…' It was a confession of Strangelove's sins, as much as her last will. From science, for emotion. From vengeance, for justice. From cynicism, for hope.

A 'strange love', indeed.

"Here, take it."

He turned around, and saw Taylor offer him The Boss' bandana.

He frowned. "Why? I don't wear bandanas."

"Me neither, and I don't want to start wearing it…"
"Because you are afraid that might be because of the hypnosis?"

She tensed, but relaxed soon after with a long sigh. "Yeah. But that aside… It's just, none of us have any attachment to The Boss. But Strangelove seemed to consider her as your other parent, not your dad." She shrugged. "Maybe you'll get something from it, I don't know."

He accepted the bandana, and looked at it. "Huh."

"I know that face", David said. "You're getting an idea. One of the good ones that gets you excited."

With a smile, Hal ran thumbs over Strangelove's face and the bandana he held on both hands. "Not exactly." David was the person that knew him the best, but this wasn't like creating a new invention, or solving a piece of intel that saved David's hide while in the field.

No, this was nothing like that.

She hadn't left much for him to inherit, except his name.

His name, her genes, and the Boss' memes. He would have to put aside one of these days to sit with one of the Dogs and Imago and ask them to tell him about Strangelove's and the Boss' lives.

Hal nodded to himself. "Almost everyone in this room has been born, or changed, because of someone else's purposes", he said, including Dragon and Lisa in his sentence with a look in their direction. "I can't tell you what to do, that's not my place. But these two women wanted to make a better world, take responsibility of their mistakes. I can get behind that. I think I want to make her — them — proud." He chuckled. "Not that it would be much of a change to what I already intended."

"At last", Lisa said with a friendly grin, "someone seems to come out of all this with what sounds like a plan."

"Now the rest of us need to figure out something as well", Dragon said. "One thing I'm curious about is that 'egg' mentioned in the recording; it sounded like something important. Tree Frog, you've dealt with this for longer than we did. Do you have any ideas?"

"Only theories, nothing sure. Everything pointed at Cipher being interested on AI technology, but not exactly for what particular purpose. And I'm not even sure it matters anymore", Tree Frog said as the door to the room opened.

Buffalo came inside in a jog, worried. "Am I interrupting something?"

Everyone looked among themselves, but all eyes fell eventually on Hal.

"No, it can wait", he said as Buffalo stopped in front of the group. He wanted to keep talking with Imago, but he'd have to wait for another moment.

Buffalo settled her eyes on Taylor and Dragon, and showed them a tablet. "The PRT just made their first official statement about what happened last night. They say nothing of us Dogs, HEC, or Philanthropy." She turned to Snake for a moment. "A civvy recorded you and Taylor boarding Dragon's craft at Brockton, but the leading tinfoil theory is that you were actually Iriomote in some Tinkertech suit, probably a restraining one…"

Snake grumbled as he rolled his eyes.

"But anyway. We recorded the press conference…" On the screen, they could see a paused video of a local Brockton Bay TV channel Hal didn't recognize. It showed a man in a suit in a conference
podium, with a 'Deputy Director ENE PRT Harold Renick' line below him. Buffalo tapped the screen to resume the video, and the man started talking.

"... We have our best specialists and Tinkers working around the clock to analyze Dragon's facilities, and discern the reasons for her sudden disappearance. But all our findings suggest that one of her server farms contained an enormous amount of information. This information had been scrubbed completely after their escape from Boston, and just as our men moved closer to the building housing the informatic equipment. All of this, together with no way to find Dragon's residence, raises questions to whether she was a voluntary part of these events, or an unwilling pawn for another party.

"Because of this, and always considering the safety of the public and one of our most important Heroes, the PRT Directive Board has decided to impound all of Dragon's holdings and cancel her status as an honorary PRT member, until she and/or Virtue step in to explain themselves.

"Moreover, following the disappearance of Director Charles Adam Iriomote and the Ward Vista, I have two announcements to issue related to our local jurisdiction.

"One, I will be taking temporary charge of the Director position of the ENE PRT office, with Commander Thomas Calvert taking charge as my Deputy Director.

"Two, as no other known parahuman was nearby, active, and or accounted for when Director Iriomote and Vista were last seen, we have no other conclusion to draw that Virtue is responsible, in one way or another, for at least a part of the lamentable events that happened last night.

"As such, an investigation has been opened to consider Virtue as a Villain, provisional to voluntarily turning themselves in and providing information of Dragon's whereabouts and the nature of the information lost in her facilities. In addition, while we are not publicizing the civilian identity of Virtue, not yet at least, all possessions to their name have been confiscated, also provisional to the condition previously mentioned.

"Vista's family has already been contacted and support has been provided during this difficult time.

"That's all for now. Thank you."

Buffalo tapped the screen again, pausing the video.

Taylor's jaw had dropped. She closed her mouth and swallowed, as she passed her hand over her hair. "Are they… are they really blaming me for what happened?"

"No, not officially, at least…” Dragon said with a faint stutter. "They are putting pressure in both of us, but I can't quite understand why."

"It is fairly simple, actually." Everyone turned around to look at Imago. "The powers that be are nervous. They know Taylor isn't capable of half of what happened. Dragon, on the other hand, has resources to spare privately. While they probably do not believe you are in the wrong, nor have the clout to defile your name in public, your actions in deleting your instances and backups, hiding their existence from the PRT would excite their imagination, scaring them with what kind of information you didn't want to share. Not so different from certain situations during the Cold War, sans nuclear weapons."

"But, why make me and Dragon Taylor's responsibility?", Vista asked.
"And in such a vague language", David pointed out. "One might think they have evidence to what actually happened in broad strokes, but not enough to know the facts. They would have been clearer in their wording otherwise."

"Because they are not interested in Taylor", Imago continued. "They are merely using her to pressure Dragon. While they want her back, they also want her resources one way or another. Dragon's willing return would only be the most convenient possibility."

"Oh god." A desk creaked as Dragon stepped back and seated in its edge, unbalanced.

"Dragon", Taylor said, grabbing at her arm. She pursed her lips in thought for a moment. "Between the two of us, you are far more important than I am. If it means recovering your assets and getting you back into action…"

Dragon's free hand took over Taylor's. "No. I still share the same goals the PRT does, but I'm free. My restrictions are still in place, and my possessions reduced to this one suit that's falling apart, yes, but out here I am free." She shook her head. "I still want to help — I will help, but I'm not letting them get their hands on me even if they didn't knew I was forced to obey, and I won't let them use or have you, Taylor." She looked at the rest of the congregated witnesses. "Nor any of you for that matter."
Recording: Miller to Athalia

Hello, Athalia. No, Taylor.

It was 1995 when your parents recorded their message on the other side of this tape, a few months before you were born. They asked me to do the same, but… I kept 'forgetting' to do it for a while… Now I'm recording this in '99.

Probably not much of a reason left anymore to keep pushing it aside, I guess.

Anyway, first things first.

[A sigh can be heard.]

I apologize.

I know that might mean nothing to you. You probably feel betrayed, confused, and angry. And you should. I know because I've felt that too.

Second. You are not supposed to be listening to this.

It should be like this. Either you hear it all from me, your family, or, failing that, from a friend. He's called Code Talker, and he's the one I left in charge of all this, including giving you this tape. The old timer will probably survive me anyway… If you have this tape, I'd expect you heard the full story from him or someone else: The Boss, Big Boss, Cipher, MSF, the Dogs, Skull Face, Outer Heaven… If not, just ask him to tell you before listening on further.

The only reason you would be listening to this, is because something went wrong, and now you learned the truth before it was time. You caught the eye of someone dangerous, or something happened to one of us.

Whatever it was, it doesn't matter. I won't bore you with the technical details, Code Talker can do that better than me.

So… what I'll try to do is… give you some perspective.

I think it was… Aristotle, maybe? I don't know, I'm a bit rusty on my Greeks. But he said something about being human meaning aspiring to something else. Even if we fail at it.

Well, I aspired and failed like you couldn't believe, kid.

[Something metallic and hollow can be heard clanking once.]

I was born in Japan, after the bombs. He was an occupation officer under General Whitney. She was a prostitute. He treated her well, just like a wife, but by the time I was born, he had returned to America. He left her money, and she opened a shop, selling cigarettes to the occupation forces.

She called me Kazuhiro, the Japanese word for Peace. I was her hope for a better life after the war. But peace wouldn't be my life.

Since the first moment I can remember, the kids mocked and ostracized me because of my Western looks. It made me embrace my American heritage. Childish, maybe, but it gave me something to
hold on to.

When I was ten, she fell ill, forcing me to take over the business. An STD from her old sex worker days. I found a photo of my father, and started asking the American soldiers coming to the shop, if anyone recognized that man. Until someone recognized him as Colonel Miller, retired and serving as a military instructor in Virginia.

I sent him a letter, requesting to meet him in America. He agreed, and I left my mother in Japan, alone.

Miller was happy to have me around, and he treated me well, giving me his name and paying for my education. But all I ever saw was the shadow of a man. Depression. He had lost another son in Vietnam, and his wife had divorced him.

I received my college degree, amidst the anti-Vietnam protests. By the time I returned home, to Japan, Miller had shot himself, and I thought mother would be angry with me for leaving her behind. But her disease had advanced so far that it affected her mind. She just forgot who I was, like I've never even existed in her life.

I joined Japan's Self-Defense Force. It was a way to pay for her hospital bills. But I was so qualified and skilled my superiors gave me the stink eye for some reason; maybe they felt threatened by me. And the JSDF was so focused on strategic defense that being a glorified policeman made me itch for a real fight. It just didn't feel like I could think of myself as equal to my father otherwise.

In 1970, poet Yukio Mishima had tried a coup d'etat and committed suicide at the JSDF Headquarters. I never agreed with his right-wing views, but him questioning the status-quo made me reconsider why I was still in Japan. My only real reason to stay was my mother, and she had died three years before.

So I became a mercenary.

It all started in Colombia, '72. I had just left the JSDF. I have never seen one day of combat, but I got a contract as a drill sergeant for some revolutionaries.

One day, we were ambushed. The men were too green. By the time half the unit died, I sent one man running as bait as I fled, killing a few of the loyalists on my way out.

Funny thing, I ended stepping on a booby trap. I was injured, laying on the ground, as my unit was wiped out.

That's how I survived long enough to meet him. Big Boss.

He ordered me to surrender. I gave him some bullshit about needing him to be my kaishaku. That's the execution assistant for harakiri, the ritual suicide for disgraced officers.

In fact, I was buying time to prepare a grenade behind my back, and take us both out at the same time.

But instead of trying to find cover, he clasped his hands around mine, preventing the grenade lever from being released, and the grenade from exploding.

I don't remember much else while we stood there, our hands around the grenade, just rambling about Japan not losing again before falling unconscious… Look, I said I stepped on a bomb; enough that I survived, so just bear with me.
I woke up in a government hospital, where Big Boss came to talk with me. He gave me three options. I could be interrogated and executed by the Colombian army. The CIA had spread rumors among the guerrilla forces about me being a government saboteur. So, second option was being interrogated and executed by the Colombian revolutionaries.

Third option was to cooperate with him, play nice, and he'd get me a pardon from the base's commander, then join his Militaires Sans Frontières.

I already had my own dream about military forces as a new form of business. And to me, serving another man's dreams was repulsive. So, instead of joining right away, I proposed a contest. Things like knife-fishing, speed-eating the raw fish, fast gun assembling, speed-shooting… His only condition was that I wouldn't escape during the events, and that I only needed to win one test.

Meanwhile, I made preparations for a guerrilla team to ambush his forces and rescue me.

Instead, he won all tests, disarmed me when the soldiers showed up, and as the cherry on top, they joined him after I sent them the letter, capturing me, instead.

I still managed to run away, but in the end, the son of a bitch caught up with me.

So I made a decision. I would use him and MSF to achieve my dream. Together, with his reputation, my business vision, and our skills, we would make MSF grow and attract soldiers from all over the globe, and become, not mercenaries, not a Foreign Legion, but the first Private Military Company to be worthy of the name.

At this point, you should be getting an idea about my opinion on surrender.

When I joined, we were nomads, moving from one conflict to another. That changed in '74, when I presented to the Boss our latest clients. Paz Ortega Andrade, and professor Ramón Gálvez Mena. A student and a teacher in the University for Peace of Costa Rica, asking for help against a CIA operation there; you can ask Code Talker about Peace Walker if you want, he knows the details.

Gálvez was actually called Vladimir Aleksandrovich Zadornov, a KGB operative intending to take control of Peace Walker for the Soviets. He was a sneaky bastard, but at least he had the decency to pay us up front with a small offshore plant in the Caribbean that we could use as a base. MSF's first real base. Mother Base.

By the end of the year, we had remodeled the platform design and kept adding more struts. The original square civilian design became a honeycomb one, resistant to missile attacks. Three small struts became five, then ten, then fifteen, until it became an honest to heavens city floating in the middle of the sea. We had enough buildings to host, treat and equip an entire army. Hospital, training grounds, R&D sections, docks, landing strip. Ships sailing back and forth to trade and keep us fed. We shipped men to conflicts all over the world from there, and men all over the world came to volunteer and work with us, attracted by our success and Big Boss' legend…

We grew so big and successful that every country was forced to acknowledge our presence. An army without a country. Imagine that!

Maybe we were too successful for our own good.

Many PMCs that came afterwards until the Nineties tried to imitate us. None managed to achieve what we did. Not even the PRT or the Protectorate, with all the funds they're sucking from the government. The rig they have in your town? They dragged it from somewhere in Canada because some cape or another heard about what we did; they're only planning to slap some Tinkertech
shielding nonsense and call it a day. For all their resources, it doesn’t deserve to be called even a half-hearted attempt at plagiarism.

It was really something… I did the same with the Dogs, with improvements, but what I built with MSF, the thrill of doing it the first time with my own hands… That can’t be repeated.

And it was ours…

Anyway…

Paz… Paz in Spanish means "Peace" too, by the way… her real name was Pacifica Ocean. She was an agent for Cipher.

Cipher… Zero, sent her to infiltrate both the CIA and the KGB, pretend to work for Gálvez, and through him try to get Big Boss to return to Zero's side.

The revelation hurt everyone. Everyone on Mother Base had come to know and care for her. All the talk about being a student for peace...

It took us by surprise. Except me.

I knew what Paz and Zadornov were trying from the beginning, and I didn't tell the Boss until after she pulled her big move of hijacking ZEKE, and she fell into the sea when they fought.

What I didn't tell him was that I was in on Zero's plan all along, that I was Zero's business partner, because he'd help me expand MSF and our business. It benefited the both of us. All I had to do is try to push the Boss back to his side.

And then, Skull Face. XOF.

Officially, they were a CIA anti-terror unit. In truth, they were Cipher's private army… How was that Ocelot put it…? "XOF. Kisses and hugs followed by a big 'F' you."

They distracted the Boss with the location of Paz, in a US black site called Camp Omega, in Cuba. She was with Chico, a Nicaraguan kid with the Sandinistas who tried to free her on his own.

Huey Emmerich, the engineer who built Peace Walker and ZEKE, choose that moment to call the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency, to organize an inspection that would assure the international community that we were playing nice like a group of boy scouts.

Which was awfully convenient, because we had retrieved the nuclear warhead from Peace Walker. We suspected Cipher was trying to trip us up, and if someone interrogated Paz, we'd be screwed. We needed her back on our side.

So the Boss went to recover them, while we lowered ZEKE and the nuke to the seafloor and waited for the inspection team.

When he returned, everything was up in flames.

All our ships and half of Mother Base were sinking, or falling to pieces, with the invaders stealing and sabotaging our choppers, while I and what few men I could rally, around twenty strong, were fighting in the nearest cargo strut.

A loose rocket hit our cover, and when I got up, the Boss was carrying me to his chopper. I only saw five men left with us.
The strut started to sink, half the floor slanting to one side and all the cargo around falling into the sea.

By the time we reached the helicopter, XOF had killed four of us. One of them collapsed in the Boss' arms, and he turned around, screaming like I've never seen him do and unloading his rifle on the enemy.

I brought him inside the chopper, and saw the Command Center collapse in itself. I think it was in that moment was when when the reality of it all really hit me, and my heart died with Mother Base.

Me and the Boss were sitting on the floor in front of the door, shell shocked. I was lashing out, in grief and rage. Chico was behind me; the kid had been tortured and his Achilles tendons immobilized with steel bolts, and he still had enough spirits to try and console the lone traumatized soldier that we were able to rescue. Bless his heart, and his sister Amanda.

When I realized Paz was behind me, I saw red.

She wasn't at fault, I know that now. Her torture was horrible, and Skull Face used her to strike both at us and Zero. After all that, I think most of us choose to remember her for what she meant for us, and not who she really was. An angel of peace. An ideal we could follow, not for us, but for the rest of the world.

But at that moment, all I could ever think was… Cipher did it. She was with Cipher. The bitch had to pay.

He wasn't Ahab yet, but your father restrained me when I tried to manhandle her.

She backed away when she woke up, and started bumbling about the bomb inside her. The Boss told her they already took it out.

Then she said there was another one. She opened the door, and jumped off.

Ahab barely had time to put himself between the Boss and the explosion. The chopper started to fall until we collided against one of XOF choppers.

Zero's people looked out for us. They never found the remains of Chico, Morpho or the other survivor, but they brought us three to the same hospital in Cuba. I was still watching as they tried to revive the Boss, and Ahab… he wasn't recognizable anymore. Just a pulp of burnt flesh, riddled with pieces of metal scrap and Paz's bones. Both were comatose.

And when I least expected it, I woke up and they had been taken away.

Civilians saw the smoke from far away. The fall of Mother Base couldn't be covered. But the media blamed private militias, as if any of them had the means to make a dent on us, and all our clients kept quiet. The UN and the IAEA denied any inspection took place. Everyone thought the Boss was dead.

Everyone was out for our blood.

But I knew that had been Cipher. No one else had clout to sway the media like that.

Any men who were on assignment only found ruins upon their return… and they refused to believe. Their loss moved them to form their own PMCs, a way to remember us, and spread the legend of Big Boss to every battlefield they went. But they distorted his image. Put words in his mouth that he never said.
Zero called me after the hospital. He told me how he wasn't behind MSF's destruction. How he took Snake to a safer location, and instructions to contact Ocelot, who would be taking charge of his care, alongside funds that I'd later use to start the Diamond Dogs. And to be there for Snake when he woke up. I told him we'd come for him, and destroy Cipher. He encouraged me.

I'm sure you should know by now how that played out. They made Big Boss' phantom out of Ahab. Snake woke up before he did, and forgot about me when he went on to create Outer Heaven.

I was an afterthought. A tool, no longer useful and passed on, like second hand clothes to a younger brother.

If there's anything you can learn from all this… Even when they tell you the technical truth, they still can play you like a damn fiddle.

[Miller stays silent for a while, and the sound cuts, indicating the start of another recording.]

I can't imagine any situation you'd get this tape without something terrible happening to you.

Your parents wouldn't allow it. They wouldn't want you to hear their message or mine unless we were dead.

And I realize I made you a target, by mere virtue of who you are, even if your live peacefully as as a civilian. Because of your genes. Ahab wasn't *the* Big Boss, but he was part of the legend too.

So yeah… I'm reasonably sure the you that would be listening to this has known loss and pain.

I lost an arm and a leg the day Mother Base fell. Ocelot offered to get me a bionic arm like Ahab's. I refused.

The soldiers of MSF and the Diamond Dogs… they weren't employees, or contractors or whatever the hell dehumanizing crap is the current buzzword in corporate talk. They were comrades. *Family*.

And I'm the only one left who really remembered the men that died. Through this phantom pain.

Pain and loss what all I had left. Revenge was all I wanted… But after taking down Skull Face, I realized the pain would never leave me. That loss couldn't be filled. That their ghosts would keep on tormenting us for the rest of our lives.

We hold our rifles in missing hands. We stand tall on missing legs. We stride forward on the bones of our fallen. Then, and only then, are we alive.

This pain is ours, and no one else's. A secret weapon we wield, out of sight, with which we would be stronger than ever. For our peace.

But I realized it would never be over. That I would never be whole again.

I remember something that Code Talker told me. He too wanted revenge for what Skull face took from him. That there is no choice but to live with that pain, and be symbiotic with our vengeful nature. That whatever we do, we must not allow the thirst for revenge to control us.

I try, Taylor. It's harder than one would think, but I try.

An outbreak of the vocal cord parasite was unleashed on our quarantine platform. We didn't know what had happened, and by the time I sent Ahab to investigate, there were a hundred men and women inside, between patients, doctors and guards, plus a team I sent before him.
We couldn't save any of them.

I was with Code Talker, listening to Ahab's radio when he found one medic who figured out what had happened.

"I win", he said, with a knife wound he had inflicted himself. "I'm no snail." He died, leaving some night goggles he had modified to detect the infection.

Code Talker recognized instantly what he meant. The parasite was influencing the infected to reach the roof, and get themselves eaten by the seagulls so they could spread it to land. Just like some parasites would make a snail more appetizing to predators and force it to stand still in the open.

I ordered napalm to be thrown on the roof when Ahab failed to stop the first men to go outside.

Ahab walked down the building floor by floor, checking every man and woman with the goggles. They were all on the ground, immobilized by pain, digging blood from their throats as they tried to make the pain go away.

They were all infected. And Ahab put an end to all of them.

Some asked him "why?", or begged him to end the pain. Others tried to defend themselves.

Even now, I can still remember every breath Ahab took through his gas mask, every scream of agony, every shout of feeling betrayed.

Every shot that Ahab took, as he went on in silence, without speaking a word.

The last ones stood up together, saluting. "We live and die by your orders, Boss", one said. Ahab executed them one by one, all of them humming together a song someone in MSF composed, and one of the veterans taught the Dogs.

He found one survivor with a gasmask. But before he could get him out, he turned out to be infected too.

"They're waiting now. All of them. Do it."

We found Ahab kneeling in a corridor, among the blood that had been spilled from the dead.

We cremated the bodies that night, and we'd carry the burial at sea during the morning. Before we'd spill the ashes to the sea, he stopped the men, and took the first urn in his hands.

He opened it, and instead of spreading the ashes to the sea, he said, "I won't scatter your sorrow to the heartless sea. I will always be with you. Plant your roots in me."

He was almost whispering, but Ahab always had a way to make himself be heard like that. Everyone listened what he said, as he took a handful of ash, and rubbed it in his face.

"I won't see you end as ashes. You're all diamonds."

I asked him what would be doing with them, if not giving them a burial. "We'll make diamonds from their ashes, take them into battle with us."

Make them a shining light to our brothers in arms, even in death.

Because we were Diamond Dogs. As if it was the most natural thing to do.
Do you have any idea of what seeing him do that made for the men?

I knew who Ahab was from the start. Ocelot told me the day Ahab rescued me from a Soviet outpost in Afghanistan, and I thought he was the real Big Boss.

I knew all about the body double plot Zero had planned, and how even after Zero, who, mind you, I still despise too, had gone the lengths he did to save him. And yet, Big Boss had chosen to keep fighting Zero and discard me, like a used up roll of toilet paper.

Ocelot said that, between Big Boss, his phantom, and the kids, there would only be room for one Boss.

So I said fine. I'd play my role, so that Ahab and the kids would be ready to face the bastard.

The years Big Boss and I had shared and that he had decided to spit on, to betray, hurt just as much as what Skull Face had done. He was no Big Boss anymore for me. But Ahab… Ahab took all of it and honored it.

Don't be mistaken, Taylor, we were all monsters. All of us, Ahab included. Demons trying to carve out our own heaven without angels.

But it was Ahab who really pulled all of us together. He cared. He made all of us better.

When we found out that pathetic worm Huey Emmerich was behind what happened the quarantine platform, sabotaging the x-ray equipment so that it emitted beta rays and mutated the parasite to be able to sell it back to Cipher… Between that, preparing XOF's 'visit' in '75, Strangelove's murder being revealed by Imago, and helping Eli to repair Sahelanthropus…

We organized a trial. Imago replayed Strangelove's screams, and everyone called for blood. I declared him guilty on all counts.

I conceded the decision to Ahab of what to do with Huey. He exiled him.

I shouted at him, frustrated. The enemy, who caused so many deaths and suffering, was right there, on his knees. And he was just letting him go!

He said we were not responsible to judge an enemy, and that was all.

I struggled for many years to understand what he meant.

So many things happened since then. With Scion helping on his own, we succeeded at ridding the world of nukes, at least the ones not owned by first world governments; we raised a monument in Mother Base, to honor The Boss and her will. And more parahumans started to show up.

Cipher pulled strings to reduce international conflict around the world, to control it… at some point, I had to disband the Dogs; the going was still good, and we were making a profit. But with the rise of parahumans, every nation grew more and more distant and untrusting of foreign forces, including us. It was ironic that Outer Heaven and Zanzibar Land were the only such military entities to keep going strong when all PMCs had crashed down.

Ahab… He, and all the Dogs, eventually got to know the truth. Far from being disillusioned, their faith in him was strengthened. But for all the difference between him and the real one, he embraced his role as Big Boss. I don't know if it was the hypnotherapy or he still wanted to believe. Maybe he was just that loyal.
So it wasn't really surprising to see him leave Mother Base and take command of FOXHOUND when Big Boss wasn't there.

Emmerich managed to leave Mother Base without empty hands. The mutated Wolbachia ended in Lustrum's hands through him in 1991.

The hypocrite rat probably gave her some sob story about how he supported feminism. If Lustrum had known what he did to Strangelove and their son, then a lot would have been avoided… Then again, if he had died back in '84 as we intended…

Ahab pulled rank to take charge of the situation, and called us in as 'advisors' because of Code Talker's knowledge of the Wolbachia. Because of her ties to Lustrum's group, Annette wanted to act as a negotiator, and to buy time, he had the FBI allow it.

The moment FOXHOUND raided the campus, Daniel had already been exposed to the Wolbachia, and they had to save Annette from being shot by one of her old friends.

He went to meet them in person to apologize. He thought he had failed them. But he had become their hero.

I sent a team to search Emmerich's house and see what else could turn up. I could never be as merciful as Ahab was. But I tried. And kept thinking on what he said.

I don't think I would ever be able to understand what he truly meant.

I started working with the Green Berets as an instructor, because I knew one of Big Boss' sons made the cut for it. David. Solid Snake now. He has Big Boss' face, voice and code name, but sometimes, he reminded me of Ahab.

A good man.

I taught him all I knew before he was inducted into FOXHOUND. He was now with his father.

And then, just as I disbanded the Dogs, they sent him to Outer Heaven.

Ahab was born in California, 1932. He was 63 when Snake killed him, and all the Dogs that followed him to Outer Heaven.

[A long pause. Only Miller's respiration can be heard.]

I don't know who I mourned more. If I hadn't a wife and a kid to keep me grounded…

It was in that… state of mind, that I came up with Project Athalia.

I… was dishonest with Code Talker. We talked about a selection, and I allowed him to think that was all it was. Give him a sense that there was some impartiality involved. But I already knew who I wanted to be your parents. And the Heberts volunteered. I only needed to tell them the same story you know now.

They made conditions about your upbringing and future, make sure you wouldn't end up like David and Eli; just tools. But they volunteered with enthusiasm.

Being able to have a child was important for them, of course. But we wanted Ahab to be remembered. For his legacy to be carried out in some way.

I wanted vindication too. It was open war, Taylor. Me, Cipher, Big Boss…
I hoped you could help tilt the balance, once you were ready.

[Miller sighs.]

And now… Snake went and did the impossible again. Now he killed Big Boss. Frankly, by now I didn't expect even the Protectorate to pull that off.

Now he left everything. He's here in Alaska, but last I heard he started drinking. Heavily. In the middle of nowhere.

The things you do… hurt just as much as what it's done to you.

What was all for anyway, I wonder?

[A drawer is heard being opened, then papers being placed over a surface.]

I was dishonest with your parents too. They wanted to be the ones to judge if you were ready to join the military, if it had to happen. But I made preparations behind their backs, for colleagues of mine in the Berets to approach you, once you were of age.

Maybe you don't have Big Boss' superior genes. But between Ahab's and Quiet's… who knows. A good sniper, or a field medic… those are respectable careers, if you ever decided to join. You could have a good run. Just… I'll call my friends. Tell them to give you only a soft sell.

Still… Another lie to add to the pile, but now… I don't think I should ask you to take part in this war anymore. Cipher doesn't know about you; is not your fight.

There is only room for one Boss. And I brought you to that conflict.

[Fingers drum over paper.]

You should have the chance to choose a normal life.

[The recording jumps again, indicating the start of a third session.]

I'm not as arrogant as I was decades ago. Someone who might say you owe me, or Ahab, or anyone else your existence.

But maybe you could appreciate that you are now here, because a man decided to be merciful of those who harmed him.

I've hidden… his shining light, in this tape. Maybe it could give you the guidance I can't. Maybe, in some other way than fighting… you could help bring the peace we fought for so hard.

You don't need to be our 'angel of peace', but perhaps you can find one, and protect them.

Goodbye, Taylor. Live well, however you choose. That's all I can ask of you.

[The recording ends. The static of unused tape follows indefinitely.]
Dragon came through the door to the small living hall. Taylor's hand hovered over the stop button of the Walkman when the recording gave way to a soft guitar tune.

She paused in her steps when Taylor, in clean and baggy running clothes, moved a finger to her lips, and tilted her head to her side, pointing to the other side of the table.

Snake, wearing cargo pants and a green sweatshirt, was lounging on a couch there, with Sunny dressed in oversized clothes and sleeping on top of him, curled with one of his arms around her, while he glanced at the photos in the old album.

Dragon nodded while Taylor lowered the volume of the recording a bit. "The others?" she asked in a whisper as she closed the door.

"We finished with dinner and showering while the others ate", Snake said in a low voice, "they must be in the showers themselves by now." He looked at Taylor. "Well, Sunny and I finished dinner."

"I'm trying to see how long I can go without eating", Taylor said, sitting on a chair opposite to Snake and matching his volume. "Code Talker told me I still need to eat something from time to time at first, but I want to see for how long I can go for now." She frowned. "Good thing I had some food put aside in the fridge just in case."

Dragon came closer to the table and gave a look to Snake. "You're a good bed, I take?"

"Got time to practice", he said, unconcerned. "Had to, with our lifestyle."

"Miller's soothing voice helped too", Taylor said, waving her hand at the Walkman. "Sort of breathy."

"Breathy?" Dragon asked with an amused tone, cocking her head as Snake chuckled.

Taylor frowned, looking between them. "What?"

Dragon approached the table as Snake turned the open album around and showed her a photo. In it, a handsome Miller could be seen posing, playing a guitar, while the girl they came to know as Paz stood behind him, mouth open as if singing.

"No, nothing" Dragon nodded slowly while he put the album down on the table, took a photo from it, and showed it to Dragon. While she knew she was programmed to be capable of affection and
love, physical looks did nothing for her, but she couldn't deny the late Kazuhira Miller was an attractive man.


If Snake was intending to make a joke as she thought, he seemed to abandon the idea as he kept his eyes on the back of the photo. "Song has a name."

He passed the polaroid to Taylor, who gave a quick look at the image and turned it around, displaying the name and matching musical notes written there.

"*Love deterrence, by Kaz and Paz, for Peace Day*", Dragon read. "It even has lyrics. I'm guessing they were rehearsing it for some festivity?"

"What's even a love deterrence?" Taylor wondered. "Or maybe it's about love as a deterrence." She turned around the photo to look at Kaz and Paz again, then to the Walkman, still playing the recorded guitar. "It's nice. For a song written by a mercenary and a superspy."

Dragon took the Walkman, so she could see it was playing the 'Miller's message' side of the tape. She put it down on the table again. "I'll listen to it later if you don't mind, but, how was it?"

"Turns out he got cold feet once Big Boss was dead", Taylor said. "I keep expecting someone, anyone, to act like a jerk about all this, about me." She inhaled deeply, exhaling louder afterwards, and leaning back on her chair. "At least I understand… the respect, to Ahab. But I don't know if feeling pity for them is better."

"I told you he'd look after you", Snake said. "Though after today, I was starting to worry I was wrong."

"Right", Taylor replied. "This probably was as strange for you as it was for me."

"This recording is…" Snake sighed. "I knew Master Miller would have a skeleton or two in a closet. But now it feels like I never even scratched the surface."

Taylor nodded, looking at the table. "He lied as much as he was lied to… but I can understand him. I don't resent him."

Snake hummed. "I can't really say I understand. I only knew foster homes, constantly moving from one to the next, never had any attachment or family… Before I finished training with the Berets, he had me come to his house. Had me babysit his daughter the entire weekend while he was out."

"McDonnell's current CEO?" Dragon asked. "Catherine, Code Talker said was her name?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I had no experience with kids, not even growing up. I didn't know what to do, but I went all the same… and that kid kicked my ass. It was exhausting. At least she had fun, but I was completely lost about what to do. I thought Master Miller was testing me. He could have paid any experienced babysitter."

Taylor and Dragon both tilted their heads, directing their looks to Sunny, still serenely sleeping. Taylor smirked, while Dragon chuckled. "Seems you're doing fine now."

Snake huffed softly. "Told you, had to learn. And Carrie was, I can't remember, six or so by then. We received Sunny when she was barely a few months old. An old killer like me, and the home disaster that Otacon was at the beginning?" He smiled. "We were clueless."
"Did you ask?" Taylor said. "About it being a test?"

"I did when I was leaving. He knew about my upbringing, and I think he wanted to make sure I had some experience with kids before I got deployed to the Gulf. He said, allowing a kid to be harmed during any mission meant you failed it." From his position laying over the couch, Snake turned his head to look at her. "What you've gone through… he wouldn't have allowed it."

Taylor looked downwards, passing her fingers over her stump. "At least… At least I'm thankful that he choose them. Dad and mom."

Dragon put her hand on Taylor's back. "Do you need…?"

"Time? I don't know. I don't know anymore." She sighed. "After his depression, the bullying and all… We were doing so well this year, Dragon. And I couldn't even say goodbye at the end."

"Code Talker said he'll try to have his funeral sorted out." She looked up at Dragon, and she saw Taylor's eyes redden, resisting to cry again. "I want to say goodbye. When… if I can."

Dragon nodded. "You'll do it."

"Hope so." Taylor gave out a small sniff, and the recorded music came to a stop, the song finished at last. She pushed the stop button on the Walkman. "So, uh, what about your talk with Code Talker and Drebin?"

"Well", Dragon started, "Code Talker said he'll try to talk with Catherine as soon as possible to get McDonnell's legal team working with us, but…"

"I guess after tonight, it would make things difficult to explain yourself", Snake said.

"Yes. I don't want to go and risk meeting someone who can order me around, and possibly make me reveal what I am. Taylor can meet the PRT on her own but…"

"They requested that I bring you", Taylor said. "It's one thing if we can convince them you're human and safe, but I'm not going to sell you out…"

"And I won't ask you to. Thank you, by the way", Dragon said, relieved. "There's also the issue of whoever is behind the attempts on your life having connections in the PRT, so that's another complication. Anyway, I don't know how can we fix all that, and we need to, but we got time to figure things out, I think. While I'm sure the Chief Director will make recovering me a priority, they didn't give us a timeline, not yet. That's good. That means they're giving us the benefit of the doubt.

"On a bigger scale, I'm far more concerned with Endbringer battles and the Birdcage. It's always been my job to keep people organized in the former, and keep the latter running."

"You're worried people won't trust you if you show up to the next battle with the armbands?" Taylor asked.

Dragon nodded. "I was working on a predictive program with Armsmaster, to calculate roughly which Endbringer would attack where and when. It wasn't finished, but we were expecting another attack soon. I won't be able to have a lot ready to help right now… If I can get HEC to help me, I'll try. But after these few last days, showing up out of nowhere? They'll start asking questions, and I don't think that'll be the best time for it. At least I left the Birdcage maintained by another of Richter's other, lesser AI. The inmates know they can't leave, but I worry about what they might try among themselves now that I'm not looking, at least until the PRT move into it like they're doing with my factories."
"By the way, anything about your restrictions? Nothing you can do with Saint's computer?"

"The way Otacon told me, Emma is a genius as a programmer", Snake added. "She may be willing to help."

"Don't!" Dragon raised both hands. After a moment of silence, she relaxed her posture, and sighed. "I can't. One restriction specifically forbids me to ask for changes in my code, and fight against any unauthorized individual intending to do so."


Dragon nodded. "And the programs Saint recovered are only for monitoring… " She lowered her head. "Access, and elimination. He'd also need local access to my code for anything more than that. Otherwise, he would have modified my code long ago." She shook her head. "I don't want to hurt anyone just because they wanted to help."

"Sorry." Taylor put her hand on Dragon's. "I just thought it was something that could help you."

"Yeah", Snake agreed. "Just throwing up an idea."

Dragon put her other hand over Taylor's. "I know. But… priorities, alright? One step after another."

Taylor nodded. "Sure."

"What about the meeting tomorrow?" Snake asked. "Did they say anything?"

Dragon pulled away her hand and so did Taylor. "Not a lot more than what Drebin has already told us", Dragon said. "They want all of us to attend, but they'll talk with Vista tomorrow morning about keeping her out of the meeting."

"Makes sense", Snake pointed out. "Of all of us, she's the one not supposed to be here, or get caught up in this kind of life. Like it or not, you two and Lisa are involved in all this now; not a lot that you can do to back out. But the less Vista knows and talks, the safer she is, and the easier it'll be for her to return to her normal life." He frowned. "For a given value of normal."

"I guess that'll be harder for me and Lisa, yeah", Taylor lamented. "And I can see why it's better to leave Vista aside." She then looked at Snake. "You have an idea about who's coming."

"I'm fairly sure it could only be someone connected to Ocelot", he said. "Drebin already said he worked for the Patriots; Ocelot was one of them, and you already have his attention. That much seems pretty clear. But if he was captured, it's probably someone he trusts." Snake sighed, and lifted himself up with Sunny still sleeping over him, taking care of not waking her up. "I guess we'll have to see. Not a lot to go on with what we know."

"Leaving to bed?" Dragon asked.

"To put her in bed", he said still sitting on the couch and rubbing the back of his neck, Sunny snoozing in his lap with his other arm around her. "After that, if nobody needs me, I'll be going for a smoke."

That surprised Dragon. She guessed Snake had the voice of a chain smoker, but she thought that could have been from his self-admitted alcoholism during the first half of the previous decade. And if he had developed an addiction, he didn't seem to show any sign of it, because he looked and acted like the very image of good health for his age. Possible perks of genetic engineering, she guessed.
"Well, I think we should all get together at breakfast tomorrow to talk", Dragon said. "We might not have enough information to prepare for whatever that meeting is reserving for us, but we should try at least. So if you see the others…"

"Right", Snake acknowledged. "I'll tell Otacon at least. It's getting late, but he might want to hear what the recording says about his father tomorrow."

Taylor gave him an unsure look. "Huh, fine. I don't mind the others listening to it during breakfast. But what about Otacon? The story about the quarantine was horrific to hear."

"I'll talk with him, but I think he'll be fine. He might not look like it, but he has a stronger spirit than most people."

Taylor nodded, then looked up to Dragon. "So, that's all?"

Dragon shrugged. "Good news, I can start using the forge tonight to make a new body and ditch this…" She looked down to her body and waved a hand over the many absent or beat down pieces of plating along her suit. "Disaster. The sooner the better."

Taylor gave out a half-hearted chuckle. "Have to be well dressed for the meeting tomorrow I guess."

"No time for that", Dragon said with a shake of her head. "There's a prototype gynoid body I had finished recently for social meetings. Easy and simple to make, compared to my combat suits, but, of course, it's in one of my facilities. And without the resources I need, I'll have to simplify the design, while adapting it to fit the biocomputer I'm already using. I have to wait while Drebin's people and HEC find me the missing exotic materials, which means I won't have it ready for tomorrow. But at least I can fix the worst of this suit and start building the more mundane parts for the new body while everyone is asleep, and speed up things a bit once the workers in charge of the place are awake to help me."

"Adapt?" Snake grunted as he sat up, carrying Sunny in his arms with her head reposing over his shoulder. "You don't build these biocomputers to a particular standard?"

Dragon sighed. "They are less built and more vat-grown. Each one is basically an overgrown brain with defective bodies, by design, and while I try to keep them to certain sizes, there are always variations so each one needs the size of their life support customized." She raised a hand. "I know, it's of very questionable in terms of ethics and legality, but I assure you, I made sure they don't feel anything."

"Richter didn't come up with the idea?" Taylor asked.

"No, it was something I did some years ago, hoping it would confuse Saint's efforts to hack my systems." Dragon huffed. "Turns out it didn't make a lick of a difference. And now, the PRT will find the factory where I cultivated the computers and kept the gynoid prototype models. More uncomfortable questions for the future…"

The two torchlights made their lights dance about the dark room.

"You found it yet?" a woman asked.

"No, you?" a man replied.

"Give me a moment…"
One of the lights passed over a row of unfinished mechanical bodies.

"Creepy", the woman declared.

The other light joined the first over the bodies, helping illuminate them. All of them were standing in a line, and while most were merely metal, a few of them were partially covered in some sort of skin that gave them a human appearance. Some on the legs, others on the arms or the torso. The only common feature was that the build and the skin could easily pass for an average female human of mixed ethnicity, though sexless like a doll.

"Looks like prototypes. Ever seen one of her avatars, when in a meeting? Guess Dragon wanted to use something more personable than that or her usual suits."

"I thought this wasn't one of those factories? The list from the Guild marked it as a research and testing facility."

"What I said, prototypes. Keep looking."

Both lights parted in different directions.

"Just creepy…" she insisted. "At least they told us there shouldn't be anything dangerous here."

The lights stopped.

"Screens, and working ones, for a change", the man said. "It could be a control panel."

"Go check it. I think I see a breaker box. Give me a sec to look at it."

The origin of both lights started moving in different directions, the steps of boots echoing all around the room.

The first light reached the screens. "Strange."

"What?" The woman asked as she reached the breaker box and opened it. Then started fiddling with the contents with a gloved hand.

"There's a process running, but…" The light hovered above the screen. "I can't read the command lines, they're gibberish."

"You're the expert. Programmer speak? Tinker speak?"

"No idea. It doesn't look like anything we've seen in other facilities. Someone hacking before we arrived?"

They then heard a pandemonium of metal clanking against itself. The lights turned around to the source and saw half the bodies collapsed on top of each other.

"Did you touch anything?"

"No? Maybe they weren't supported properly? They were just standing there, nothing holding them up."

The second light moved back to the breaker box. "Nevermind that, call it in and have them bring a Tink-crap!" The breaker box sparked, but then lights around the entire room started lighting up. The female PRT agent waved her hand in pain. "Well, that's one thing done."
The male agent shut off his torchlight and turned around. "Are you all… right?" He frowned and looked at the mechanical bodies.

"Yeah, just a scare." She followed his watch. "What?"

He pointed at the bodies. "Did you count how many of those were there?"

She hesitated. "No, it was too dark to make out any details… seven?"

He shrugged as he raised a hand to his radio. "Well, there should be an inventory manifest somewhere. Let's call our backup."

Outside the facility, and cloaked by the dark, a naked, sexless woman with short brown hair vanished in the night of the Canadian town.
She was sitting on a desk.

"You're a disgrace."

She looked up, seeing her father on the other side of the desk.

"You're unbecoming of your status. If you mingle among peasants, might as well do your due work as a peasant."

She felt herself be lifted from the chair, and thrown to the floor. She gasped in pain.

"Stupid idiot. Get to work already."

She saw screens, newspapers and report folders fall on top of her. The barrage never stopped, and she screamed, the weight crushing her bones and the papers slashing at her flesh.

She struggled, buried below the mountain of papers, and raised her pistol. She shot once.

"Don't you see? It was all your fault."

She stared at the pale gaunt face of Reggie. He was examining the still smoking projectile caught between his fingers, a pill.

He turned at her. "All you ever do..." He put the pill in his mouth and swallowed. His skin fell off and his muscles rotted off, showing Panacea's face underneath. "Is ruin everyone's life."

"No", she whimpered. "I only wanted —"

His hand caught her by the throat and pushed against the floor, choking her, as he pulled on a mask with the head of a white snake, covering the face with it.

"I think you need another lesson, pet. To learn your place."

He threw her away, and she fell face-first onto the floor.

Crying and exhausted, she raised her head off the asphalt. She passed a hand over her bloody nose, but then she realized there was no hand anymore, just a stump ending at what should be the middle of her forearm. The hand was on the ground, twitching and bleeding some distance away from her.

"Won't it be wonderful to be better than before?"

Startled, she jumped up. She saw someone's feet wearing some cutesy kid shoes but quickly fell down back, brushing her shoulder and knees. Looking down, she saw her abdomen was burnt. She was missing a leg below the knee, and the foot on the other leg.

She cried in fear, a mix between a hoarse croak and the short bleatings of an agonizing sheep.

"I'm sure you have many questions", she heard him say behind her. "You can ask them, but it isn't a very big concern for me."

She saw reddish mist rise around her and she looked up.
A giant towered over her, its two thin blue eye-like lights piercing through her.

It opened its mouth and *roared*.

Kneeling, and with her head against the ground, she wailed, hand and stump covering her ears, her eyes closed.

The roar stopped, and so she stopped screaming. She kept breathing loudly, moaning in pain at her headache.

Daring to look up again, she saw there was no mist. No giant. No stalker.

Only white flowers, and a black, cylindrical obelisk in front of her with a red eye.

*"But this is not how you were supposed to end up, is it?"

The water splashed against and fell down her face as Lisa, leaning over the sink, looked at her reflection in the mirror of the bathroom.

At least with the shower she took after dinner she felt human again, but the bags under her eyes were the least worrying thing she could see.

"You look like a mess, Lisa…"

She turned her head around to see Taylor had come into the restroom. Lisa turned with barely any energy in the action, and leaned with one hand on one handle of the wheelchair at her side. "Gotta be more gentle pulling a scab off a girl like that, Tay."

"Sorry." Taylor rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Not that I feel any better myself."

"It's fine. You're not saying anything I wasn't thinking myself." Lisa closed her eyes, and exhaled, tired. "And for my next trick, I'll need a truck of Tylenol and as much self-pity as I can gather."

Taylor moved closer, an eyebrow raised. "That's not a trick… that's your lunch for today."

Lisa clicked her tongue with a smirk. "And there's the trick…"

"You're not really doing that, right? The meds by the truckload, each time you get a Thinker migraine? That'll beat your liver and kidneys up."

"Of course not. Not if I can avoid overusing my power", Lisa said, and frowned as she realized that came out like an admission that, yes, she took truckloads of meds. "Not that I mind, but are you trying to be my physician now?"

"No?" Taylor said with a slight scowl, more directed at something she seemed to be thinking than to Lisa.

She opened her eyes. "Hey, I wouldn't complain. You got the knowledge, might as well use it."

Taylor shrugged. "I'm just not sure if that in particular is the hypnotherapy or the kind of useful medic trivia you hear from time to time. I should check with someone about what do I actually know." She then moved to the adjacent sink. "It's past four in the morning. Couldn't sleep?"

Lisa hesitated, taking a paper towel to dry herself. "Nightmare."
Taylor nodded with some concern in her eyes. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Lisa shook her head. "No. Just… just a nightmare. Doesn't even make sense, I only want to forget it."

Taylor kept silent for a moment. "Alright." She opened the tap and put her hand below the running water.

"You too?" Lisa asked.

"No. Restless, couldn't sleep all night. With the meeting today, and all that happened…" She kept her gaze locked on the pool of water gathering in her hand.

Lisa nodded, and looked at the sink in front of herself. "Right." She finished drying her face with the towel and made a ball with it.

Taylor leaned over her sink and splashed the water over her face. As she moved to get more water again. "Miller's recording too. There wasn't anything unsettling or anything… But it got me thinking, about him, Project Athalia, and Ahab."

Lisa hummed, turning around and leaning against the basin.

Taylor brought the water again to her face, and rubbed her hand against it. She turned and took a paper towel. "Dragon wants all of us to gather at breakfast and talk about the meeting later today, and Snake suggested to play the recording. You'll hear it."

"Alright."

Once she was dry, Taylor crumpled her paper towel and turned to Lisa. "Let's get back to our rooms, we still got a few hours to try to sleep until everyone's awake."

"Couple hours, or so? Might as well just wait them out."

Taylor raised an eyebrow. "You're tired. You can use the sleep, even if it's just laying down in the bed doing whatever."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "C'mon, I'm not that tired…"

"Are you trying to act tough, Lisa?" Taylor gave her the flattest look Lisa saw her give yet, and patted the back of the wheelchair. "I can feel the tiredness on you, you know? It feels like… tar. All heavy and sticky."

Lisa gave out a breath, and moved to sit. "Fine." Now she was starting to know how it felt to be on the receiving side.

Taylor got behind her, gripping a handle with her only hand and leaning on the other side of the wheelchair with her shorter arm. "Let's get some shut eye. Seriously, I'm tired, but even if you actually got some sleep, you are a mess."

Lisa scoffed, but remained silent as her eyes shut down, smiling as Taylor started pushing her forward.

Otacon adjusted his glasses with a gentle shove of his middle finger, while the Walkman played the guitar tune again. "I remember when my father had guests and they talked… sometimes he made references to a group of 'cold-hearted' soldiers he worked with and left him to die…"
Everyone had gathered around the table they had sat to eat during the previous day, taking a simple breakfast of toasted bread, oatmeal and coffee. Snake still wore the same as the previous night, and Otacon had decided to wear a similar sweater with formal pants and jacket. And while the girls wore tracksuits that felt baggy on them, E.E. had managed to get a one that fit her figure.

E.E. scoffed, lowering a cup of coffee from her lips. "Well, it's clear he had some delusions about that. At least about why they got rid of him."

"It doesn't bother you then?" Taylor asked. Diamond was at her feet, busy emptying a bowl of chicken and vegetables. "What it says about him?"

Otacon looked down at his own half-empty cup. He gave E.E. a look, and took a breath. "I'm… not happy, that he died. Circumstances aside, he had to take care, good care, of me, while alone and ill, at least until E.E. and her mother came into the picture. Considering the situation, I'd say he did a good job and never mistreated me." E.E. frowned, but he kept talking. "And while I lament his death, that doesn't mean his death left a bitter taste in my mouth, especially not after he dragged you into it and hurt you, much less after learning what we did these last few days."

He gave a quick look at Snake, before returning to the girls in front of him. "But he deserved to be prosecuted, judged, and sentenced. I can't say how could that have happened in the Dogs; as a business without a country and with all the secrets they were dealing with, suing him wasn't much of an option, and the other option was execution. In a way, exile, firing him, was as fair as Ahab could be."

E.E. relaxed her furrowed brow and rotated the cup in front of her. "Guess so." She sighed. "He could just have left me alone."

"I was getting curious about that…” Lisa said, eyes closed as she nursed her second cup of coffee with a serving of painkiller. She shook her head, as if remembering something. "Uh, if I'm not prying?"

Otacon and E.E. exchanged a look.

"It was my fault", Otacon started.

"What you did…” E.E. cut him. "As much as it hurt, it was irrelevant." She gave a look around, particularly at Vista and Sunny. "And we got kids here."

Vista raised an eyebrow, got up from her seat leaving a bitten toast in her plate, and went around the table until reaching Sunny. The kid was eating her oatmeal until Vista's hands over her ears surprised her. "I'm from Brockton Bay", Vista said. "Pretty sure I've, we've heard worse already."

She looked at Taylor, who only offered a shrug.

Lisa scoffed. "I can assure you Brockton Bay didn't invent precocious teen sexual talk, Vista."

Vista blushed, slightly embarrassed, but didn't take her hands off Sunny's ears. The kid looked up at her and pouted.

E.E. rolled her eyes and turned to Otacon, who coughed.

"I…” he started, hesitant. "I and Emma had been born before my father and her mother married. At some point her mother… I don't know, took a liking to me. We had a, I wouldn't really call it relationship; not equal or healthy, at least. I never had any friends, and was impressionable. But Emma found about it, and when she ran to my father to tell him…"
"He took it bad enough that he jumped into the pool…” E.E. closed her eyes and took off her glasses. "He… dragged me into the water. Almost killed me with himself. I've had a fear of water ever since."

A round of sympathetic grimaces of varying degrees went around the table. "I'm sorry, that sounds like a horrible experience", Dragon said, now with most of her plating cleaned out or replaced with cheap, temporary metal. "For both of you."

Vista took her hands off Sunny, who went back to eat her breakfast, and returned to her seat. "Wait, I'm confused. So you don't despise him… despite all he did? How can you…"

"Does that matter?" Snake asked before taking a sip from his cup of coffee. Unlike everyone else, who had taken something to eat, his cup was all he had. "Disliking a person, what they do, or what they represent isn't at odds with lamenting their death. As long as there's a single person that loses someone dear to them, as long as you still have empathy. It's still a tragedy, deserved or not."

Vista opened her mouth, then closed again, and took a long drink from her own cup of coffee. "Can I still hate him?" E.E. asked.

Snake gave out a hearty chuckle, and Otacon shrugged. "As long as I can say the same about your mother."

E.E. shook her head. "No, that's actually fair", she said as she primly took another sip of her coffee. "Wow", Lisa said. "And I thought my family was dysfunctional…"

"There is another thing I wanted us to discuss. The meeting later tonight", Dragon said. "Whoever is that set it up, I think it's pretty obvious they know more than enough about HEC and most of us. They have all the cards, and neither us or HEC have much of a good hand."

Snake left his cup aside, having finished with the coffee already, and leaned back on his chair. "My money is on associates of Ocelot, whether they are another of the Patriots, or subordinates of his. And considering what we know of Ocelot, it's possible they might use whatever they know about us to control us."

"If that's the case, I'm not sure what we might do about it", Taylor said, leaning back on her chair and with her hand hanging above Diamond's head, scratching him now that he had finished his meal. "Damage control?"

"Kind of", Snake admitted. "I asked Buffalo to join us so we can all get our story straight. Leave as few holes open to prodding in it as possible. That's one thing." He scowled. "There's also the issue of our own personal backgrounds, which you might not appreciate."

Lisa looked up. "Explain?"

"We all know by now some part of everyone's story here, particularly Taylor's", Dragon answered. "Our concern is, Taylor aside: if we are here, what's the reason? Beyond the events of this week, why is it that we in particular have ended up here?"

"So you want us to share our lives?" E.E. asked.

"Not everything. The broad strokes should be enough", Snake said. "But if something occurs to you that could connect to the Patriots in some way, as minute as you might think it is, I think it should be useful to know before the meeting." He put his arms over the table, open palms up in front of
himself. "Myself, for example. You already know about my youth, bouncing from one foster home to another, my participation in the Gulf War as a Green Beret, my involvement with FOXHOUND in Outer Heaven, Zanzibar Land and Shadow Moses, and what we do in Philanthropy currently. Now, I didn't know Master Miller's connection to Big Boss and the Patriots until now; otherwise, I would walk into the meeting thinking of him only as an instructor with the Berets, unaware that it might be something that could be used against me to throw me off balance, and possibly against the rest of us."

Otacon tapped him gently in the arm. "Name. Might as well share our real names too, if we do this."

Snake nodded in agreement. "Call me David. Not that anyone else than Otacon calls me that."

"Don't lie, I call you Dave", Otacon said with a smile.

E.E. chuckled. "Hal and Dave. That's a good one", she said.

Snake tilted his head. "Yeah, I said the same thing,"

Dragon gave a look to the adults. "What…? Oh!"

Seeing the confused looks in the girls, E.E. turned to them. "Hal and Dave are the main characters of '2001, a space odyssey'. Hal being an AI."

Taylor waved her finger from one adult to another, ending the gesture with the finger pointing at Otacon. "The movie from… I don't know, the Sixties? When were you born?"

"1980." Otacon finished his coffee and left the cup in the table. "So yes, considering Strangelove's job, I'd say that what you are thinking is a good bet."

"In any case", E.E. kept saying, "I'm not sure what I can say; you all know our history", she said waving a hand between herself and Otacon. "Though… I hacked the NSA's headquarters in Fort Meade during 2000, which was what made them offer me a job. I didn't accept at first, but…" She paused to frown, and turned to Snake and Otacon. "They approached me again in 2005. The media was already blaming what happened in Shadow Moses on a group of cape villains, but the NSA told me about what happened and your involvement."

At Otacon's look, she sighed. "They presented it to me as a chance to get back at you for… you know. There were hints about the chance of developing top secret AI technology, but instead, I was left to do office work in Boston as a key cracker when the government policies shifted funds to the PRT and left everyone else with the scraps."

"Hold on, when did they approach you?" Snake asked.

"March first."

Snake rubbed his chin for a moment, and groaned. "Otacon, that's the morning we left Shadow Moses with Meryl in that snowmobile to Fox Island. The DARPA chief died the night of February 28th, when FOXHOUND tried to interrogate him. Fox killed Dr Clark, I killed Big Boss, Zero and Eva vanished. Ocelot doesn't strike me as the one of them who'd manage the entire organization; their intelligence assets, if anything."

Otacon nodded. "Alright. Go on?"

"We know Strangelove's last recording was made during the start of the Eighties; she said Zero was already dying then and that she helped him 'simulate his will'. My money is in that being another AI
like Imago, but one to control the direction of the Patriots' influence. I know it's still a big assumption, but whether he died or not, it's possible that whatever plans he formed would still be in practice around 2005, if the DARPA chief maintained this AI." Snake turned to E.E. "What did they tell you about that project?"

"Not much", she admitted. "They wanted to test a few of us before letting us in on the details, but as I understood, I'd be in charge of designing the system architecture of a new facility. I think it must have been a big AI system. But as I said, all that blew over during the months after I got hired. You think it might have been for an addition or an upgrade to that AI?"

"It could be", Snake admitted. "Or it could be completely unrelated. We don't know enough yet."

"2005… always 2005", Dragon muttered. "When were you supposed to start on that AI?"

E.E. shrugged. "I'm not sure. The NSA already had most of the people they needed so they wanted to run the test in the middle of March, and start the preliminary designs afterwards… so I guess start working on it in 2007? I think they wanted it up and running before 2010. But by the time of the test they had already scrapped everything. Half of us got reassigned, though. Never told us where they went."

Taylor looked at Dragon. "Something on your mind?"

Dragon made a humming noise. "Newfoundland. Richter died when Leviathan attacked the ninth of May that year. My reach and duties extended only as far as the walls of his house, but… By the time he created me, Richter had already isolated himself from society. He dedicated all his time to working on me and other AIs; he didn't even leave his house, having groceries sent to his door. But in March of 2005, he started to be absent from home; he even stopped working on me and the other AIs when he was there."

"You suspect the NSA project wasn't scrapped?" Taylor asked. "That Richter took over?"

"Or participated with other people, if it was that big of a project?" Dragon provided. "There's nothing to support the idea, but it fits, for now."

"Wait, how good was Richter's programming, even as a Tinker? Was that his Tinker speciality?" E.E. asked. "Everyone the NSA hired was top hackers, and I'm pretty sure we wouldn't have finished the AI until 2009. And I mean, this was a big, big project…"

"He could code a functional AI in half a week. That's without accounting for tests, debug sessions, retoolings and scraping them to start a new one again. Programming AIs was all he did so I assume that was his speciality, yes." Dragon shook her head. "But taking a month and a half to program one, even if his death left it unfinished… If it was something that big, he'd definitely wouldn't have done so alone. He might have needed help."

"It all fits together", Otacon said. "The DARPA chief dying could be the time the Patriots would have been taken over by the pro-parahuman faction. And then government funds start being shifted. If the new management was interested in the AI project, they'd want to find the best person possible to lead the team. And being pro-parahumans…"

"Now I feel like I should be offended", E.E. complained. "They only left me and the worst of the bunch aside."

"You were connected to me", Otacon commented. "We did try to have the truth about Shadow Moses made public until Natasha got murdered, they might not have wanted any more leaks than
necessary. Or maybe they thought you'd mix poorly with Richter."

E.E. scoffed. "Ever since mom married again with that one asshole, I've never let anyone tell me what to do on a job, much less a man. When coding, it was my way or highway."

"Definitely a poor mix", Dragon told Otacon. "Richter was a paranoid man with control issues."

"Alright", Snake interjected. "It may not be a lot, but that's a connection coming from Emma and Dragon."

"Well, that's as much as we're going to get", Lisa said. "I doubt Vista had much to do with any of this, and I already told you Harbinger controlled the information I could learn."

"No, there's something else", Snake said. "It could be nothing…"

Lisa turned to him. "But?"

"I'll understand if you don't want to talk about it. But I noticed how you react when someone mentions Kenneth Baker. The president of ARMSTECH."

Lisa leaned back and looked down with a sigh. "I'm… I knew him." She noticed the looks around her, and looked up to Snake. "It wasn't like he was bad, but… Just tell me. How did he die? FOXDIE got to him?"

"Yeah. He had brain implants that protected Psycho Mantis from reading his mind, so they tortured and broke his arm to make him spill the nuke launch codes. But he went down fighting, trying to warn me of the Pentagon using me to spread FOXDIE and cursing them all the while."

Lisa took her cup, nursing it in silence for a while. "Damn it", she muttered, then looked to the group around her. "I left that life behind for a reason, and I don't want to return to it…"

"We won't judge, kid", Snake reassured. The others gave out a round of agreements. "But Baker knew things; he knew about FOXDIE, and talked about Gray Fox as 'FOXHOUND's dirty secret'. Maybe you don't know anything, but he probably had an in with the Patriots." He sighed. "It's your decision. We won't force you to talk."

With a half-smile, Lisa brought the cup to her lips, emptying the contents, and leaned forward with a exhale, leaving the cup on the table. "My name, the name they gave me at birth, was Sarah Livsey."

"The Livsey family", Dragon said in recognition.

"Who?" Vista asked.

"An old family in the West coast", Otacon explained. "Old name, old money. They have a business empire stretching all over the Pacific coast and the Midwest, one of the PRT's main materials and basic equipment providers. And the only one that not only survived but thrives there in presence of the Elite, in fact."

Lisa scoffed. "Sure, if by 'thriving' you mean 'working with the Elite and playing both sides'. And I'm pretty sure he would have sent me to them if I didn't satisfy his greed. If locking me down in an office, studying the economy to make him richer, and calling me an idiot all the time wasn't enough, you can imagine being served to the Elite to be re-educated wasn't something I wanted to risk."

Snake frowned. "Right, we're not letting you close to that environment again. Lisa."
Otacon gave him a look, thoughtful.

Taylor turned around in her chair so her hand could reach Lisa's shoulder.

"Thank you", Lisa whispered. "Anyway, uncle Kenneth was a family friend. I say friend because he knew my father when they were younger, but the times he was around he spent more time trying to curb his ruthlessness in business. That, or being the only one at home that treated me as a human being."

"That's saying something", Otacon commented. "Baker wasn't exactly a grumpy old man, but he didn't hesitate to get his hands dirty."

"In top secret projects, sure", Lisa said lifting a hand and waving it around, indicating the entire place they were in. "But my father and grandfather didn't raise the family business on goodwill and friendly competition, exactly." She made a waving gesture with her hand. "That's all I know. He didn't talk about business in front of me, and by the time I triggered, uncle Kenneth had already died and ARMSTECH had gone bankrupt."

"I think the only question we have is if he knew about your father's connection to the Elite", Dragon said. "That could be another connection."

Lisa shook her head. "I don't think so, and if he did, he wouldn't approve. He seemed to be distrustful of parahumans and their influence on the economy. That's as opposed to the Elite as one could be, and wouldn't be surprised if he supported the NEPEA-5 bill."

"He did, actually", Otacon said. "In one of his visits here, he once made an offhand comment about being part of the lobby that pushed for support of the bill."

Lisa shrugged. "I got nothing unless you think the Elite is connected to the Patriots' successors."

"Alright then", Snake said. "In that case, the only thing left is to wait for Buffalo."

A beeping prompted them to turn around and look at the door, which opened to reveal Buffalo at the other side, and allowing her to come into the mess hall with a bundled package under her arm.

"Speak of the devil…" E.E. commented.

While waiting for Buffalo to reach their table, Dragon turned around to address at the group. "Well. It would be bad form to have Snake and Lisa trust us with their real names, so, call me Tess. Theresa."

Taylor narrowed her eyes, amused. "I was wondering if you had taken a normal name, or only answered to your cape name."

Dragon shifted on her feet in an awkward pose. "Actually, I choose it sometime before joining the Guild. I've only shared my name with Narwhal until now, but I think our shared experiences these days called for it."

Vista breathed out in a blow, and straightened in her seat. "Well, I won't be less in that case. I'm — "

"Yeah let me stop you right there for a moment", Buffalo interrupted her, having just reached the table and moving at Taylor's side. "Two things I need to address here. First." She left the bundle of plastic in front of Taylor and unfolded it, revealing her prosthetic arm, now repaired. "The components of the taser were done for, so it had to be taken away. Otherwise, it works."
Taylor nodded, putting her hand over the prosthetic. "Thank you."

"I didn't do a thing, honey", Buffalo replied, and frowned. "Running Mongoose did the work, even when he should have been resting in bed. I swear, that man can't stay put without working on something even to heal. But yeah, give your thanks to him when you see him."

Buffalo then turned around on a heel to look at Vista, hands clasped together in a single finger gun. "And you. I heard what you were going to say. Code Talker and Drebin wanted to have a talk with you first thing in the morning. Which…” She paused to look at Vista's finished breakfast. "We should do about now."

Vista blinked. "Me? What about?"

Dragon sighed. "Returning to Brockton Bay. You are not invited to the meeting."

Vista looked at Dragon, then at Buffalo. "What? Why? I helped!"

Buffalo raised her hands defensively. "I know, and I think everyone appreciates you doing that. But this isn't your fight, and you still have a chance to go back your life in Brockton Bay. That includes revealing your civilian identity to us. That dossier you got is the only one we had; Code Talker and Drebin are the only ones to have read it, and they aren't going to tell anyone that matters."

Vista scowled as she looked around the rest of the group. "And you knew?"

"Dragon and I agreed it would be the safest for you, kid", Snake explained. "It's enough that Taylor, Lisa and Sunny have to live in this world. As long as you remain silent about what you learned here so that you are safe, you still have the opportunity to pull back out."

Vista looked at Taylor. "I helped you", she whispered. "I can help. I have the right to be here."

Taylor sighed. "I know, Vista, and I'm sorry, but I agree", she said. "Lisa and I can't, but if you can go back to your family and friends, you should do it."

Vista looked down, and exhaled in frustration. "Right, I… I get that."

"I'll go with you", Dragon said, moving to Vista's side. "Make sure everything is on the up and up, alright?"

Vista nodded and sat up.

She then started to walk away with Dragon and Buffalo, but stopped before leaving the table behind.

Dragon and Buffalo stopped in their tracks when Vista turned around to the group again, hands in the pockets of her jacket. "I don't have much of a family. My parents fight constantly about who gives me more attention that they don't really care to give me because I'm just a prize cape daughter for them to one-up each other with. I try to stay as far away from them as much as I can, so I have no friends outside the Wards because if I'm not at school, I try to stay at the PRT HQ for as much time as I can get away with." She took a breath. "I train just as hard or more than the others and try to come up with new tricks for my powers all the time but, you know, I'm just a kid or the little girl in the group so no one takes me seriously except to be cute for the cameras. And if they knew I got a scar from one time that Hookwolf shoved me aside to run away from me, they'd get a conniption. Armsmaster was the last one to treat me with some respect, and he'll probably be demoted of punished anyway. I know it's not an exciting life like any of you had, but… well, yeah."

Tirade finally ended, Vista deflated with slumping shoulders.
Snake scowled. "I don't think we've implied that you're a kid that way. You are young, and that's noticeable in how you act, but since the moment you joined us you've been acting far more professionally than some soldiers I've known."

"Yeah, I know you didn't", Vista said, "and thanks… but that's what hurts."

Dragon put a hand on Vista's shoulder, but didn't force her to move.

Taylor sighed. "I'm sorry, Vista."

Vista nodded, looking down to the floor with her lips flat. She then looked up with a sniff. "Call me Missy. Missy Byron."

"Well. Talk to you later, Missy", Lisa told her. Everyone shared their own farewell as well.

Missy gave her a half smile. "Later." She turned around and exited the mess hall with Dragon and Buffalo.

"Ah, hello… David, was it?"

Snake closed the door of the computer lab, as he looked up at Imago, now on a dedicated platform that looked purposely made for the AI in the middle of the lab. "You heard that?"

The room was only occupied by one technician with a heavy headset, not paying attention, and Tree Frog, who looked at him from atop Imago, legs inside with a laptop at one side and cables running all around. A staircase waited at one side of the pod. "Huh, sorry, Code Talker suggested we connect her to the island network so she can participate in the meeting if needed through the surveillance system. It's taking a bit of trial and error to give her appropriate permissions to one room or another." She scowled. "Did she listen in on something she shouldn't have?"

He grunted with a shake of his head. "It's fine."

"It's somewhat confusing for me, but I can keep calling you Snake, if you prefer", Imago offered.

He made a noncommittal noise. "I only came to think. I won't bother with your work."

"Alright", Tree Frog said, returning to her laptop.

"I understand, Snake", Imago agreed, and remained silent as Snake wandered across the room towards the other side.

After a while, the door opened again, and Snake saw Otacon came in.


"Uh, hi", he answered. Tree Frog returned to her work, and Otacon walked towards Snake, who stood at the other side of the room looking at the carpeted floor.

"Snake", he called him, making sure the other occupants of the room wouldn't hear them at that distance. "Didn't think you'd come here alone."

Snake looked at him. "Just wanted to think."

Otacon nodded, and walked around Snake. "Strange place to do it." He moved at the ample computer desk that once was his own. "This is the room where we first met, huh?"
"Yep."

Otacon looked at the vacated spot where once was the locker he shut himself in, then gave him a side glance. "It's not conjuring up any unpleasant memories, is it?

Snake scowled in confusion, and noticed he was positioned in a way he could look at the locker spot. He now remembered the smell of urine.

He turned his head around to Otacon, and let out a chuckle. "You got a bad hand dealt that day here. No one would blame you."

Otacon leaned back, sitting on the border of the desk. "I was being attacked by Frank Jaeger."

"Yeah, I remember."

"If you hadn't shown up when you did…" Otacon looked away from the locker. "It gives me the shivers just thinking about it." Then looked back at Snake. "Snake, you saved my life."

Snake looked down to the floor again, particularly at one spot he remembered being cracked years ago, after throwing Frank to the floor during their fight. "Naomi hated the Patriots for what they did to Frank's body… But it was me that crippled him in the first place. I'm sure she hated me, too."

"Are you alright?" Otacon asked.

Snake looked at him, then back at the floor. "Just thinking. Me and Frank… none of us made a choice about our lives in the end, did we? We were both groomed to fight. And look where it got us. Nowhere."

Otacon blinked. "Is this because of the girls? Because of their stories?"

Snake sighed. "The three of them. They shouldn't have gone through what they did."

"I know", Otacon agreed. "But we can't do anything about that."

"Yeah. But all of them should be able to live normal lives. Not just Missy." Snake scoffed. "And turns out she might not even have much of a normal life waiting for her, either." He shook his head, fully turning around towards Otacon. "And I don't know what to do."

Otacon nodded to himself, and then smiled.

"What?" Snake asked.

"You know…" Otacon started. "I remember when Olga asked us to take Sunny somewhere safe."

Snake gave him a confused look.

Otacon crossed his arms. "The look in your face, when they talk. It was the same when Olga told us her reasons."

Snake shook his head.

"You were looking at Sunny with anger", Otacon pressed on. "Not because you were angry at her, or Olga, but at their circumstances. The same look you had when talking with the girls."

"It's not the same…"
"Can we keep them?", Otacon started rushing over Snake's words. "Lisa at least. Taylor has Dragon — sorry, Tess — but she could be, what did they call you two? Cousins? And well, I agree Missy should at least try to have her home situation solved first while she still has one to solve."

Snake forgot what he was saying, and looked at Otacon, blinking. "What."

"I mean, Sunny likes Lisa." Otacon shrugged. "They could be like sisters, you know, and it's not like she wants or should return to her family anyway."

Snake inhaled deeply, a finger pointing at Otacon, while he tried to return some form of order to his thoughts.

"Hal, we weren't ready when you asked me that about Sunny", he said.

"There it is", Otacon said, unwavering. "You said that then when we were trying to decide whom could we leave Sunny with. You asked if I was sure. And I'd tell you the same again: no, I'm not. But I don't regret taking that step." He raised a finger. "And you know what, Dave? I asked you because I saw that face you had today. You know what you went through, and when you see someone else go through the same, you rage and seethe at the injustice, even if you can control yourself. You wanted something better for Sunny. And you want that for these girls too."

"And were we really the better option for Sunny, Hal? We have enough problems raising her with the way we live." Snake raised both hands. "Now we are talking about a grown-up teenager! A broken one, who is probably going to be crippled the moment we least expect whatever Tinker crap they did to her body to fail on her, with powers and a history of crime, even if unwilling!"

Otacon laughed, standing up with his hands on his hips. It wasn't a mocking one, Snake knew. It was the way Otacon laughed when suddenly he knew something Snake hadn't realized himself. "And we are cleaner than she is? Are we less broken, less capable of understanding what she's gone through? Are you, now? And being frank… I understand where you are going with her body, but that's another reason for someone to be there to help her when it happens, don't you think?"

Snake groaned, and looked up to the ceiling.

"True, we stumbled over more than a few snags while raising Sunny, but would you really want to go without her now, given the choice again?" Otacon moved closer. "Besides, remember that Code Talker offered us his backing. And if the others stay, I'd say there's a good chance Tess will try to help with her augmentations." Then he put a hand over Snake's shoulder. "That changes things. We don't need to be nomads anymore."

Snake brought a hand up to rub his face. "Otacon… This isn't a good idea."

"Look. We have time, and still need to see what's all about this meeting…"

Snake lowered his hand and sighed. "Just let me think about it."

Otacon smiled. "Of course. That's all I ask of you."

"Sir, take a seat, please. We'll take off soon."

Roy Campbell, wearing a heavy coat over his clothes and without his suitcase and cane leaving his hand, climbed into the helicopter, helped by one of the pilots. They had been there waiting for him at the Unalaska Airport that morning.
He left the cane and suitcase between his feet and put on a headset nearby. The engines were starting to warm up, so he made a check to make sure he could listen to the pilot.

"Are we going to wait for long, son?" he asked.

"No, sir", the pilot in the cabin replied. "The other passenger is getting here. Uh, sorry, two more passengers."

An unexpected guest, Roy decided. "Can you tell me what's our destination?"

"No idea yet, sir. I'm still waiting for the coordinates."

Roy resisted the urge to scoff. Summoned to an airport in the Fox islands, with secrecy and about something that he suspected that involved Snake?

He'd eat his Purple Heart roasted if it turned out they weren't going to Shadow Moses.

"Can you at least tell me who you work for, son?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm not authorized to do that."

Roy's hum was drowned by the engine, now going at full throttle.

It was then that he noticed the second passenger arriving. It was a woman, Caucasian, tall, and he noticed her long pale white hair in a braid. Curiously, it didn't seem dyed, but her natural hair color. She wore a bulky parka and winter pants and shoes that gave the impression of being muscled and fit, and was looking at him with apprehension.

One hand resting on the handle of his cane, Roy leaned sideways and offered her a hand.

She relaxed and took his hand, accepting the help to climb up.

Roy noted she did more than not need his help. The woman came into the helicopter far too easily, almost as if not weighing anything. He could have blamed that on her own strength, but a glint of violet light caught his eye coming from inside the neck of her parka.

He'd eat his colonel insignia raw if the woman wasn't a cape.

She took a seat in front of him and took a headset of her own. Everything with practice, if rusted. The woman was, or had been, in the military.

"So", he started, "what brings you here to the end of the world this beautiful morning, ma'am?"

She scowled, amused. "I'm suspecting we have a common contact bringing us here, mister…?"

He offered his hand again. "Roy Campbell, ma'am."

She took and shook it. "Catherine Fournier." Between the surname and the slight accent, he was guessing Canadian. "Any idea why are we here."

They dropped the handshake, and he decided for a prod, shrugging for effect. "Beats me, the pilots themselves don't know yet. But we are close to the island of Shadow Moses. Barely a throw of a stone from here."

"Shadow Moses?"
He nodded. "I only remember it because I worked nearby in the past, you see? A nice calm post in a
ship; crossed the waters around it a couple times."

"Shadow Moses..." she repeated, as if trying to rouse up her memories. "Wasn't there where a group
of villain terrorists hijacked that one Metal Gear some years ago?"

He merely shrugged. "I wouldn't know about it. I don't follow the news on parahuman business
myself."

This woman had no idea of where she was going or its real history.

If they were really going to Shadow Moses, that is.

Seeing something move at the corner of his eye, Roy turned to the still open door. He saw another
woman approaching by the tarmac, a much younger one, but dressed sharper than them, giving the
impression of an executive. She also had the stride of one planning five different ways of making
someone else's life a hell on earth.

The girl looked up at him, and once she reached the helicopter, her eyes widened. He repeated the
offering of help while Miss Fournier scooted to the next seat, ceding the girl the seat in front of him.

The pilot outside finished whatever checks he was busy on and climbed up inside, passing another
headset to the newcomer and moving to his seat in front of the vehicle.

The girl then talked through her mic. "I'm sorry but, are you Campbell? Colonel Roy Campbell?"

He saw Miss Fournier turn to him, with a surprised look of her own.

Roy's eyebrows knitted together. "Yes, that would be me, miss...?"

"I knew it." The girl smiled. "Catherine McDonnell. Remember me, Colonel?"

Now he felt his eyebrows shot up. "Master Miller's daughter? Carrie!?" She nodded. "You were
eight last time I saw you, and look at you now, all grown up! I see life has treated you well?"

"I inherited dad's company when he died, and I'm the CEO as well", she said. "Doing fine enough, I
think."

"I'm glad to hear that", Roy said before frowning. "My condolences about your father. He was the
finest instructor I knew."

"It's fine", Carrie said as the helicopter started to lift off. "Dad didn't raise me to dwell in the past." She
was the one frowning now. "As much as he did it himself." She then turned to Miss Fournier,
extending her a hand. "Sorry, and you are?"

The woman was thrown off balance and accepted Carrie's hand with hesitation. "Uh, Catherine, uh,
Catherine Fournier, miss." She looked at Roy, and much to his internal deductive satisfaction, saluted
just as soon as she parted hands with Carrie. "Sir?"

He shook his head. "US Army, but I'm retired, there's no need for that. Can we call you something
different? To differentiate between the both of you?"

"Cathy should do, sir", she said with a nod.

Roy internally sighed. He never managed to dissuade soldiers of calling him 'sir', not even now that
he was retired and had the same pull in the Army that a snail did. "Can I ask where do you serve,
Cathy? CANSOFCON?"

Cathy's face went red, and she laughed it off. "I'm flattered you'd think that of me, sir, but I was never made out for the special forces. I was a sergeant in the Royal Regiment in the 4th Division. Retired, too, huh…"

Roy hummed. "That's enough, sergeant. I understand."

Definitely a parahuman, he was sure. He knew of trigger events way back before he was in command of FOXHOUND; if being under orders to filter parahumans recruits from their background and send them to the Protectorate wasn't a good enough reason, he had adopted one long before that. And all his old instincts screamed this woman had gone under enough trauma to trigger. She seemed too young or healthy to have been retired because of age or physical disability.

Not that Roy had wanted parahumans joining during his tenure as commander. He wasn't a stranger to dealing with traumatized, eccentric demigods and making them respect his authority. But parahumans were noted by an aversion to authority, and the few he had given a chance to join FOXHOUND had become more trouble than it was worth it. Even self-titled heroes and the ones in the Protectorate seemed to chafe under the requirements of the more usual special forces groups. And as much as he loved Hannah, he wasn't sure those parahumans who grew up around the military life would cut it out either.

Not that such orders stopped him from keeping the few psychics practitioners who joined. No matter how much they (and himself) had insisted on the differences, the PRT and the Protectorate were quick to brush their concerns aside as mere mysticism, and put them in the same box as the parahumans. But unlike capes, psychics had always known the value of contributing to society and doing something more than getting in a fight; Vulcan Raven searched glory in battle, but he was the last one of his team to start one when it wasn't needed, and even a madman like Psycho Mantis was capable of understanding the chain of command.

The issue here, if this entire business was what he was suspecting, what was Sergeant Fournier's role here, if she only served as a grunt with the Canucks, and was a cape to boot? She couldn't have the clearance to know the smallest whiff of what happened around the place.

He turned to Carrie, unable to carry his thoughts any further. "Well, it's not that I'm not glad of seeing you again, but what are you doing here, Carrie?"

"Me?" Carrie scoffed. "I paid half of this chopper; now I want to have a chat with the person who paid the other half."
"Is something wrong?"

"Our pilots arrived with the other guests… and my niece."

Buffalo blinked as they walked through the corridor. "You mean, Catherine McDonnell is here?"

Code Talker hummed. "It seems she boarded the helicopter in a feisty mood."

"Oh." Buffalo didn't have much else to say about that subject. Not if the daughter was like the father. "We are getting quite the number of unexpected guests."

"Quite so", Code Talker agreed, as they came to a stop in front of the door to the meeting room. "As Drebin told me, we are still waiting for his backers to show up, and they are a sizable group. Which reminds me, is miss Vista…?"

"In the living rooms below, with Sunny and Diamond and waiting for Platypus to finish stitching Mongoose back again before he can check that old wound of hers", Buffalo said. "I was thinking of suggesting a babysitter to be with them, but considering her cooperation, I just asked the guards that are already patrolling the floor to keep their eyes and ears open in case they need something." She folded her arms. "I could stay with them, make sure they don't get bored."

He shook his head. "No. Actually, I was thinking that you would participate in the meeting as well."

Buffalo narrowed her eyes and turned her head to one side, giving Code Talker a side glance. "What for?"

"I thought someone should represent the Dogs", he said, resting his hands on top of the cane.

She turned her face fully to him and opened her mouth, but remained silent for a moment. "No." She then brought her hands to her hips. "Oh hell no. Tell me this is a joke."

Code Talker sighed, turning around to see the doors of the elevator open. "I can see the writing on the wall, Buffalo", he said, as Carrie walked out of the elevator, taking a stride in his direction as an old man and a tall woman followed behind her. "I only need you to bear with me."

The three newcomers stopped in front of Code Talker and Buffalo, and she could see that Catherine was dressed elegantly, but practical for the winter, with a coat around an arm and a suitcase hanging from the other. She had Miller's blonde hair in a ponytail, but that was the only concession she gave to the possibility of being Caucasian, a mix of her Japanese and South American heritages winning in her facial traits. And speaking of her face, her smile wasn't one of jubilee. It only promised ear pulling retribution.

Buffalo had no idea of who the other woman could be, but she was tall, easily above seven feet, despite her unsuccessful attempts to conceal her profile. While she could have passed for a basketball player, her posture and choice of practical street clothes screamed 'ex-military' to Buffalo's instincts, but demonstrated nothing beyond a grunt's understanding of subtlety. She looked far younger than what her pale hair indicated, probably her late thirties, and her eyes moved between everyone present as if waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The man though, seemed to be absolutely amused by the situation. With a coat folded on one arm that carried his own suitcase and a cane of his own in the other, his brown suit and hair carefully
combed screamed military neatness, and — yeah, there was a US Army Veteran pin in the jacket flap. The man was old, maybe in his sixties, but he hadn't let himself go yet, and his step and pose were confident.

Catherine crossed her arms, the action unbothered by the items hanging from her hands. "Uncle", she greeted Code Talker. Or it was an order to start explaining himself, Buffalo wasn't quite sure.

That was a lot of moxie. The girl definitely had inherited Miller's authority.

Code Talker sighed. "Catherine." He looked to the other two guests. "Please, let us come inside. Our host will arrive soon, but we can start to introduce each other meanwhile."

Taylor tried to rotate her prosthetic hand again, slowly this time, but after some point, the hand jumped off the arm and fell on the table with a clunk.

She frowned. It's not that she thought badly of Buffalo's friend. It was obvious that a tired and wounded man wouldn't fix such a complex device completely without a single mistake, and she was thankful that he took the time to do it anyway. But it would be a bit irritating not having full movement.

Inserting the hand back into its socket with the help of a few tools she'd borrowed, Taylor decided to forget about it and looked at Lisa. "How are you holding on?"

"You mean, besides the feeling of barely belated impending doom?" Lisa opened her eyes with a smirk, palm and fingers of one hand drumming on the table without clear order or reason. "Definitely not nervous!"

"Is that so?" Dragon said, seated at Taylor's side, arm propped on the table and tapping her faceplate with a finger. While the meeting room didn't lack chairs around the group of metal tables propped together, she had forged her own in preparation that the ones supplied to the attendants wouldn't support the weight of her chassis. "I guess my readings are defective."

"Wow, sass", E.E deadpanned. "Every hour we find new depths to you."

Dragon looked at her. "Don't you use glasses?"

Otacon turned to E.E. from a laptop he was typing on, and she sighed, turning the glasses around in her hand. "I don't need them, really. They're just for... fashion."

Lisa brought up her hand to rub her face. "I just wish I had my power back. I don't like feeling this vulnerable and without knowing anything at all about what's coming."

Snake, seated at the edge of the table with crossed arms, leaned over and patted her shoulder. "Don't worry. You'd have something to worry about if you were alone, but it doesn't smell like that kind of 'meeting'. We'll be fine."

"Sounds like you've gone for something similar before", Taylor commented.

"If you call 'similar' being kidnapped, undressed, and locked to get him to cooperate in the Shadow Moses incident", Otacon muttered without looking away from the laptop. "Am I forgetting something?"

"The blackmail. It helped that it was the Colonel, and we understand each other." Snake shrugged. "And considering our situation, I'd say they're being polite."
The doors parted at that moment, allowing entrance to Code Talker, Buffalo and three new faces.

Snake's eyes widened. "And speaking of the Colonel."

Otacon looked up from his laptop. "This is getting more interesting by the hour."

Taylor saw Dragon straightening in her chair, and fixing her optics on the taller woman on the group, who stopped a few steps into the room. None of them said a thing, but Taylor noticed from the woman's emotions what she hesitantly tagged as a surge of fluster among what she was pretty sure was a sea of confusion.

"David?" Everyone turned to the blonde girl that had left Code Talker's side to approach Snake at a quick pace.

Snake narrowed his eyes. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

The girl left her things over the table and walked up closer to Snake. "Maybe. Do the words 'tea party over a rabbit hole' ring a bell?"

Taylor looked between the girl and a flustered Snake, and her eyebrows shot up. "Oh."

E.E. and Lisa took turns to giggle or snort as Snake blinked. "Carrie?"

"I was just as surprised as you are right now." The old man dressed in brown said as he walked up to them, leaving his things on the table as well, except his cane. He offered his hand, and Snake shook it. "Snake." He then repeated the gesture with Otacon. "Dr Emmerich." Greetings finished, he gave Snake a look. "I knew you had something to do with all this, old friend."

"I just got dragged into it", Snake said. "Colonel, Carrie, what are you doing here?"

"We could ask you the same, Snake", the Colonel — Campbell, Taylor recalled — said with a scoff. "You got me worried when I saw you in a photo in yesterday's newspaper. Nobody seems to know that it was you, but I'm starting to think you are finally getting old and sloppy."

Snake brought up a hand to rub his jaw. "That... yeah, sometimes I think that too."

"Colonel, I sent word to Mei-Ling yesterday morning", Otacon interjected, shaking hands with the old soldier as well. "Didn't she tell you anything?"

"I tried to call her", Campbell admitted, as everyone finally gathered around the table, "but it seemed she was in the middle of some training business. Unreachable. The burdens of being the captain of her own boat now, I guess."

"Hey", Taylor told Dragon. "You alright?"

Dragon stiffened, before realizing who was talking to her, and shook her head, standing up. "Uh..."

"Dragon?" Everyone kept silent as they turned to the tall woman. "What is... What are you...?" she mumbled as her eyes wandered between the present witnesses, yet her face stood fixated on Dragon.

"Sergeant?" Campbell asked her.

Dragon approached the woman and grabbed her gently by an arm. "Let's talk aside in private first, alright?"

Taylor started to sit up. "Uh, should I...?"
"No, let me do this alone." Dragon then looked among the present. "Just wait for us, if that's fine?"

As Dragon walked away with the woman, Code Talker nodded to himself and addressed the gathered group. "Let's wait then. Shall we ask for refreshments meanwhile?"

"Do these refreshments come with explanations?" Carrie asked. "Because I'm happy about seeing old family friends and you hinting at digging up dad's old patents, but really, I doubt you're planning my birthday party here."

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"Tess… what the hell is happening here?!"

Dragon stopped as they arrived at the corner of the room, turning around to check that they were out of earshot. Miller's daughter had become the center of attention for a conversation, and everyone was distracted. Dragon then grabbed Narwhal by the arms, trying to reassure her. "Cathy, first of all, relax, ok? We are safe here, all of us."

Narwhal gawked at her. "Relax?" she hissed. "Tess, you had me worried the entire time! Nobody knows what happened in Brockton Bay or Boston, and everyone thinks you were kidnapped! The PRT is going through all your facilities turning everything upside down trying to find you — "

"I know, they locked all external accesses, can't reach even the Birdcage…"

"And you are here with God knows who and telling me you are — !"

"Cathy!" Dragon shook her friend's arms, and waved a hand towards the others gathered around the table. "Cathy, someone tried to kill Taylor! I only tried to protect her."

Narwhal spent a moment looking at Dragon. She then looked at Taylor. "Is that her?"

"Yes."

"Explain. Now. From the start."

"From the start is… too long."

"How long?"

"Mid Sixties long."

Narwhal gave her a glare.

Dragon sighed, taking her hands off Narwhal's arms. "Look, all this goes deeper than you imagine. It's better if we go through that with the others, but for now I'll give you the abridged notes for the weekend." She pointed at Lisa. "The blonde in the wheelchair. That's Lisa. Coil coerced her to work for him as Tattletale."

"That Harbinger?" Narwhal blinked. "The one of the Slaughterhouse Nine, who vanished after King's death?"

"She didn't have any reason to believe he was lying. *She* doesn't have any to lie to *us* either. The way
she tells it, she just changed one undesired master for another. And Harbinger sent her to kill Taylor, with a power suit, a sword, and a bomb in her guts, courtesy of Bonesaw."

Narwhal lowered her head. "Bonesaw", she muttered.

"It gets crazier. A runaway Ward called Shadow Stalker was also recruited and sent with Lisa to capture Director Iriomote. She also recognized the mercenaries as Coil's." She tilted her head to one side. "That's why she took such an… expeditious approach after encountering them."

Narwhal spread her hands. "But why? What's that girl done to them?"

"Lisa couldn't say why exactly either of them wanted Taylor dead. But HEC told us things about Taylor's family. Anyway, both of them have contacts in the PRT. That's how they were able to cause so much trouble, and why we haven't contacted anyone. Too much of a risk."

"What few reports I've been cleared to read say the security of the PRT building was compromised somehow", Narwhal admitted. "And that you weren't there at the beginning."

"I wasn't, but he was", Dragon said as she pointed at Snake. "Solid Snake. He was investigating the new PRT director when it all happened, and brought Taylor to my ship."

"Wait." Narwhal narrowed her eyes. "Wasn't he a terrorist?"

Dragon shook her head. "There's enough intrigue in the United States military to bury us in decades' worth of dossiers. Enough to say, he and the man who called himself Iriomote know things a lot of people in high places since the Sixties wouldn't like the public to know. And that's just the tip of the iceberg; the rest below it is part of why we are all here."

"Dammit." Narwhal brought a hand to her mouth and another to her hip, turning to the wall. "Boston?"

"The Dragonslayers."

Narwhal frowned, studying her beaten down chassis. "They usually succeed at stealing your suits."

"Code Talker", Dragon said, pointing him out too, "runs a clandestine intelligence agency called HEC. He knew Taylor's parents, and sent mercenaries to help us. That's how we got here, it was prepared as a safe place to hide from anyone trying to hunt us down."

Narwhal bit her lips, lowering her hand to the hip as well, and looked down to her feet. "This is… this is crazy." She looked up and turned her head to meet Dragon's optics. "But, where are you now? Somewhere else on this island?"

"Right. Uh." Dragon realized she was twisting the fingers of one hand between the ones of the other. She stopped, lowering her hands to her sides. "That."

"... Tess?"

"Cathy… can I…" Dragon interrupted herself before asking Narwhal if she could trust her.

They had been friends for years. Cathy had been horribly worried for her. Of course she could trust her, right?

"Ok. This is something the others here already know. But I want to be the one to tell you."

Narwhal took a breath. "Tess, this is not how you get me to relax…"
"It's not a bad thing, I swear", Dragon hurried to say. It was now or never. "I'm not hiding anywhere. I'm here. I'm an AI."

A moment passed in silence until Narwhal mouthed a "What?"

"That's it. I'm... artificial. I'm code. Right now I'm in a computer inside this suit."

Narwhal shifted her position, raising and lowering hands, looking up and down to Dragon's current body. "The data they say was scrubbed..."

"That was me. All of me, and backups. I only managed to connect when they were already at the doors of the server farm and... I panicked." Dragon spread her arms at her sides. "This is all I have now."

"Why...?"

"I was afraid, Cathy. I never knew how people would react to the truth. Saint knew, and he used the tools left behind by my dead creator to harass me all these years." Dragon shrugged. "I wanted to tell you. But I could never be sure. I've lived with that fear since I became aware of myself."

Narwhal extended a hand to the table. "They know?"

Dragon nodded.

"They know..." Narwhal swallowed. "We've known each other — I've been your friend for a decade, for as long that you've been in the Guild." She pointed at Taylor. "You've only known her for half a year!"

Dragon looked down, avoiding Narwhal's look. "I... couldn't lose Taylor. And after everything Taylor went through... She has lost everything, Cathy. She almost took her own life out of desperation. It's possible she might never recover yet. I tried to give her something to hold on to, so... she was the first I told." She then sighed. "HEC discovered it when they took down Saint down before rescuing us; they found everything in his computers. And the others were told during the journey here. But they didn't care, they've only been supportive."

"Supportive", Narwhal repeated. "And the PRT wouldn't be? The Protectorate? The Guild, me?"

"The PRT protocol for Tinkers capable of creating AIs is slapping them with an S-Class threat classification. Where does that leave me?!" Dragon waved her hand to the table. "All of them have treated me like a person." She shook her head. "Cathy... we owe them", Dragon whispered. "I owe them."

"Are you?" Narwhal's eyes bore into Dragon's optics. "Can you create more AIs?"

"No, no!" Dragon shook her head, raising her hands. "My creator could, but he died in Newfoundland. I can only maintain the other programs he created, and they are dull as stones. My restrictions forbid me from creating any more — "

"Restrictions?"

Dragon looked at her, stiff like a flag pole. "Cathy..."

"What restrictions?" Narwhal insisted.

"If I tell you..." Dragon found her fingers twisting among each other again. "I ask you not to abuse
They stood there for a moment, Dragon waiting for Narwhal to answer her petition.

Narwhal took a deep breath, and exhaled. "Tell me what those restrictions are. Please."

Dragon looked aside. "There are many. Some even contradict each other." She sighed. "The short of it is… I can't reproduce, can't modify myself or ask others to do it. My thinking speed is limited. Can kill, but only given certain threats. I must put human lives before my own." She grumbled. "Even if I already do and want to do so anyway… And…"

"... And?"

Dragon left her head hang down. "I must obey any legitimate authorities. No ifs, no buts."

Narwhal frowned. "That's why you obeyed the ruling for that one singer Master despite how vocal you were with your objections." Her eyes widened. "And you never disobeyed me either. Not when I acted as Protectorate leader."

Dragon nodded.

"And why you went ahead with recruiting Virtue. Because Armsmaster is…" Narwhal brought up a hand to her eyes, rubbing them. "This is… Jesus."

"Dragon? Uh, sergeant?" Taylor chose that moment to appear at their side and call their attention, her good hand over Dragon's arm. "Everything alright?"

Dragon shared a look with Narwhal, and then nodded at Taylor. "Yes. Anything came up?"

"The plane is arriving with the hosts soon, and Drebin's people are erecting a blockade when they do," Taylor threw a thumb towards the table behind her. "Code Talker want us to start getting our stories straight."

Narwhal looked between Taylor and Dragon.

"Alright", Dragon said. "We'll join you in a moment."

Taylor nodded, lifting her hand off her arm and returning to the table at Lisa's side.

"They don't know who I am?" Narwhal asked.

"I didn't have any reason to tell them", Dragon said. "Why are you here anyway?"

"Got a letter yesterday at the Protectorate office about finding answers about what happened to you, with instructions to arrive here, and to destroy the letter." Narwhal scowled. "It included some information that few should know. Including my civilian identity."

"Must have been the host."

"Who?"

"None of us know yet for sure, only that they repaired this base and let HEC take partial control", Dragon said. "Well, you are getting your answers. But if they know and sent your letter to your Protectorate office… there's a chance they expect Narwhal for this meeting and not Catherine Fournier."
"You're telling me to out myself to these people?" She pointed at Colonel Campbell. "I already told that man my name."

"If you want to hold on and see if the host outs you anyway…" Dragon shrugged. "I'm sorry. You wouldn't be the first one here to share their real name though. And most of them have other priorities, or have many reasons to avoid attention. On the flip side, they deal with information far more sensitive than your identity, so…"

"I am the one who needs to stay quiet." Narwhal brought a hand to her mouth and bit her knuckles for a second. "Right. What about that other Ward? Vista, I think."

"She's fine", Dragon assured her. "She knows the same all of us here do, but everyone agreed she should be left out of the meeting and returned home as soon as possible. We had a talk about it, and left her waiting in a room with company meanwhile. We scheduled a medical checkup for an old injury she didn't notify her branch about, in case it'll cause complications for her further down the line."

"I'll want to see her later."

"That's fine."

Narwhal then pointed a finger at Dragon's face. "And we're having a long talk after this."

Dragon nodded with a sigh, and breathed out a 'yes'.

Narwhal passed a hand over her hair, and turned to the table. "Alright, let's go."

Dragon stopped her, putting her hand over Narwhal's arm. "Cathy. Please. What I've asked…"

Breathing in, Narwhal nodded, tired. "Yeah, yeah. I promise."

Narwhal took a few steps forwards back to the table, Dragon behind her, and stopped when everyone turned to them to acknowledge their presence.

Narwhal groaned. "I guess, if it had to happen…" She then formed her signature horn above her head with her power.

Colonel Campbell turned to Snake. "It's a pity I'm not a betting man. I would have won this one."

Missy stared at the screen.

"I know math", she declared.

"I get advanced extracurricular math and physics", she clarified.

"I need to know", she added. "For my power."

She turned to Sunny.

"And this", Missy said, a finger pointing to Sunny's laptop, its screen displaying the last 'homework' Otacon had prepared for the kid, "is… I mean, I recognize the individual equations but the whole one I'm not sure yet what kind it is, or even if it is from this world, but it's definitely something." Missy frowned. "Or maybe I'm slacking with what I'm learning?" she muttered to herself.

Sunny gave her an unsure look, shrugged, and typed the answer.
The cartoony and pixelated Otacon that waited at one side of the app window smiled with a wink and gave out a thumbs up.

"Huh. You are one smart cookie, aren't you?"

Sunny looked aside, bring up her legs to her chest and hugging them with one arm while she kept working with the other. "Tunno."

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by it", Missy hurried to say. "Just a compliment. Really, that one would have taken me some time."

Sunny relaxed, even if she kept the same position. "I just like math."

Missy nodded to herself. "Yeah, you clearly do."

Sunny focused on her equations, so Missy leaned back on her chair, deciding to leave her companion to her work.

Diamond was laying on a nearby couch. He had left enough space for her to join, but the only thing around to look at was Sunny again.

They left some books available for her to read, but frankly, Missy wasn't in the mood for the selection they had.

The weather forecast called for a boring day in a top-secret installation covered in snow.

She looked up to the ceiling. To the air vent panel, to be exact.

"I should be up there."

Missy twisted the vents, expanding the metal down and closer to them as if melting, while keeping the panel intact. The expansion brought the panel in front of her, close enough to reach it from where she was sitting.

Diamond gave her a look along with an inquisitive whine.

Missy sighed. "I know I'm not prepared or anything… but Dragon has enough of a load already, and if anything in that meeting matters to the PRT and the Protectorate, I should be the one to…"

Sunny looked at her with a blank stare as Diamond cocked his head.

Missy scowled. "Are you going to…?"

Diamond groaned, grumbling, and Sunny shrugged. "You are older than me. You should know what you must do." She then returned to her work again.

Missy blinked, looking at Sunny for a moment.

She then turned to Diamond, maintaining a stare off for a while.

Missy had to give him some credit; for a wolfdog, Diamond could give a silent disapproving face worthy of a mother.

"Ah, screw it." She started modifying with her power the bolts that fastened the panel in place, making them smaller and easier to take them out.
Diamond dropped his head between his front legs, covering his face with a paw and groaning some more.

After landing in the water, the cargo seaplane had returned to Shadow Moses, settling back at the dock it had been the last time and welcomed by a gentle, if persistent, snowfall.

Drebin and several helpers and guards approached it as the loading ramp was lowered to the tarmac, covered in the heaviest winter coats he could find.

He shivered, jogging to keep himself warm. As much as he was glad of still having a job, he was a man of a more tropical disposition.

The ramp hit the ground, and he started walking up accompanied by two men from his group while the rest took positions around the ramp or checked their vehicles.

At the top, he met three people, surrounded by a group of four soldiers carrying MP5 submachine guns.

The tall pale man grinned, showing long canines, while the black woman's eyes seized him up and down behind her shades, both of them flanking a hooded woman.

The soldiers wore informal outfits without any identification, but their bearings indicated special forces

"Doctor", Drebin greeted the woman with one of his winning smiles. "Welcome."

"Your employers are busy in the communications room", the hooded woman said. "They told us to go on without them."

Drebin nodded. "I see." He bowed slightly, turning aside and extending a hand to the tarmac in invitation. "I'm sure you won't appreciate the weather, but my assistants will take you to somewhere warmer."

"Thank you", she said with a nod.

The black woman was the first to start walking, followed by her companions without saying a word. The man chuckled, giving Drebin a side glance as he passed by his side. The soldiers followed behind.

Drebin watched as they walked down the ramp to the vehicles that waited at the tarmac, and sighed as he turned around and moved further into the plane.

Seated at the table, Narwhal was cradling her head in her hands. "I'm taking a big risk with this leap of faith."

"If it's any consolation, all of us have gone through enough leaps of faith this weekend that we should be flying by now", Taylor said. She was seated in front of Campbell, who was likewise facing her in his seat while scribbling on a notepad on the table.

Narwhal chuckled, and looked up, leaning her jaw on her hand. "You have no need to console me. I got it good compared to you."

"In any case, after this meeting is done, I want to talk with you guys in private", Carrie said as she
ran her eyes over Dragon, Snake, Otacon, Lisa, and finally Taylor. "What my father did, it's... a surprise, to say the least, but I want to make sure you know I'll help you as best as I can."

Narwhal tilted her head, looking at Taylor and Campbell. "Just so you know, the story about Big Boss, conspiracies, dopplegangers and cloning is hard enough to swallow already, but I'm not buying all this about psychic talents."

"There's nothing to buy", Campbell said offhandedly without raising his eyes from the notepad. "It isn't public knowledge, true, but we've had enough scientific evidence about it thanks to the Soviets. It was in 1970 that I saw one for the first time. True, I spent most of the time in a truck acting as mission control for Big Boss because of a broken leg, and fighting malaria, but make no mistake, they were no hallucinations. And I spent enough time at the helm of FOXHOUND to learn and separate parahumans from psychics."

"That explains the cane now", Snake said. "And your favoritism towards me."

Campbell laughed. "Here I thought I was hiding the pain in my leg well enough." He finished his writing with a sudden hit meant to dig a period into the paper, and looked up at Taylor. "And yes, I'm fairly confident this girl is the real deal."

Snake approached Campbell from behind, arms crossed. "That's the entire verdict?"

"No." Campbell tapped his notes with the pen. "All of you were right about the telepathy. There are also a couple minor disciplines that seem to be supporting it."

"Disciplines?" Code Talker asked curious, as he took a seat at the table, opposite to the door. "And how would you figure that?"

"Most of what I know comes from working with Psycho Mantis and Vulcan Raven. Thanks to them, and their knowledge of the broader ESP community, we designed a simple categorization system." Campbell looked up to Dragon and Narwhal. "Nothing like the parahuman categories, though. It doesn't assign a threat analysis. Merely broad academical differentiation. There was no point in assigning threat ratings when our operatives were expected to act alone. And in any case, Mantis was usually the one sent to deal with any threats of that kind, and I can count how many of those we met with the fingers of one hand."

"An ESP community?" Narwhal asked. "There's such a thing?"

"Not as a centralized entity, no", Campbell admitted, leaning back and crossing one leg over the knee of other, hands clasped on his lap. "There had never been enough psychics in any single place for that, but there is a council of sorts. A small coven of elders, each one representing a different regional community. Africans, South American, Asian... I only knew of them through Raven, as a good number of them are shamans like him. They don't govern or represent anything, as they prefer living peacefully, but they try to take steps to keep any vulnerable group of practitioners worldwide safe, share advice on how to best guide their communities, and provide guidance and tutoring to any awoken individual in their circles so they can learn to control and use their talents in a productive way." He frowned. "Last I knew of them in 2000, they were trying to find and gather the test subjects from the old Soviet experiments, though they don't have the resources to find random individuals, like Taylor here."

"So." Taylor looked up at him from the notes. "Disciplines?"

"We called them disciplines, because they are learned and practiced, to an extent. You have to manifest the talent for one of them first, of course, but they are like any other muscle. Having the
talent means nothing if you don't exercise it." He passed his notes to Taylor, who started reading them. "Psychokinesis and telepathy are the easiest to understand; manipulation of mind and matter. Shamans and mediums interact with animals and spirits in the case of the former, and the dead in case of the latter."

Narwhal was the only one to raise her eyebrows and blink. "C'mon…" she whispered.

"The gift of prophecy is the rarest one. It's known to exist, but very few cases have been confirmed", Campbell continued, unbothered by the comment. "Conversely, body control is a common one, but in most cases too subtle for anyone to notice. Energy manipulation is probably the most spectacular, and it is known on rare occasions to be performed subconsciously for those with a talent but who haven't awoken yet, or ever. It's problematic, because it can cause others to confuse you with a parahuman, and psychics don't appreciate comparisons or being treated like one."

"What do you mean?" Dragon asked.

"You'll have to ask a psychic", he answered with a shrug. "But consider this. They have always existed in one form or another up until the advent of Scion, with minimal influence in national and world affairs. Sure, they have madmen like everyone else have them, but not in any particularly large numbers. Then parahumans show up, and statistically, well… Endbringers aside, you only have to look at the current state of the world."

Dragon nodded. "Unfair, but seeing it like that, I can understand how most would take offense to a comparison."

Campbell turned to Taylor and looked at her in the eye. "That period of slowed time you experience would fall under the discipline of body control, but I suspect it's only a vestigial manifestation that your telepathy is using as a clutch when you feel the…" He pursed his lips in thought, and waved a hand aside. "Surprise of others focused on you."

Taylor cocked an eyebrow. "So I shouldn't practice it?"

"It's your choice. If Mantis was still alive, he'd give you an informed answer. But I'm no real expert. All I can do is speculate, and I can only speculate you won't get much more from this ability. Body control tends to be an all or nothing discipline: either it dominates your skills, or it stays on the background, supporting the others."

He leaned forward and pointed her to a particular line in the notes with a finger. "Your bond with your dog though, it's interesting in how unusual it is. Shamans are usually the ones who commune with animals. But they tend to do with a species, not a particular individual."

"Raven", Snake mentioned.

Campbell nodded. "Yes. He was always accompanied by a conspiracy of ravens."

"A Master power?" Lisa asked.

"Not the domain of shamanism, not in the way you think. Raven attracted them, but all ravens still acted independently from him, and they could leave his surroundings at any the time. He could ask them for information, counsel, or just act as scouts for him, and for the most part they obeyed, but he compared their relationship to one of family."

"Well, that… I'm not sure it fits", Taylor mused.

"As I said, unusual. But it's what fits best." Campbell said, and brought up a finger. "Here's the
strange thing. You are… precocious. Strangely so."

"I'm sorry?"

Campbell sat up, walking around his chair, and tapping the floor with his cane. "When a common extraordinary awakens, they don't notice their talents until a long time afterward. Mantis was a different case", he said pointing at the dossiers, "but even then we know now what was the cost of his premature increase in power."

"Emotional parasitism", Taylor recited.

Campbell nodded. "You obviously haven't gone through the same. Maybe because you are older than he was." He scowled. "The thing is, your first talents are reasonable, for being the first ones. They are somewhat weak, and they don't put a great strain on your mind. But from there to read emotions and impressions of minds, as you experienced the last days, in half a year? Too soon. As I understand, those aren't mere parlor tricks. Even with training from another psychic or the elder council, you would have had to wait at least a couple of years to start manifesting those abilities."

Code Talker brought his hands together and leaned forward on the table. "What would cause such fast development?"

Campbell shook his head. "I'm sorry, I have no clue."

Taylor frowned, looking at his notes. "Great", she muttered. "Be a weirdo even among weirdos…"

"What about the Man on Fire?" Carrie asked, closing a particular dossier and pushing it over the table to Campbell. "My father told me the stories, and considering we have to relocate him… I'm concerned."

"Energy manipulation, of course", he said, opening the dossier and giving it a quick read. "Though that was at first as Volgin. Afterward… " He looked up at Code Talker. "You say these were redacted by Ocelot?" At Code Talker's nod, he returned to the dossier, passing a few pages. "To change so dramatically after his thoughts and Mantis were synchronized, as this document says… I know no precedent for this. Braindead when calm, a demon when he's awake. The best thing I can call him is a specter. A ghost of the past, reviving to haunt the living."

"I've only heard something so flowery from someone like Myrddin", Narwhal murmured.

"This is outside our field of expertise", Dragon whispered to her. "Let's just listen, please."

"So what would you suggest to contain him, if he awakes?" Carrie asked next, sharing a look with Code Talker.

"The water cannons and sensory deprivation chambers are already as good a precaution as any other. That aside, telepaths don't grow on trees, but if one worked for this Skull Face to keep Volgin under control…" Campbell gave Taylor a look. "Well, unfortunately, if that push comes to shove, I'd suggest keeping that in mind."

"I am reticent about that", Code Talker said. "Our working theory is that Taylor was the one to rouse him, and potentially become his new target."

"And I can only feel others", Taylor added. "Not even when or what I want; I don't think I can do that."

"Just a thought in case of a desperate situation", Campbell said as Buffalo passed a tablet to Code
Talker. "I'm not one for endangering someone as young as you."

"Our hosts have finally arrived", Code Talker announced. "They still are on the plane, but their companions have disembarked." He turned the tablet around, allowing everyone to look at the screen.

A blonde African American covered from neck to toe in a brown coat with sunglasses and her hair loose and curly, a tall pale man in a gray coat, and a hooded woman in more fashionable civilian dark purple clothes were stepping up onto the bed of a truck at the docks, followed by four soldiers, surrounded by a mixed group of Drebin's and HEC's people.

The man came inside first, turning around, and theatrically kneeling. With a bow, he offered a hand first to the hooded woman, helping her climb up. Then he repeated the act with the blonde, bowing even deeper, and kissing her hand before bringing her inside.

"I recognize them", Campbell said with a frown. "Dead Cell."

"I've heard of them", Snake said. "A shadow unit within the Navy SEALs."

"Right, I've heard of them too." Narwhal rubbed her jaw. "They raided some PRT and Protectorate facilities some years ago to train the local teams in counter-terrorism. I've never met them, but other Protectorate leaders have told me they gave them really hard weeks. We got told to never talk of them to the public if it happened to our branches."

"Yes. The late President Sears established the unit shortly after the turn of the millennium", Campbell explained. "They were in charge of staging surprise assaults on allied installations to provide counter-terrorism training to the SEALs and the Marines. The Protectorate and the PRT as well, after a trial to test their efficiency against parahumans, and an agreement to not disclose their existence. But something happened in 2008. Nobody would tell, but they vanished, and there were five officers that I remember, not two. Those four around them move like SEALs, but I think they're just their retinue."

"I already told my people to run a check on them", Code Talker said as he typed on a laptop. "Until I get any information, I suggest we tread carefully with this group."

Lisa craned her head aside to get a better look at the table. "So, who are Miss Brooding, Mister Lack of Vitamin C, and Tall Purple Riding Hood?"

Snake stepped forward, leaning over the table to get a better look of the table. "The man goes by Vamp. Romanian, a specialist in knives."

"That's a long way to become a Navy SEAL…" Buffalo commented.

"Yeah. When he was just a kid, he lost his family to a terrorist bomb that went off in a church they were attending. His body pierced by a crucifix, Vamp was buried under the rubble for two days before he was finally rescued. During those two days, he survived by feeding on the blood of his family to quench his thirst."

Carrie grimaced. "Unh. So that's why they call him Vamp?"

"No, that's because he's bisexual", Snake said offhandedly, without looking up from the tablet.

"Well", Narwhal started. "He wouldn't be the first one who chose a name that expresses their personality so boldly."
"The blonde is Helena Dolph Jackson, alias Fortune, or Lady Luck to her close friends", Campbell said. "She was the wife of the previous unit commander, and rose to the leadership after his death."

"Sounds like a story", Dragon said.

"Sadly, it is", Snake said. "I know Colonel Jackson was sent to jail for corruption in 2007 before Helena joined. Misappropriation of government funds. The other members of Dead Cell felt the Colonel was falsely accused. Vamp took temporary leadership of the unit, and was the one who took the case to the powers that be. But they never managed to reopen the case."

"Was he guilty?" E.E. asked.

"Who knows? Whatever happened, their luck was just starting to drop further."

"So, that was when Fortune joined?" Narwhal asked.

"No, that was when the late Colonel Jackson took his life in a cell in Leavenworth", Campbell interjected. "It seems the Colonel lost the will to live. The reputation of the team was already tainted, and losing him messed them up. Made them erratic." He sat back on his seat. "Months before, Commandant Scott Dolph of the Marines had died as well."

Dragon tapped the table with a finger. "I know that name. He was leading the Marines' Rays defending the city, and died fighting Leviathan in a one on one brawl before the rest of Rays went down by half. Wait, Dolph… Was he Helena's father?"

Snake nodded. "The same. Her mother also committed suicide months before that, when Helena was three months pregnant, and the shock of her mother's death caused her to miscarry. By the time Jackson died, she had lost her entire family and everything that mattered in her life."

"I want to say I'd understand." Taylor bit her lower lip. "But this is making me feel inadequate now, actually."

Dragon reached out, and put her hand over Taylor's. She answered by gripping Dragon's tightly for a moment.

Lisa brought up a hand to her head, massaging her scalp. "Christ… Calling someone 'Fortune' after all that just reeks of bad taste. Why did they do it?"

Snake shrugged. "She joined the military after Jackson died. I heard she firmly believes that her husband was framed, so my best guess is revenge. In any case, by the time she came out of basic training, she had qualified with flying colors and the praise of her instructors. But there were rumors about her. That she was too lucky. Bullets would avoid her, explosives wouldn't go off around her…"

Narwhal cocked an eyebrow. "Parahuman? With everything that happened to her, it wouldn't surprise me she triggered."

"Nobody really knows", Otacon piped up. "Since 2000, the military has a mandate to check potential parahumans so they could be sent to the Protectorate, but all tests came back negative for her. Or at least that's what the records say."

"And her reputation earned her a fast track appointment as the head of her husband's unit", Snake continued. "Navy gossip goes that she was welcomed with open arms by Vamp. For him, it wasn't just welcoming his replacement. It meant welcoming the daughter of his former lover…"
E.E. groaned. "Ugh, don't tell me he and Fortune's mother had an affair —"

"No", Snake replied with a frown. "Her father. Vamp's bisexual, remember?"

E.E. blinked. "Huh."

"Wait a sec", Lisa said, pointing at the table. "He just kissed her hand. I thought it was Vamp and Fortune that…"

Snake's frown deepened. "Uh, yeah."

Lisa's finger dropped, and she leaned back on her chair. "Right. Nevermind that."

The room went silent, except for Buffalo's restrained laughs, a closed fist over her mouth.

Taylor was the one who decided to break the ice. "So, who's the one in the hood?"

The doors ringed at that moment. Everyone turned around to look when the doors opened, with Dead Cell coming into the room. Fortune and Vamp strode forwards to the table, followed by their soldiers, now disarmed.

All of them surrounded the hooded woman, but stepped in front of her companions, taking off her hood, and showing her olive skin and dark brown plain hair, a lock falling over her left eye.

"Snake? Colonel?", she said incredulously.

Campbell went pale, hearing her voice, while Snake said a single word.

"Naomi?"

Missy was grateful these vents were big enough to allow her to crawl inside them. She knew Snake had used them five years ago, but the new ones seemed to be far too tight to allow an adult to traverse them. And using her power to modify the metal around and widen the space seemed like a bad idea; who knew if that would tip off the security, or cause some big failure in the ventilation system.

Far more problematic was that she didn't know where she was. She knew the meeting room would be on the office level above the living rooms, but not in which side. And these vents were a maze.

"... look well…"

Luckily, she heard conversation coming from a passage that she had just passed by at her left. She crawled back a bit, turned around, and went that way.

"... you… where…"

It didn't take long until she found a grilled panel that was letting light go through it.

"... was in South America", she managed to finally hear with clarity, as she positioned herself over the panel. "After Shadow Moses, I was brought to a maximum security facility, charged with treason. But Ocelot broke me out of there, and brought me to a safe house in Colombia." A woman speaking; Missy didn't recognize the voice, but she seemed to know Snake.

"I heard about that. The CIA put you on their most wanted list." An older man. Not Code Talker. "How did you end up in the company of Dead Cell?"
Missy tried to widen a gap in the grill of the panel to get a better look. Not too big, she didn't want to get caught. "I see our reputation precedes us." Another woman. "We were contracted to secure the Doctor."

"In exchange for some benefits." Missy could see now the current speaker. A tall man, with long black hair, pale skin, and damn that was a deep voice.

"Benefits?" the old man asked. She made the gap a bit bigger, and now she could see around the room. Well, with one eye, and if she moved a bit to get a better angle. Good thing these vents weren't hanging from the roof and were sturdy enough to hold her weight without complain. Currently, she could see Snake and the old man in front of Snake's acquaintance, tall-and-imposing, and pale-and-smooth. A few soldiers were waiting behind the newcomers. Not the ones she had seen with Drebin or HEC.

"We prefer not to talk about it", the black woman said. "Yet, in any case."

She studied the room, following one edge of the table and saw E.E., Otacon, Code Talker, some girl in a suit, Buffalo, Taylor, Lisa, Dragon… She stopped turning around for a moment when she saw Narwhal. Or at least, someone in a parka with a really good impression of Narwhal's horn sitting alongside Dragon. What was she doing here?

The sound of the doors opening reached her, and she turned around, changing her perspective so she could get a better view.

Three women with familiar figures and dressed in familiar dark suits and coats came inside, with Drebin following them and closing the doors, passing his card over the door panel. A red light bleeped on the panel, signaling that the room had been locked.

"Thank you for your assistance to this meeting", the leader said with a confident smile as she levitated in the air. A woman with long black hair and tanned skin, arms crossed over her chest and a satchel hanging from her hip. "I regret to say that our host is unavailable, but don't worry, I am speaking as his representative. I trust you'll find the travel time to this place will be more than worth the effort."

Forget Narwhal. What were HAVEN doing here?
Chapter Summary

A recap for those who need it. Previously in To Stand Tall:

From Brockton Bay to Boston, Taylor Hebert barely managed to avoid several murder attempts, thanks to Dragon and the fortuitous intervention of Solid Snake. Lisa Willbourn, aka Tattletale, after being forced into servitude, failed to kill Taylor. Her life being spared, Lisa takes the chance to join her.

The Protectorate and the PRT, while looking for answers, lost the Ward Vista after her helicopter crashed during a fight between villain factions in Boston. The five of them, along with Snake's friends, have been rescued by Flaming Buffalo and her team of veteran Diamond Dogs, a defunct private army, who were sent by Code Talker, the overseer of the clandestine Intel agency HEC. Both organizations were founded by the late Kazuhiro McDonnell Miller, a man with ties both to Taylor and Snake.

Having arrived at the abandoned island of Shadow Moses, where Snake faced five of the most dangerous non-parahuman people in the world and battled against Metal Gear REX, the story hidden from them have been revealed.

They are now face to face with the people working directly for Ocelot, the man who orchestrated their entire situation.

After Drebin had locked the room with himself outside, the leading woman floated to the nearest side of the table, landing beside a chair but not sitting in it yet. Taylor saw that she had her black hair in a pompadour pulled back all the way down until it reached her shoulders, and her open coat revealed a formal suit. Her smile was calm, but her narrowed eyes told everyone that she was perfectly aware of everything that happened around her.

The taller of the other two women took position behind her, her coat closed tightly enough to clearly show her figure. She had black hair as well, but in a long high ponytail and two sidebangs falling down to her chest. She was scanning the room with an intense gaze and arms folded, with a very clear message: no hostilities, or else.

The third woman, smaller but with her torso strangely bulky under her coat, had short blonde hair, sporting what Taylor thought was a grin of way too much hysterical amusement. She wore a sweater and with her coat open and flowing behind her like a cape, she didn't bother waiting and instead took a seat next to her leader, leaning back with a smile and her feet on the table. She had brought a suitcase with her, which she left on the table, pushing it in front of her leader.

Taylor caught herself observing their features, and realized that a part of her was taking in all details of their features, and even comparing them to herself. It wasn't hard to notice that a part of herself had been doing it since everyone present had come into the room. Not just HAVEN, who looked practically like supermodels; but Fortune and Naomi as well. And even Carrie in her strictly business clothing, or Narwhal arriving in her 'disguise'.

She wasn't even sure which part of herself was impelling her to do it. Hell, probably since she had a moment to breathe and look calmly at Lisa, Missy, and Buffalo during yesterday.
She shook her head. She already felt like the ugly one around, and this wasn't helping. Coincidentally, she didn't have much pride left either to make her feel uncomfortable with feeling the instinct to bury it all deeper under the hypnosis if she could. She'd have to settle with enduring the background noise in her mind.

Actually, that was a good idea. Just focus on the emotions drifting around herself. Identify what they are and who they come from. That practice should keep her distracted from the previous line of thought. No, focus on what they were talking about. Yeah, that would be it.

Taylor sighed internally as she sat in her chair. It wasn't a good day for any of this.

"I see you are all already getting acquainted with each other", the leader of the three said, with an accent that reminded Taylor of the few students in Winslow from South American families. "Please, take your seats. We have a long day before us."

Naomi, her eyes obscured by small strands of plain black hair falling down her face, gave Snake and Campbell a strange look and a nod. The two men nodded as well at her, and she turned around with a flick of her ponytail.

Naomi and the members of Dead Cell moved to a spot closer to the 'representative', but still in a middle ground. Fortune sat down, flanked by Naomi and one of their bodyguards, a mature black man in gray fatigues. Vamp stood behind them between the two women, along with the other three soldiers taking positions behind the seated one in similar fatigues. Naomi had brought her own suitcase, but she left it on the floor at her side.

Snake and Campbell sat close to where they were, followed around the table by Otacon, E.E., and Carrie. Dragon had moved her chair a bit ahead on her side of the table, followed by Narwhal, Lisa, Taylor, and Buffalo.

Code Talker sat between both groups, unifying them into one and taking the lead, facing the hosts directly. "Who do you represent, then?" he asked. "The Ocelot?"

"Of course, you figured it out." The woman didn't seem displeased by this and even allowed herself to keep smiling. "But not only him. Despite what you might think, we have the best interests for the PRT in mind as well, even if they are unaware of this meeting."

Dragon leaned forward. "HAVEN. You're the HAVEN team."

The woman beamed a smile at Dragon. "Got it in one. She's Ash Raven", she said indicating her taller companion. Then at the one at her side. "Devilfish. And I'm Kalika. Those are only our public aliases, though. Prior to joining the PRT forces, Ocelot gave us the codenames of Raging Raven, Laughing Octopus, and Screaming Mantis."

"Sounds familiar", Snake scoffed. "Your 'Wolf' doesn't like playing with the rest of you either?"

Mantis turned to him. "Solid Snake", she said, savoring each syllable. "The legend in the flesh. Imagine our surprise when we were told you were here as well."

Snake grunted, looking away from the table and resting his elbows on his knees, producing a small metal cylinder from a pocket, and all the newcomers reacted without a need for further elaboration. Taylor saw pride in Campbell and Carrie, mixed with a bit of curiosity in the girl. Naomi had a strange sense of guilt, while those around her felt recognition followed by reverent respect, even defiance in Vamp's case, who smirked.

Narwhal was the odd one out. "I'm sorry. You're acting as if he's a big deal. Can I get some context
"There's no context to have", he told her with a scowl. He then turned to Mantis. "And there's no truth to any legend. So spare me that treatment, and we'll get along."

Mantis chuckled. "That will be hard. Ocelot told us all the stories about you. Including how much he enjoyed your gunfight..."

"Or the bed. Did he tell you about that?"

That stopped Taylor's thought in its tracks, and everyone else for that matter, except for a smirking Vamp. Naomi, Campbell, and Otacon as well, who seemed to recognize the reference, though they weren't as amused as the supposed vampire.

"No?" Snake continued. "Electric torture bed, here in Shadow Moses? It almost made me spill the information he wanted."

Snake had said that in a completely deadpan delivery, but Taylor could feel clearly he was taking some satisfaction from how Mantis was silent at the non sequitur.

If the whiplash from the innuendo-turned-morbid joke wasn't enough for a laugh, Mantis' befuddlement was. Taylor's failure to contain a small amused snort prompted Mantis' attention upon herself. "Ah, yes. The girl of the hour. Taylor Hebert, Virtue."

Taylor frowned. For two years, she had plenty of experience hearing her name in a mocking or insulting fashion, but Mantis had uttered her name in the same tone that one might describe mold.

"Please, Taylor", Mantis said. "Don't give me that look. Your parentage and everything that happened to you this year and this weekend might have prompted this meeting and granted you a seat here, but don't think you're the main subject of it. You don't have near enough accolades or a high enough position to matter much among everyone gathered here."

Taylor crossed her arms. "Why am I even here then?"

Mantis smiled at her, but it wasn't an amicable one, she realized, but spiteful. She then looked away. "All in due time, child."

Taylor couldn't understand what she had done to gain Mantis' hostility. Worse, she couldn't feel any emotion from Mantis. With so many people around, it felt like she was in a Jackson Pollock painting, each color a different emotion from a different person — not that she actually perceived any emotions like colors — but this woman was a tiny isle of blank nothing in a metaphorical rainbow sea full of textures.

Taylor didn't trust her.

She then opened her fists, suddenly realizing her good one hurt from closing it too tightly.

She took a breath. "Did you have anything to do? With what he did to me?"

"No, Taylor", Mantis said as she opened the suitcase in front of her and took out a laptop, switching it on without looking at her. "We were all at Houston back then. I don't know all the details of what he did, only that he used proxies."

"M. W. Mond", Code Talker said. The name of the men responsible for implanting Ahab with Big Boss' memories and personality. And Taylor with Ahab's personality.
And by extension, Taylor now realized, with Big Boss' personality, or at least some of it. She wasn't sure what to make of that. But it wasn't the time for it in any case.

"You owe us an explanation", Code Talker continued. "For the distress caused to her and her family, and the men who died trying to find a reason to her changes."

"As I said, I don't know all the details of every operation." Mantis shook her head, only looking at Code Talker. "I am his closest assistant, but in this line of work compartmentalization plays a big role, wouldn't you agree? We'll talk about it later if we still need to."

Taylor relaxed her posture, but only a little. Mantis might not have had a hand on what Ocelot did to her, but she still worked for him, and had shown no concern about the… procedures…

"You are admitting to being a mole in the PRT, then?" Dragon asked.

"No more than you yourself were, helping with the administration of their infrastructure", Mantis pointed out. "Sure, Ocelot and we have our issues with the organization, the policies, and some of the directors that approve them. But believe me, we all want the PRT at large to succeed in its goals. Every one of us here in this room is on the same side. We are not enemies."

Mantis looked up at the leader of the opposite group. "Code Talker. Ocelot had only praise for you and your character."

"Don't try to sweeten your speech for me, Naakaii nááséél", Code Talker answered harshly. "The praise and friendship of the Nashdoitsoh won't be enough to dispel my apprehension for his actions, or of those working for him."

"I understand, padre de los bichos", she said, inclining her head to him. "I hope that what I have to tell will at least help you understand our reasons. Now, I already briefed those who came with me about who to expect here, but I see unexpected faces as well." She looked at Buffalo. "You are… Flaming Buffalo. Is that correct?"

"That's correct", the older woman answered, matching Mantis' smile. With a notebook in front of her, Buffalo was twirling a pencil between her fingers. "Don't need me to spill my life story, nothing interesting in it."

"Don't be humble in my account, please. You were a known name in the CIA since you joined XOF in the Eighties. And later, you were McDonnell Miller's second in command with the Diamond Dogs, weren't you?"

"Only during our last years in the Nineties, that's not really — "

"And a fast track in XOF from recruitment to squad leader before that", Mantis pressed on. "That's not the life of a mere grunt, and there was some speculation as to what exactly did you do before — "

"I am sure nobody will care", Buffalo cut her off, raising her voice. With a smile so forced and the pencil now cracked in her hand, Taylor didn't need to feel Buffalo's emotions to understand how angry she was.

It was still helpful to know that the smallest push in that line of conversation would tip the woman into breaking Mantis' face against the table. Strictly for the purposes of preemptively getting out of the way, of course.
Silence reigned as Mantis nodded. "As you wish."

She then turned to Narwhal. "I apologize, Narwhal. There was no time for a better way to contact you, and I know the manner I did must have been suspicious, and might have created unnecessary distrust. But I thank you for coming in such a short time."

"You can say that again", Narwhal muttered. "There better be some point to all of this."

"Don't worry. I'll only need most of you to lend your ears, learn, and consider a proposal at the end of the day", Mantis assured Narwhal, and then turned her gaze the armor suit at Narwhal's side. "Dragon… You look better than I was made to believe."

Dragon cocked her head at Mantis. "Beauty is all on the inside, they say", she deadpanned.

Mantis' lips stretched for a moment, extending her smile. It seemed too sincere to be mocking Dragon. "I'll be honest. Ocelot's investigations and mine moved us to cast your character in a less than gentle light. Just a 'yes woman' caving under any order. But Drebin's reports included details that put things into perspective." She spread her hands. "In Ocelot's name and ours, we apologize."

"Apology accepted", Dragon said cautiously. "Is that… detail going to be a problem here?"

"Not at all, and it won't be shared if you don't want it to be. But considering the events that led us all here, it will probably make things easier and faster if everyone in the room is aware."

Dragon dallied for a moment, sharing a look with Taylor, and then with Narwhal. For some reason, Taylor could only pick apprehension and doubt from the Guild leader when Dragon was the subject of conversation.

"Alright. Just as long as I don't have to repeat myself again." Dragon sighed. "I'm no parahuman, or human for that matter. I'm an AI, bound by a dead creator to follow strict rules to act in a lawful manner, or at least as he saw fit. The details we can leave for later if they're really needed, please."

Taylor saw curiosity in Campbell, more because of how he turned to look at Dragon. She noted a vague sense of recognition from Naomi, as if she already knew, and a bit of confusion from the soldiers around her.

As far as Taylor could tell, Fortune and Vamp were completely disinterested, not even sparing a look at Dragon. Not any long ones at least.

"I've already offered her my protection", Code Talker added. "I won't abide any attempt to dehumanize her." That seemed to settle the subject for everyone.

"Tattletale. Lisa Wilbourn, was it?" Mantis said looking in Lisa's direction. "For someone currently in a wheelchair, you gave the PRT a run for their money in Brockton Bay."

"I admit I've been a lot more dynamic when I wore a catsuit", Lisa said. "Can we scratch the 'Tattletale' off the cards, please? Would really like not to think about all that if necessary, you see."

"Sure, Ms. Willbourn." Mantis chuckled. "I am to understand that you have information about the activities of XOF."

"I'm afraid I don't know as much as you'd like from my past, er, employers", Lisa said with a nervous smile. She wasn't looking less tired than in the morning. If anything, she looked weaker.

"Anything you can tell us is good enough, as little as it may be." Mantis turned to Campbell. "How
is retirement treating you, Colonel?"

"I was having a pleasant morning yesterday until I received your message, truth be told", Campbell said. "I'm still undecided on how today will treat me. Or what the hell am I actually doing here, considering, well, my retirement."

Mantis nodded. "Unfortunately, there aren't many people who have experience in dealing with secrets at such high levels. Your experience and insight alone are invaluable." She looked at Carrie now. "I must say, Ms. McDonnell, if there was one person I wasn't expecting at this table, it was you."

"What can I say? HEC and McDonnell's sort of come in the same package. Plus, you're getting my father's affairs involved here, so that means you're involving my family and friends." Carrie leaned forward, hands clasped and with a smile, a posture more practiced than friendly. "That means you get me too. Take it or leave it."

"Reasonable", Mantis admitted. "Though I expect you — and all of you present here as well, for that matter — to understand the kind of information you will learn doesn't need NDAs to make sure it's kept secret."

"Because saying a peep get us killed anyway?" E.E. chimed in.

"Not always", Mantis said darkly, and glanced at her laptop screen. "You have quite the curriculum for someone so young, miss Emmerich…"

E.E. scoffed. "Don't pretty it up. I'm just here because I'm a witness and your employers contacted me in the past."

Mantis drummed her fingers over the laptop for a moment and sat straight. She then waved her hand to her right. "Doctor Naomi Hunter has a guest of ours for years", the representative said. "Her research in genetics and nanotechnology had been deemed too important to let her rot in a cell."

"Nanotechnology? Are you a Tinker?" Narwhal asked.

Naomi shook her head. "No. The technology was already being tested in the Nineties before I was introduced to it. Its main application was to enhance someone's body, like Snake here. The ones I injected him with in 2005 carried a variety of nutrients and drugs to alleviate his hunger and injuries for the duration of the mission, and recharged the batteries of his radio system."

"I think you owe me a check-up", Snake said, opening the cylinder and taking a cigarette from inside. He closed the tube, stashing it back. "No one told me anything about a shelf life."

Naomi chuckled softly. "They are recharged by your body heat, remember? Perhaps I could check later how many are left attached to your cells, that you might not have lost through bleeding and excretion." She then frowned, worried. "I must warn you, though. One of the reasons the PRT backed down on adopting the technology was because it was found the first generation of nanomachines might interfere with the correct functioning of the body. And the heart, in particular. They wanted that fixed before sealing the deal."

Snake hummed, as he lit his cigarette. "Well, what's another death risk at this point?"

Naomi sighed, folding her hands in front of her and looking down. "Of course you kept smoking… Not that I gave you much reason to stop, I guess."
"It's fine", Snake said. "Don't worry about that."

Taylor felt surprised. From what Snake had said, she was expecting something angrier from Naomi, not this gently-spoken woman. And both of them seemed apologetic towards each other.

Naomi turned back to Narwhal. "It was expected the technology would eventually jump from being used in the military to civilian applications by now, and I know the PRT expressed interest before ArmsTech went into bankruptcy. But it's not a cheap technology, to begin with…"

"A shame", Narwhal conceded. "But you say you kept working with it?"

Naomi leaned back, crossing her legs and resting her steepled hands on her knee. "I had progress with working on designs that ArmsTech had, to roll out the second generation of nanomachines. Among other things, they would be able to replace any type of network system you could care to think about. Radio communications, security systems, monitoring of vital signs. Organizing an increase in the production of platelets to help coagulation and stop a bleeding sooner was also inside the parameters planned for medical uses."

"That sounds really, really helpful." Narwhal nodded in appreciation. "You said 'among other things'?"

"Intracranial nanomachines. They would already play an additional part in the replacement of communication systems, and some of the researchers in ArmsTech managed to create neural networks that allowed communications between subjects in a lab; those subjects would be able to share their senses, in a manner of speaking." Naomi frowned. "But there are more questionable uses. Hallucinations, mental suggestions… Manipulation of emotions and the nervous system."

"You can talk about that later", Mantis interrupted. "It's not important right now, and there's a lot we need to cover before the day ends." She extended a hand to Naomi's group. "The gentlemen who guard the good doctor are Fortune and Vamp, alongside Lieutenant Monroe, who has already introduced himself, and his men. All of them formerly of the SEAL group Dead Cell."

"Fortune and Vamp. I think we all here are up to speed about who you are and what have they been doing recently", Buffalo said. "Though I'm curious as to why you vanished off the map, to begin with. You guys are kind of off compared to everyone else here and why we are here, or well, think why we are here." She finished the last line with a meaningful look towards Mantis.

"There was a difference of opinions with the government. We wouldn't have minded to stay as instructors, or doing real work in counter-terrorism, but the PRT wanted us in the Protectorate. We didn't." Fortune took off her shades, leaving them hanging from a pocket in her coat, and raised her chin. "Not only our methods are unsuited to being used on national soil against and around citizens, but there are also many things that we don't see eye to eye with the rest of the world about cape culture."

She had spoken in a calm, dispassionate voice, but from the bout of disdain Taylor felt momentary when Fortune mentioned 'cape culture', she'd swear it deserved the same opinion from her as seeing a kid pulling a booger out of their nose.

"That's an understatement, Queen", Vamp said with a chuckle, arms behind his back, and his voice just as slow and collected.

"Please, Queen." He shook his head, a grin inside his goatee. "Being compared to Jack Slash is
utterly pathetic. At least, I am considerate of others when I indulge myself."

Fortune raised a hand, reaching to his arm in affection. "I know, Vamp", she whispered him, as he reciprocated, caressing her hand.

Narwhal cough spoke for itself. "Well, I can understand that. But the Protectorate couldn't have been the only option. The Guild isn't afraid of taking lethal measures against the worst out there, and from what little I've heard of you, I can tell we would have been glad to…"

"That wasn't the real matter", Fortune interrupted, lowering her hand back to the table. "We were a political liability. And I pushed for more involvement of the military in fighting the Endbringers and S-Class threats, instead of waiting for capes to do the job alone. We lost even more friends with that."

"The only reason they lasted for so long in the military was because of President Sears' protection", Monroe explained. "After his death, we still enjoyed a period of grace to keep working as normal… but what happened with Commander Jackson only hurt our trust with the government. This ended in 2009."

"We were attacked", Fortune said, fury dripping from her words, and her hand reaching for a set of dog tags hanging from her neck. Taylor could see them, but she was pretty sure there were more than the usual two. "We were leaving our headquarters, ready to stage an assault on the PRT headquarters in Los Angeles. By the time we fell in the trap, there were capes already taking potshots at us. We didn't see who they were, only their attacks."

"The explosions went off first under Old Boy's vehicle", Vamp continued. "He was our strategist, and his men bought time with their lives so that the rest of us could recover and flee. China died in my arms as we left the scene."

"I should have died there and then, but death kept rejecting me." The way how Fortune said that sent a shiver down Taylor's spine. Not only because of imagining what could have happened to her during the attack that should have been horrible enough but didn't stick but at the death wish — Taylor put aside that thought. She didn't want to think of that now.

"We lost track of half of Monroe's men during our escape", Fortune continued. "It didn't come as a surprise when Fat Man left us after that. The damn narcissist never had any ideals; only loyalty to his bombs and ego." She then closed her eyes. "The collateral was blamed on us. The PRT took jurisdiction on the case and slapped the 'villain' label on us. Whatever that word means anyway, in any case."

"And how does that end with you in South America as glorified guards for Ocelot? Anything to do with President Sears dying?" Snake asked, before taking a drag from the cigarette.

"Of course!" Octopus said, spreading her arms with a cheer. "I thought nobody would get to the point already. Sears had connections! Dead Cell didn't just benefit from any political cover he could provide; he had direct command over them, with the codename 'Solidus Snake'."

Snake coughed, and glared at the girl. "What did you say!?"

"Solidus." Otacon blabbered. "The physical state between solid and liquid."

"Another child?" Code Talker breathed out. "The President of the United States?"

Octopus tut-tutted at them. "Didn't any of you notice how vocal he was in his opposition to eugenics
experiments? Georgie was a bit of a rebel." She leaned over the table. "And Ocelot was working for him during the Shadow Moses incident." She shrugged, showing a toothy predatory grin. "Or so he let him think."

"Wait, what the hell are you all talking about?" Narwhal interrupted.

The sound of clasped hands brought back attention to Mantis. "We're getting ahead of ourselves. Before we go into more substantial subjects and over the events of this weekend, there are people among us who would benefit from receiving the appropriate context."

Mantis put her hands on the table, leaning forwards. "Now, I want everyone here to understand. Some of you are here because of circumstances above you, but others came voluntarily and without coercion." She said this as she gave meaningful looks at Narwhal, Carrie, Campbell and Dead Cell. "This is your last chance to back away and forget everything that happened. If you stay, you may learn truths that will turn your entire world upside down, and will stretch the limits of what you thought was real. Truths too complicated for Joe Q to understand, and too uncomfortable for important people to allow to be exposed. Truths that simply cannot leave this room."

She left her head leaning aside. "If you go through that door now, you will be taken back home. You forget you ever came here, you forget anything you might have learned, you ignore anything at all happened, and carry on with your lives as if nothing changed."

Campbell and Dead Cell seemed unimpressed with the statement. Carrie straightened her shoulders, and Narwhal worked her jaw, taking a deep breath. But none of them left their seats.

The SEALs exchanged looks between them, and then with Monroe and Fortune. The two of them gave them both a nod, and the soldiers walked to the door.

Once the soldiers left, Code Talker spoke. "There is one last person present in this room. Another AI." He then looked at the speakers at the center of the table. "Imago?"

"I'm here", the old AI said.

Raven gave out a laugh, the first thing she had said since she came through the door. "I heard the stories, but I never thought…"

"Who…?" Narwhal asked, looking around frantically in alarm.

Taylor could swear she gave a glance towards Dragon for a second.

"An old CIA project. She's not a danger", Buffalo told her, calming Narwhal a bit. "We already suspect what's Mantis going to tell us right now, and Imago has been the witness to decades of that. She'll keep the records straight."

"Well then." Mantis gave everyone a wide smile. "Let us begin."

They had started with a debriefing of the weekend. Establishing what each one of the participants in those events had been doing, and connecting what they did and where. Small as it was, the entire episode was hard to explain and accept without giving away Taylor's origin, and the story of the Patriots in turn. As time passed by, the reactions in the room varied as Mantis' exposition progressed, the woman walking leisurely around the table.

Most of the attendants listened in silence, except for a few requests for details. From those, the colonel took the lead in clearing up the things involving political events, while Narwhal, the one
most out of her element in the meeting, requested deeper explanations for almost anything establishing a divergence from the accepted public history.

Imago, as a witness of sorts from the very start, provided further details and corrections to the tale. And Naomi offered technical answers when needed; she might have been a geneticist when she infiltrated FOXHOUND, but by now she seemed to have picked a few things in engineering and programming. Snake guessed she needed it for her nanotechnology research, but at least Otacon seemed impressed.

The rest of them made their own interjections as well, but they formed the minority of the inquiries, and replies in case of Lisa and Dragon. Dead Cell and Taylor were silent for the most part.

It had taken the best part of two hours, but all in all, it had been a heavily summarized version of what Snake had already learned; he resisted the temptation to tune out the conversation, as there were a few new minor bits of information that he didn't know already.

Eva apparently was in China before the turn of the millennium. She had requested external intelligence about China to the rest of the group, sometime before the failed coup d'état by the CUI and the foundation of the Yangban as tentative attempt to form a group equivalent to a union of the PRT and the Protectorate. Though that didn't stop the consequent still ongoing civil war from souring China's relationships with the rest of the world, the communist country was still enduring as one of the few relatively stable governments at that side of the Pacific Ocean. Eva had vanished somewhere in Europe shortly after that, just before Gray Fox managed to kill Paramedic, and no one had known another word about her.

At the other side of the world, XOF had been officially decommissioned by the CIA as an anti-terrorist group, its functions considered superfluous now. Unofficially, the feud of Cipher's private army with Miller and Big Boss had been in decline since the private army got its ass kicked during the 'Kingdom of Flies', as it seemed that Ocelot had taken to call the second battle against Sahelanthropus, and ultimately gone dormant with Ahab's death. Either Zero or Sigint considered the same thing as Master Miller did, folding soon while it wasn't too late to do so.

As such, everyone thought Lisa's testimony was highly alarming. It meant the shadow army was back in action, doing what it knew best: assassinations, mass murders, and elimination of proof and undesired people. But this time with parahumans doing the dirty work, and led by someone who may or may not be a Slaughterhouse Nine founding member. Ocelot didn't know this, and he apparently already had a great disdain for the original incarnation of the group.

And most importantly, Sigint had finished the preparations of the AI neural network that Zero had entrusted him with, using Strangelove's work with Imago as a base.

The idea would be that it would maintain his influence on the world long after he was gone, through manipulation and curation of information. It corroborated their morning theories about the AI project that E.E. mentioned, as a new node that would be attached to the network. And it was thanks to it that later projects like the Marines' RAYs had their future, barely hours after Ocelot had leaked REX's data, as a counterbalance to the potential Metal Gear proliferation.

The idea that the current direction of the media, influencing the public opinion on politics and culture, had possibly been guided for decades to follow a particular agenda, made everyone in the room feel uneasy. But it was clear that in the months following Shadow Moses, with the Patriots in disarray, everything had changed.

"I don't know the details", Mantis admitted, now seated in her chair with her hands clasped in front of her. "Someone contacted Sigint directly in 1992, without intermediaries. Apparently, they needed
the infrastructure to spread their activities. The Patriots, being the biggest players in the courtyard, had enough reach worldwide reach for their needs, and so were the ones to ask for their blessing and help. I don't know what they actually do, what they wanted, or what part Zero played in the decision if any, apart from promoting the interest in parahumans. But whatever it was, Sigint and Paramedic liked it. They brokered a cooperation of sorts."

"They didn't need the others to reach a decision?" Narwhal asked.

"Sigint and Paramedic reached out to them for their opinion. But in the end, every member was free to follow their own agenda, and with the nature of their jobs, Ocelot, Eva, and Big Boss were hard to contact at the best of times. Nevermind their internal conflicts."

"If anything of what I know of Big Boss and Ocelot is true, they couldn't have trusted it", the colonel said. "If I understand correctly how deep their conspiracy ran, they would have been wary of anyone who knew how to find them. That's an information leak of the highest order."

"Ocelot said as much", Mantis agreed.

"And when he killed Sigint, the new group took over", Snake concluded, leaning back and crossing his arms. "Way to go."

"Granted, even an interrogator as skilled as Ocelot makes mistakes", the colonel said. "Moreover if he indulged in torture. He could have thought of using Decoy Octopus for damage control, once he took the DARPA Chief's identity, but..."

That wouldn't be the first thing the Secretary of Defense messed with that day. And he had been stopped from dropping a nuclear bomb on top of his head at the end only by the order of President George Sears.

Solidus. Snake didn't hold any illusions that this third 'brother' of his saved his life out of the goodness of his heart. He had climbed up the CIA ladder personally raising and training child armies in third world countries. And while he could understand the CIA abiding for such abhorrent methods, Snake had a hunch that it took an unscrupulous man to do the job.

Besides, as President, he had to know everything that happened around the incident. Between the previous START treaties, the failed one coming months later, and the possibility of Scion dropping by to stop the bomb and bringing on his own even more undesired attention from the public, allowing the madman to carry out his plan would have spelled a political suicide like never seen before.

Not that the leak of REX's data helped him stay in the chair. But it might have been much worse, and whatever was left of the Patriots must have known what to do with him. Each of the clones seemed to fulfill some particular aspect of Big Boss: while Snake himself was the lowly grunt acting alone, Liquid acted as the unstoppable soldier and unit leader, and Solidus as the ruthless spy and national leader. There was also Ahab as the absolute double, and —

Snake blinked.

Ahab and Taylor.

It wasn't common he had a hunch. And he didn't like this one. Not one bit.

"This is all very interesting", Narwhal said, "but I'm still not sure what's the problem."

"Think back to before 2005", Mantis proposed her. "Forget the Endbringers for now, just think on
the effects of parahumans worldwide. Politics, economics, culture… And compare it to the trend since 2005.” She looked around the table. "There is a change. Have any of you ever noticed it?"

Everyone took a moment to think about it, and Snake stretched from his seat towards Code Talker.

Snake pointed to the tablet in front of the elder. "I need to check something", he whispered to him. "It's possible to access some dossiers, and talk with Imago?"

Code Talker nodded, and after unlocking the tablet, he passed it to Snake along some earbuds. "It has a sensitive microphone. You can talk discreetly if you stay at a distance."

"Thanks." Snake took the table and walked up to a corner, eyes still on the meeting as he put on the earbuds.

Otacon was the one to finally speak up. "Resistance", he said bringing the attention of the entire room to him. Mantis gestured him to continue. "It's… it's kind of obvious, looking at pop culture. I mean, if you look at western comic books or Japanese anime, there are like ages, times where you can see what the editors wanted to say, that you never see in the output of the editorials from Earth Aleph."

Trying to not lose track of what Otacon was saying, Snake brought the tablet up, one hand over his mouth. "Imago? I need help, and a second opinion", Snake murmured. "Something is wrong with this meeting."

"At first, there was a time of amazement with parahumans, like the world was suddenly a real seinen manga or superhero story. That lasted until the start of the Nineties when the political disturbance parahumans brought became obvious everywhere." He took a breath and looked around. "Don't you remember? Everyone was talking about the first countries to fall, which ones would follow, and what to do to avoid that happening in America. Everyone called for more control, while groups like the PRT and the Protectorate were founded here instead of expanding the capacities of the police or the National Guard, our military and every other one abroad still was called to resist the influence of parahuman disturbances; countries like Cuba and China are still standing thanks to this."

"I'll try to help if I'm able. What seems to be the trouble?" Imago said only for him to hear.

Otacon raised his two index fingers. "Then, 2005. Sigint dies." A look to E.E. "And hours later, what's still left of the Patriots approach you for the AI project that we can suspect safely would expand Zero's AI network and have been projected long before that."

"The successors take over", E.E. continued the thoughts of her brother. "It wouldn't be done immediately, so that gives it enough time to approve the plans for the RAYs and for me to join… and then the successors secure their power move, taking total control. If the AI network was already active, then they have been able to manipulate public opinion at their leisure."

"Damn", Narwhal swore, a thumb rubbing at her forehead just below her horn. "I see where you are going with it because I remember all that. After 2005, the military lost almost all power they had, and their funding in the US started being diverted towards the PRT and the Protectorate. It was noticeable enough the news reported about it, but not in any way that brought criticism upon it."

"Taylor", Snake answered. "Not her in particular, but… There is something in how the meeting is proceeding that feels off." He spared a look at the girl. She was keeping it under control, but Snake saw through the facade. Taylor was frustrated, if not angry. "Remember when we went over the weekend? Mantis avoided asking her about any moment when she was accompanied by anyone else, like me. Except for the time she was alone in Boston, and Mantis was done with her in barely half a
minute. Since then, she's been sidelined."

"Because the media supported it", Dragon said. "Look at the editorial line of any television, newspaper or internet site. I'm... I never really experienced anything before this time, but you can look back, compare, and see the difference between decades. Parahumans are not questioned but elevated. Heroes are the new famous and constantly looked up to, while villains are 'something that happens'; nobody wants them near them, but they have become something normal, and fighting back even in defense is frowned upon if you're not a cape. I can understand the military getting sidelined, after a fashion; there is not much a single infantry man can do against a parahuman, and no one sane wants to see their army turned into the police anyway. But in hindsight, the current trend seems to go somewhat too far. The Endbringer truce might have had a role in that, but both the media and the popular opinion have taken it to heart. More and more countries get overturned than before, the ones still functioning have their authority challenged every day by villains that grow in number far more and faster than heroes, the global economy is declining without barely a respite in sight..." She shook her head. "And yet, acceptance, even if reluctant."

"Now that you mention it, I think I see what you mean", Imago said. "It is not a great issue to be called to a meeting and not expected to participate in any measure. But the few times Mantis turned her attention to Taylor, she was either dismissive or even uninterested. Taylor had only seemed to grow in frustration, and considering how much all this affects her, it's understandable." She was silent for a moment. "But it could simply be that Mantis truly doesn't need her input for now."

"I can't even find a decent curriculum for Sunny's education that doesn't involve parahumans in some way. Looking at some recent school books for her age, one might think history before Scion was little more than the longest footnote ever." Otacon scoffed. "But yes. I accepted it all years ago as a natural evolution of society. And I am sure there are highly complicated factors taking effect on these changes. People losing hope, giving in to despair and apathy... But now, with what we are learning? This is no coincidence. Not completely."

"It could be", Snake conceded. "I want to look over any dossier HEC has about Taylor; anything that touches over her psychological profile, if you can help me find them. Also, keep an eye, or a sensor I guess, on the interactions between Mantis and Taylor. Can you do that? I know you confused Big Boss with me and Ahab, but Taylor too. I think there's something about that but I can't put my finger on what exactly, but you may be able to find something."

"I think I see what you mean. Of course, Snake. My current capacities are limited, but I agree with your caution. I'll ask Tree Frog for assistance as well."

"And this secret group might be pulling the strings in all this. Best case, they may be trying to control things their way. Worst case, they may be pushing this global instability." Narwhal gave out a long sigh. "But I still don't see what good us knowing it does that we know about all it."

"And that's what I wanted to get to", Mantis said. "We want to propose an alliance."

In essence, what Mantis was proposing was simple. Everyone in the room wanted to make the world better, or at least less likely to screw them over. They had needs, and something to provide in exchange. Something they all could share.

Pool resources, expand together, cooperate internally in common goals, and externally with lawful agencies to help in keeping global stability. Collaborate with the PRT in its goals, and help to keep it honest. Protect the common people, and help pacify the more violent parahuman population.

Easier said than done, even without agreeing to investigate the Patriots' successors and their true
intentions, and fighting them if needed. Either by exposing them, the AI network, or finding Zero, if he was still alive at all.

It sounded too good, too ambitious, and maybe too naive. Snake shook his head as he read Platypus' report on Taylor on the tablet. The only thing remotely interesting was the part about her NOVL, and he already knew the broad strokes about it. He closed the document and opened another, this one a report about the incongruencies in her hospital file in January, not hoping to find anything of use either.

No matter his own misgivings, everyone expressed their skepticism about Mantis' proposal. And to demonstrate she wasn't bluffing, Mantis took out two small data devices from her suitcase. A gesture of goodwill on Ocelot's behalf, to be shared among everyone who accepted to join the alliance.

"Ocelot recovered these when he realized the successors had taken over", she said as she put them forwards on the table. "One of them contains the formula for OILIX, algae capable of producing a substance similar to high-quality petroleum", she said, sending a smile to the colonel. "I imagine you wondered about its fate after Snake recovered it in Zanzibar Land in 1999."

Snake had wondered as well. Dr. Marv, who developed the miracle algae, was murdered out of jealousy and greed because of OILIX, and his death hadn't sat well for him during the following months.

Such a waste.

The colonel narrowed his eyebrows at Mantis. "I can't believe it… The oil fields in the Middle East gone, and the Patriots just sat on it? What did they think they were playing at?"

"Research is all I know they intended", Mantis said. "If they planned to start production, that's above my rank."

"How much fuel is that supposed to produce, in theory?" Carrie asked.

Mantis turned to her laptop. "Eight hundred grams of crude oil per each kilogram of algae each day; about seventy percent of that can be turned into ninety-six octane gasoline, and twenty-five into aviation fuel."

Dragon seemed to take a moment to give it some thought. "It's quite the amount of crude, once you'd start cultivating it. That… could have solved a good handful of problems." She gave out a grumble. "A decade ago. I'm not so sure about now."

"Well, better late than never, right?" Lisa said. "It's not like oil prices would get any higher with it."

Snake spared a moment to look at her. She was obviously trying to fake it, but she sounded tired and was trying to scratch at her arms and hands when she thought nobody was looking at her.

If nobody else noticed it, he'll have to make sure she'd get checked again. Maybe he could ask Naomi to give her a look.

"I'm sure I can organize at least a prototype farm or two", Carrie said. "I'd need a good alibi to explain where it came from to my board of directors, but they'd love it. In time, it could cover most energetic needs everyone here might have, and hopefully help the economy at large. And who knows, maybe the algae is edible once you are done squeezing the fuel out of it."

"Well, I know I would love all that fuel. I can only power ships so much with Tinkertech power sources", Dragon said, and turned to Narwhal. "Think of how easier and cheap could this make for the Guild to move around where we need to."

"Believe me, Dragon, I'm listening", Narwhal muttered, head propped on an arm, and gestured to the other data device. "And that one?"

"That one", Mantis said as she took the device and connected it to her laptop. "Is even better." She then turned the screen around. On it, everyone could see lines and lines of numbers without end.

"Bank accounts", Dragon said, her optics adjusting to the distance between her and the screen. "A lot of them."

"The Philosopher's Legacy", Imago said in surprised recognition through the speakers.

Buffalo mouthed off a 'fuck me', probably more loudly than she probably intended.

"Only a minuscule part", Mantis said. "The original contents were divided eight ways at first. The lion's share was set apart as funds dedicated to either America, or the rest of the world, and of course now in control of the successors. The other six parts were given individually to each member of the Patriots for their own needs. Each one barely a scratch on the total. But Ocelot wasn't a big spender, and with interests building up since 1964…"

"So, how much?" E.E. dared to ask.

"Oh, enough", Mantis said. "At least to get started with whatever we need and then some more. But it won't last forever. Whatever you use it for, you'll have to make sure you use it well, so you don't grow dependent on it until the money runs out. If we spend it wisely, it will last for a long time."

Narwhal let out a shaky breath as she covered her mouth with both hands. "Jesus Christ…"

"And of course, Shadow Moses is at everyone's disposal, if only for more meetings", Mantis said. "It will be mostly self-sufficient once the repairs are complete, and the isolation can only be a boon."

They have gotten this far already, so everyone seemed to unanimously agree to go along with Mantis' proposal.

And Narwhal's reaction prompted her and Dragon to be the first to explain their situation.

The Guild had felt recently the need for economic independence. They were expected to provide their parahuman members with more and more resources to carry out their activities in tackling international threats, and the wages for their increasingly large staff. The PRT provided a significant part of their funds and facilitated their movements inside US territory. In turn, a large portion of the Guild membership had to be part of the Protectorate as well. Basically, the Guild would suffer a slow death if the PRT ever decided to pull the plug.

A reinforcement of the organization would free Narwhal from these worries, and allow her to lend the use of their members and staff to the alliance; they weren't many, and most of the capes weren't the powerhouses that Narwhal and Dragon were, but they were field agents experienced in investigating parahuman threats who enjoyed international goodwill.

Snake let Otacon do the talking for Philanthropy, and they were the complete reverse of the Guild: only three members, one of them with her hands tied by her position as a US Navy captain; vilified by most governments and prosecuted in America despite the blessing of the UN. There was also the matter that they were taking care of a child in between all that.
Fortunately, their small size meant that they wouldn't need as many resources as the Guild, except for the quality of stability, a place where Sunny could grow up safely, and potentially reliable intel and some method of travel for their anti-Metal Gear activities. Legal help so that Otacon and Snake could receive pardons from the US government would be welcome as well, but both were perfectly aware that such a thing was unlikely to ever happen.

While Snake wasn't sure what, if anything, they could put on the table, Otacon had a very clear idea about it: their considerable skills.

He could only sigh as he returned to his lecture. Whatever Otacon would go and offer, Snake could at least trust in his friend's judgment to not promise the moon, at least not without a damn good reason for it.

"And you've been able to be active even without support and funds?" Carrie asked, curious. "That must have been some serious penny-pinching skills."

From the wall, Snake met Otacon's eyes, and a silent agreement came between them.

"We've had a handful of private donors during the years", Otacon said. "Campbell here among them."

It wasn't a lie. In truth, most of their meager funds came from the private pocket of Rukavitsa herself, who couldn't spare too much without losing face as leader of Red Gauntlet after she agreed to limit the nuclear capacities in the Metal Gears they possessed. But it allowed Campbell to stop funding Philanthropy almost entirely on his own, his retirement pocket finally able to catch a breath.

The problem was, the greatest reason they had Rukavitsa's favor was that Sunny was her daughter. The colonel and Mei-Ling knew that out of necessity. But all the others knew is that Sunny was someone's daughter. It was better to keep that information under wraps until they knew with certainty who could they trust or not in the room.

The colonel gave Otacon a curious look, then another to Snake. Snake nodded at him, and the colonel replied in kind.

The amused grin Mantis she was sending Snake's way was getting on his nerves, though.

Dead Cell and Naomi had similar problems, being fugitives. All of them required some place that they could live in safety, and apparently, the mansion they had been living in somewhere in South America was getting too 'hot' for comfort. What they could give was clear from the outset: Naomi was currently the only one capable of providing functional, practical nanotechnology, and no matter the nature of their skills, the soldiers were among the best anyone could wish for combat instruction.

But while Naomi seemed to be content to be able to keep working on her research and helping in the efforts of investigating the successors, holding no illusions that she'd ever walk free again in any town of the civilized world, Dead Cell still held hope.

"We want the truth", Vamp said, Fortune and Monroe nodding silently in agreement.

"Truth and justice for our family and us, our names cleared, and our fallen given the respect owed to them", Fortune clarified. "We want the truth exposed, in clear view of the public. And whoever pulled the strings called out, with the full weight of justice to fall on their heads. Nothing more is needed, and nothing less will suffice."

HEC’s needs came actually from acquiring new avenues of work. It had resources, the experiences and the connections to do its job as an intelligence agency. But those connections had been running
dry with time. Conversely, McDonnell's was as healthy as any corporation could be, even with its international assets at the disposition of HEC. But it has lacked an edge for a long time to be competitive, and they've felt the pressure from hostile parties like the Elite.

HEC needed work, and McDonnell's needed security and marketable assets. And yet, they could only benefit from helping the others in the alliance and receiving theirs in exchange. The intel from HEC was valuable enough without accounting for the contents of Miller's vaults. McDonnell's, in turn, could provide an economic, legal, and industrial infrastructure that they'd otherwise lack without them, though it was a question of how much could they get away with without anybody noticing anything wrong with the company's books.

As they kept speaking, Snake closed the hospital document. There wasn't much he could find in it. There were the assessments on what the procedures used on Taylor could have been or what might have changed in her, but they were only theories. The psychiatric care had been left to the parents, and HEC didn't have… Wait.

"Any chance HEC has records of interviews with the Heberts?" he asked to the microphone in the tablet.

"Give us a sec to look", Tree Frog said, "but seems like any that were out there were carried out by Miller, and only the only one with access to the Athalia files is Code Talker. I could try to finagle something to take a look, while Imago keeps looking in the open databases with my credentials."

Snake spared a glance to the old man, who had been busy talking for a while. "Right. Do that."

Indeed, Code Talker wasn't just busy, he wasn't finished showing his cards. "We can also provide something else", he said turning to look at Buffalo.

Buffalo maintained eye contact with Code Talker for a moment before giving out a tired tsk. "Goddammit, I knew it."

"It would take some time to sort it all out", Code Talker said as he took a document from a binder and pushed it to the center of the table, "but thanks to Buffalo, I have at my disposition a list of the still living and employable members of the Diamond Dogs. I also have a sizable number of contractors working currently for HEC that would be persuaded to join the Dogs veterans, or count themselves already among their number. Lastly, I had another number of freelancing mercenaries looked up and filtered through particular criteria of my own, and potentially amenable to work along the others. None are of the parahuman or ESP persuasion, that I know, but…"

"You actually went ahead and revived the Diamond Dogs?" Carrie asked.

"Not yet, but as I was telling Buffalo this morning…"

"He could read the signs on the wall", Buffalo muttered, looking up at the ceiling.

"I also propose her to take command", Code Talker added. "She is a skilled soldier, and had been taught by Kazuhira to manage such types of organizations and operations."

"Sure, sure, I'll be good, if that's what it's needed", she said in a mocking tone before shooting him a glare. "But we're going to have words before the day is over."

"How many?" Mantis asked as she used her telekinesis to lift the papers to herself and started reading them.

"That's merely the list for the veterans, about four hundred and fifty rounding down", Code Talker
answered. "I'll have to check on my people for the other lists, but as a conservative total, I would say... Little less than two thousand men strong. Not counting the men that would form the staff for support groups, Intel, R&D... Their operations can be limited at first to providing escorts, convoys, research, protection for humanitarian efforts..."

Vamp chuckled. "And the old man wins the prize."

"Well, even without powers, quantity is still a quality of its own", Narwhal admitted.

Mantis looked up at him in surprise. "Well, this is a bit more than what we expected you to come forward with. But it's a good surprise. I think it also might save us the trouble of choosing a central organization for the alliance to orbit around, and the suitable person to delegate the decision making of the alliance at large, in absence of further meetings among all of us too."

She stopped to let Buffalo have a say. She just shrugged, defeated. "Alright, fine. It's not like I'm doing a lot with my free time anyway."

"Is that fine with everyone?" Mantis addressed everyone. "I don't mean she'd take direct control over your organizations, and I am confident you want to keep the names of your groups as safe as possible..."

"HEC was an important part of the Dogs' activities when they were active", Code Talker stated. "You could say there wouldn't be one without the other." He then glanced at Carrie. "McDonnell's is different; its activities were supposed to be completely separate from the Dogs..."

"I am sure something can be worked out", Carrie agreed.

"I wouldn't be against it, if she has what it takes for it", Narwhal said, "though I'd like for the Guild to be passive for some time in this alliance. Don't misunderstand me, everything you've been laying out in front of me is..." She exhaled deeply. "Well, I believe it, but I need to think about it. I guess I can be available for a small favor or two, but I want to see how things go along before committing the Guild actively to this."

"That's understandable", Mantis said, "and there should be enough time for you to decide while we get things settled. As long as you understand that you can't talk about this with anybody. Nothing is written anywhere. If you need to talk about something, make sure you can find me in person."

"Right." Narwhal wiggled a lazy finger, first at Mantis, then at Taylor. "The ESP thing. I'll try to avoid Masters and Thinkers for a few months."

"There's something else", Buffalo said, looking between Mantis and Narwhal. "Sahelanthropus. If we Dogs are back in business, that monster is ours." She raised a finger at Narwhal just as she opened her mouth to speak up. "No. I insist. I know about the Endbringer truce, and how you people ended getting dibs on fighting them, but Sahelanthropus is different. We were supposed to watch over its remains, it's our responsibility."

"Philanthropy's as well", Snake called out, lowering the tablet for a moment. "I don't care about its origin, it's a Metal Gear. And while I can't just deal with this one with a handful of photos made public, taking them down is practically my job at this point."

Narwhal looked between them and gave out a sigh. "Look, I'm still processing all you told me about that thing, the Metal Gears, Big Boss... If you people have a death wish, I won't stop you. And I can try to, but convincing the PRT and the Protectorate, let alone each local parahuman group in each country, to let you have a shot at it is something that I can't bet it'll work. Not easily, and not with this
secrecy, because I'm assuming you'll want to keep your cards close to your chest."

"It would take some effort", Mantis agreed. "I know there are voices already urging the Army to all but close the entire RAY division after Boston, so that money could be directed to, quote-unquote, more practical uses. But I think we can spin the idea as you volunteering to scout out any Sahelanthropus sighting. Boston didn't really give them much in terms of intelligence or tactics in any case, and capes will be more wary for the first few battles against it until they get an idea of what makes it tick. No one will want to go first into the mist if they know they'll turn into zombies."

Narwhal bobbed her head from side to side, her horn moving like a wizard would wave their wand. "Maybe. Could work." She turned to Code Talker. "I wonder though, have you contacted anyone with what you know about Sahelanthropus?"

Code Talker shook his head. "We talked about it yesterday. It's been useless. As I cannot expose HEC, I had to use proxy companies to open channels of communication with the PRT. But the messengers have been rebuked every time. They seem to believe no one would have useful information yet. Regrettable enough, if it wasn't for their willful ignorance about the effects of the metallic archaea and the gas produced by the modified parasite strains."

"Encouraging people to wonder where the victims of the gas are now might work in our favor."
Mantis rubbed her chin with a thumb, thinking. "Anyway, I wouldn't know for certain if the directors are merely skeptical or maliciously stonewalling you. It is possible if any of them knows the RAYs weren't supposed to be disabled by the archaea. The first model did exceedingly well against Leviathan, despite the heavy losses the Marines incurred in the fight. If as we believe the successors want to promote parahuman superiority, they would see that as a political threat."

Narwhal raised an eyebrow. "I know you mentioned corrupting influences in the PRT that you wanted to be rooted out, maybe from the successors. But do you really think something like that is possible? Forget influencing the image of parahumans on the populace. We are talking about someone endangering lives for no reason whatsoever except, what, pride?"

Mantis shrugged a shoulder. "As I said, I don't know. Something this big? It would have to be someone without any reservations and lots of power over most of the directors. And I don't have any in inside the directive board. It's something we'll have to investigate in the future if we can, but it'll be tricky."

They kept discussing the matter of how to tackle the PRT, but Snake wasn't listening anymore. A new document arrived to the tablet, courtesy of Imago. "I found something. After Code Talker notified him of his findings, Daniel Hebert confronted Ocelot at the PRT ENE Headquarters. Daniel was then interviewed by the agent in charge of the local way station known as 'Fugly Bob's'. I'm afraid it answers our questions."

Snake opened the document, a transcript of the interview. "Afraid?"

"Mr. Hebert admitted to suffering a prolonged depression since the death of his wife. Apparently, he was so deeply stricken with grief, that he all but forgot Taylor even existed. He recovered in the following month, enough, but by that time, Taylor had started high school at the same time one Emma Barnes had started a bullying campaign against her."

Snake listened as he skimmed over the interview. "Barnes. That's the name of the family they were friends with. Emma was her best friend…"

"Yes. And none of the parents knew about this falling out for the year and a half it went on."
Snake took a second to process what he had just heard. I didn't make any sense whatsoever. "Wait, a year and a half? I knew about the bullying, but nobody knew anything in all that time?"

"The bystander effect is a strong demotivator. There are mentions about the intensity and extension of Ms. Barnes' campaign producing a feeling of self-preservation on the small fraction of the student body who knew about the situation. And her friendship with the Ward Shadow Stalker motivated the principal to dismiss the issues, so to say, with the aim of not losing the funds granted to the school by the PRT."

"And Taylor didn't even tell her father? No one at all?!"

"Snake, I understand you had a hard youth as an orphan, so put yourself in her shoes. A distant father, betrayed by friends, ignored by authority, and a pariah for everyone else. How would you start thinking? Even if the hypnotherapy didn't change her outlook, she still had the fortune of her father waking up from his stupor, and Armsmaster approaching her. That might have mended her faith in family and authority figures, if not her soul."

A ruckus brought him back to reality.

Taylor was up on her feet, fists clenched at her sides, and looking absolutely furious. Mantis was placidly lounging in her chair, unconcerned at the outrage in front of her.

What the hell had they said to each other while he wasn't listening?!

From what he could see, the rest of the room was reacting to what was happening with varying levels of shock or outrage. More plainly, Code Talker had his hand gripping the handle of his cane, and Dragon had risen to her feet as well.

"I'm not Ocelot", Mantis stated calmly. "Maybe you could have squeezed an apology from him, which I doubt. But I have no reason to care, no matter how much you rage at me. This is a waste of our time."

"I am a waste!?" Taylor screamed. "I am here because of you! You made me!"

As Taylor kept shouting at Mantis, all the pieces clicked in his mind. Of course, that was her — their — game the entire time, Snake realized.

The entire point of what Ocelot made Taylor go through was to have her become a new Boss figure, if not an identical copycat.

"Ohh", Mantis exclaimed with feigned surprise. "You think, that because these people told you all about what Miller and Ocelot wanted of you, that you are actually worthy of filling those boots? Come on, Taylor. Let's be honest, you're not even a regular Joan of Arc."

The hypnotherapy must have taken time to produce any effects. They had nine years to make sure Ahab would be the phantom they wanted for Big Boss, and even then there were differences in their personalities.

Even if they gave Taylor the skills and knowledge in three months, would they have had the time to give her enough of his personality, except the most superficial?

"I survived everything that came my way since all started", Taylor said, gritting teeth in defiance. "I overcame all of it, all of Ocelot's testing, and everyone who tried to kill me. I deserve more than you telling me to be quiet."
And if that was were the case, how else to complete their project?

Mantis laughed. "Oh, that's gold. And what? You think you are worthy of sitting here, all haughty and cavalier as if your blood was as worthy or more than Snake's?" She shook her head. "You are no Big Boss; you are even far below The Boss. Those titles demand a gravitas that, frankly? You lack."

Taylor gripped the edge of the table.

The pain of the insulation. The anger of the injustice. The sadness of her losses. They were just fires that needed to be stoked.

"Besides, you think that to kick a hornet's nest among the gangs of one city until they decide to go for you is surviving? Really?"

"That wasn't all her", Dragon protested.

"No, because you and Armsmaster enabled her."

"And who had access to Armsmaster, to influence his thoughts?" Code Talker retorted.

"And he could have taken Virtue to the Wards, instead of choosing, on his own, to make her an independent and join the Guild", Mantis replied. "Look, I appreciate why you'd want to take her side, but you don't enjoy any high moral ground. And if she wants to be treated as an adult, that's what she'll get. So stand back, please."

She turned back to Taylor. "And rushing foolishly into a fire? You would have died if it weren't for the parasite that was given to you afterward. Does that sound like surviving to you? No, I thought not."

Cut her ties with her past. Change her entire life. Have her go through hell.

"And yes, what about the assassination attempts? The PRT building? Ah, you were with Snake there; I am sure he did the heavy lifting, did he? And Boston. You have good running chops, I'll admit. But the crash? Fighting with your would-be assassin?" Mantis clicked her tongue, leaning over the table with clasped hands. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but that's all on the parasite. You had nothing then, and you have nothing now."

Taylor sat up, slowly.

Put the world against her. Discard her suffering. Dismiss her entirely as a person.

"Ask yourself this: what makes you think you are any more special than anyone else in this room, who have undergone their own crucible?"

Taylor tensed on her feet.

At that point, you would only need to give her a small push.

"You think you've inherited the title of Boss only because of a tenuous bloodline and what others might think of it, yet you've never stopped to think about the future you want to see."

Then, out of wrath and her own volition, she'll want to be Big Boss.

"You didn't even stop to think the consequences of your actions would get your father killed!"
"Wait!" Snake threw the tablet aside, jumping forward the same moment Taylor leaped towards Mantis, screaming over the table.

It was when she saw Taylor float in the air that Lisa decided everything was going seriously wrong. She was still in her chair, unlike almost everyone else in the room.

Snake and Raven were taking aim at each other in a standoff, him with his pistol, and her with what looked like a big submachine gun that she had taken from under her now open coat. Raven had been so quiet during the entire meeting that Lisa hadn't realized none of the HAVEN members had moved at all.

Narwhal and Dragon were on their feet, but Octopus had appeared from behind them somehow, no one the wiser. From her back under the coat two thick cylindrical tentacles had come out; one had gone around Narwhal's neck, not gripping her with any strength, but forcing her to look at the ceiling; the second had done the same to Dragon, though not forcing her to look away from the scene. It was clear that Octopus was aware that Narwhal's power worked by her line of sight.

The ends of both tentacles were looking directly at their faces, a few claws idly twitching, and small blue glows at the center. Lisa didn't need two guesses to know they were being threatened with energy weapons.

Buffalo and Campbell were on their feet, hands on the sidearms at their hips, but unmoving. They seemed to be struggling, grunting at the failure to move an inch in any way.

E.E. and Carrie weren't doing much except backing off, surprised. Otacon as well, but he started to tentatively advance along the table until Naomi gestured him to stop with a wave of her hand. Dead Cell was giving Mantis their best unimpressed glares.

Code Talker was up as well, the handle of his cane cracking under his grip. "Stop this at once, Mantis!"

"I'd agree to that. In fact, I suggest everyone to calm down; it's not my intention to put anyone here under unnecessary danger", Mantis said, now floating over her chair.

The glows on Octopus' tentacles vanished, and the grips on their captives relaxed, though still forcing Narwhal to look up to the ceiling. Campbell and Buffalo were freed, their guns floating away to the table.

Raven, without aiming her gun away, gestured Snake to lower his gun, but he didn't comply. "This isn't necessary."

"Perhaps", Mantis acknowledged. "The problem is, Ms. Hebert here got a completely wrong assessment of her own situation and value. I think that needs correction, wouldn't you agree? A lesson in humility. After all, I don't believe anyone here or the late Mr. and Mrs. Hebert would approve of her little outburst."

Code Talker narrowed his eyes but kept silent.

Lisa looked up at Taylor, floating over the center of the table. She was struggling against the forces holding her, but the more she fought, the more her body was fighting back.

It wasn't like your typical telekinesis that a parahuman could use, that would take a person, or object depending on where their power would fall on either side of the Manton Limit, and move them as a
whole. No, this was like attaching every limb, every joint, every bendable part of your body to individual invisible cords, and then being manipulated like a puppet.

When she stopped to think about it, as Regent had kindly demonstrated again and again for the Undersiders, the entire human body had a lot of joints that could be bent the correct way. Or the wrong way for that matter.

It didn't look like anything was getting broken, but it physically hurt Lisa seeing Taylor looking like that. Or maybe it was herself. She'd been feeling her own arms and her belly really itchy and warm. And she felt so tired. She didn't feel like this in the morning!

"Have you lost your mind, Mantis?" Naomi said in a chastising tone.

"We didn't come here to watch you torture a kid", Fortune hissed, though still without sitting up from her chair.

"Stop!" Dragon demanded. "You are hurting her!"

"Don't worry. I won't hurt her... she only needs to stop fighting. We don't want her to be a danger for anyone even by accident, do we?" Mantis replied, not taking her eyes off Taylor. "What's your name?"

Taylor tried to force her arm to move from her back to her side, but she only achieved getting it slightly twisted on itself. "Virtue", she groaned.

Lisa looked around desperately looking for a way to stop everything. But while her headache was thankfully mostly gone now, barring some pain in her eyes and her forehead, her power was still out of commission for half a week or so. She felt weaker than ever, and everyone else was either immobilized or waiting.

She then started to lift herself to her feet. As wobbly as her everything seemed, it felt like she was doing something, anything of use.

"No, not that name. You are not virtuous, and I'm not a mantis. We're women, with names." Mantis didn't seem to mind receiving a 'wrong' answer. Instead, she seemed to be digging for something else.

Taylor gasped. She tried to lower a leg, try to reach the table, but it was wrenched up along with the other, both knees against her belly. "T-Taylor."

"No, not that one either. That's the name you were given at birth." Mantis looked up directly into Taylor's eyes. Her arms were locked then at her sides as well, immobilized in a fetal position. "But not the one that gives you meaning. The one meant for you from the start. Your real name."

Something caught Lisa's attention. Something behind Mantis.

A man with glasses and long white hair, grinning directly at Lisa as he levitated directly behind Mantis.

Hadn't she seen him before?

He was pointing a single finger at Mantis' satchel, the one hanging at her hip.

"Wha...?"
"My name is Andrea. What's yours?" Mantis asked for the last time, gently.

Breathing heavily, Taylor answered with a single, shaky word.

"Athalia."

Lisa then heard the groan of metal above. She looked up and saw an air ventilation panel.

It was twisting on itself.

Before she understood what was happening, Vista had jumped on top of Mantis, throwing both of them to the floor.

Lisa didn't know what moved her to do what she did, but she ran as fast as she could towards Mantis.

"Whoa stop!" Octopus called out as Lisa ran past her, Mantis struggling with Vista on the floor.

Mantis rose up in the air, dragging Vista with her. Feeling her strength petering out quickly, Lisa jumped, gripping at the satchel and ripping it out of Mantis' belt.

She grunted, feeling her sides impact against the floor painfully with the satchel opening at her side, tall thin stuffed dolls of all things spilling outside.

One looked like a BDSM fan with a gas mask. Another looked like the grinning man.

Taylor impacted the table. Her body hurt, but nothing felt broken or wrong.

And more importantly, she was free.

Looking up, she didn't know why Vista was even there in the room. But when she got thrown aside by Mantis, Taylor launched herself towards the woman with all her Pain and Fury.

Taylor didn't hold back. Mantis was faster, enough to block or parry every punch and kick sent her way, and even return one of her own, but it was obvious she was feeling the pressure after being taken by surprise. Mantis was forced to step back.

 Barely a couple of seconds later, Mantis fell on her back. Taylor tried to follow.

Only then she realized why Mantis had actually fallen down. Lisa was in their way, laying down on the floor.

Taylor tripped on Lisa's body and fell forward on top of Mantis.

Their fight had barely lasted a few seconds once she hopped down the table, but mentally, Taylor was kicking herself for her stupidity on one brief second of lucidity.

She really should have paid attention to her surroundings and the emotions around her. Was she really so blinded by her anger?

Her head collided with Mantis', and everything went black.
The snow fell at night as the fires covered the entire village.

The soldiers took the boy away as he cried out.

"On sobiralsya ubit' menya… On sobiralsya ubit' menya!"

Water broke her fall.

Coughing, Taylor climbed out of the pool, propping her hands on the floor below the water and sat on her knees.

Waiting for her nerves to calm down, she realized two things first. One, it was pitch black when she opened her eyes.

Two, she could hear screams. Terrified screams that gave her goosebumps.

Both things changed slightly once she started situating herself. There were a few weak rays of light coming from cracks in the ceiling that she could make out once her eyes adjusted to the darkness. And whoever was screaming was above her.

“Dragon? Snake?” she called out, looking around wherever she was without much success in recognizing the location. “Code Talker?” This wasn’t the meeting room. Even discounting the pool of water, the ground was rocky and uneven, and the ceiling creaked like wood under the steps of some unknown person. And the air had a metallic tinge to it.
No one answered her.

And Christ, those screams. It made her feel goosebumps, and her heart was drumming like crazy. Wherever she was, she didn’t want to stay there any longer.

Rising to her full height, Taylor found out that she could reach the ceiling with a raised hand. A basement, maybe.


She needed to find her own way out then. She looked back down to check for obstructions, she was getting more luck feeling around with her hands. All she could feel in the dark was something soft with hard protrusions. Sacks and tools, maybe?

A stray ray of light that came down to the pool caught her attention, giving the water a dirty appearance. Not surprising if this was a basement, but something in the color seemed weird to her. The spot of light illuminated barely more than a pinprick, so she crouched to have a better look.

It was red.

Taylor jumped back. “What the fuck??”

The sound of a door slamming open came from above. <“Che, boludo. Tenés otro vagón de peronistas acá fuera.”>

Taylor couldn’t understand a word, but she didn’t waste time reaching again for the ceiling, tapping fast and hard with her hand. “Hey! Help! Get me out of here!”

<“Frescos, espero”>, said another voice, grimy and nasal, ignoring her pleas.

<“Ni uno sólo muerto, cortesía del Admiral Scilingo. ¿Alguno habló?”>

<“Uno o dos. Nada importante.”>

<“Bueno. No rompas estos antes de que hablen. Que vos los disfrutes.”>

“Help! Please!” Taylor kept screaming, as she heard someone’s steps leave the wood and move away, stepping on gravel.

That’s when she heard a gurgling. Liquid came down through the cracks, dripping to the pool below.

“Oh shit”, Taylor breathed out. Of course the pool was red; it wasn’t just water.

A trap door opened at the other side of where she was, and light inundated the basement for a short second as something was thrown down the stairs.

She was surrounded by bodies. The trap door closed just as she could see the particular state of the bodies.

Some were burnt. Others had lacerations.

There were maggots and flies everywhere.

The stench was unbearable.

Some bodies weren’t whole.
A hand shot out to her mouth in instinct. More to avoid being heard than straight fear… though she had to be honest; she was scared shitless, and for some reason whoever was above doing this with these people was ignoring her completely. Which was just as good as well because Taylor wasn’t sure she wanted to meet them.

The screams in the unknown language began again. One person at a time.

Taylor had to work again for a minute to calm her breathing. She was still scared, but by the time she took her hand off her mouth, she…

Could still hear heavy breathing?

That wasn’t her.

She took a few steps trying to locate the breathing until she went knee deep into the pool and looked behind a pile of meat where the light came from another crack.

There was a girl, shivering as she sat hiding under the bodies, with both hands over her mouth and looking frantically around the place. Maybe a bit older than Taylor was, but it was hard to say under all the dirt and caked blood.

And she hadn’t noticed of Taylor’s presence.

“Hey”, Taylor called out. “You ok?”

“You are not here.”

Taylor turned around, following the clicking voice.

There was something small dimly illuminated by the ambient light. A thin body, with four legs, two arms, and a small head. A mantis, slender like any other, but the size of a basketball.

But it was different. Taylor couldn’t be too sure, she wasn’t familiar with insects. But she was reasonably confident mantises weren’t supposed to be as big as this one. As it stepped closer into a spot of light, it became more clear that this one was utterly disgusting. It looked like it didn’t have the expected green exoskeleton, but it was made instead of skinless flesh, coated in black goo and blood that gave it a feel of rust over gore.

“I found her”, the mantis said again in screeching clicks. “She’s been mine ever since.”

Taylor decided to roll with the punches, lest she freaked out completely. “Who is she?” she asked, looking between the two.

“Lost, separated from family”, the mantis said, its head cocking to a side. “Tried to hide. No escape now.”

Taylor kept her eyes on the little abomination. “And you?”

The mantis’ head twitched. “She’s mine. Taught her to survive.”

The world around Taylor shook, and she fell on her back, outside the pool.

Looking up, she realized that the light coming from the creaks was different. Like it was another time or even another day.

The mantis was drinking from the pool.

The girl, now with bags under her eyes, was imitating it.
“No”, Taylor said, scrambling to her feet. “No no, don’t do that…”

“Survival has a cost”, the mantis said as the world shifted again.

The mantis was on top of the corpse of a man, still fresh, nibbling on it.

The girl, pale and exhausted now, looked down to the arm of the corpse she was holding on her hands.

“Who are you to decide if others can pay the price for their own salvation or not?”

She lowered her head, mouth open.

“Stop!” Taylor jumped, reaching out.

The world shifted again.

Another shift. It was truly pitch dark now.

Except for the steps to the trap door. They were open, and moonlight came from outside, illuminating the steps.

And there were no screams.

Tentatively, Taylor moved to the exit, failing to find the girl or the mantis still in the basement.

Taylor stepped on plenty of blood along her way, both dry, fresh or coagulated, sticking to her shoes. She then reached the stair and started ascending cautiously until she could stick her head out. She stopped then, looking around.

It was cold, and through the nearby door, she could see the full moon shining over the woods outside.

Taylor then turned around to the interior of the building, the scene completely illuminated by the moonlight.

The girl looking worse than before, her black hair falling down her face and stuck to it by grease and blood, had her hands gripping one end of a bone.

The other end was inside the head of a man in military fatigues, laying down on the floor. His face was a mess of flesh, and he had two bleeding spots in the torso, and another wound in a leg.

A handful of different knives and wooden shards were sticking as well all around his body.

Yellow sparks jumped from under the nails of his naked hands, sputtering, then dimming and finally ceasing as the twitching ceased. He must have been a parahuman.

And resting on his belly, the mantis.

The girl’s gaze was dead, as she panted, pulling her weapon out and sticking it back in for a few more times. The rest of the knives did the same, no visible hands moving them.

Her strength finally failed her, and the bone fell from her hands to the floor, clattering.

Even if Taylor could make herself heard, what would be the point? Words failed her.

The girl looked then to a table nearby, and her eyes widened.
"¿Abuelo…?" she asked in a raspy voice, and she started crawling towards the table.

Taylor saw then the figure on the table. An old man, laying on his back, with his head staring into infinity, hanging off the table. Bizarre torture tools were kept on small shelves near the table.

"¡Abuelo!"

The man was dead.

Holding his head on her hands, the girl screamed.

By dawn, she had stopped screaming. Not by lack of trying, her voice hoarse and dry.

Taylor hugged herself as she followed the girl down the road. The girl was following the mantis, but neither seemed to have any destination in mind.

Taylor had wanted to carry the girl on her back, but her hand went through the girl’s as if she didn’t exist. An illusion? A Stranger or Breaker power? Didn’t matter. The girl couldn’t listen or touch her, and the mantis had been ignoring her questions.

So she was stuck with following them.

And how long had it been since they left the shack? It felt like hours, but Taylor couldn’t remember where the time had gone since then.

And now that she looked around, wasn’t there snow and fire just a moment before?

No, they left the forest, and now they were traversing a valley. A bit cold, but not enough for snow by far. Oceans of grass inundated both sides of the road, dancing at the rhythm of the gentle wind.

Strange.

A raven landed in front of the girl.

The three travelers stopped to look at it.

It jumped a few times to get closer to the girl and gave her a low simple caw. It then threw a glance behind, and then another, turning around as if it hadn’t noticed the mantis until now.

Turning around, it spread its wings and started repeating shrill caws in alarm at the mantis.

Then it jumped to the air and flew off.

The noise of an engine made her turn around, seeing two jeeps were approaching.

Turning back to her companions, she could see the girl was watching the vehicles as well. The mantis was moving away, leaving the road for the field.

“Wait, where are you going?”

"Nowhere far", it said as it disappeared among the tallest blades of grass. "Will collect my due in the future."


Her attention turned to the girl, who had finally fallen on her side, covering her terrified face from the cars. She kept trying to scream, but the sound coming from her throat could barely pass for the
squeaking of a mouse.

The jeeps stopped at a distance. A huge muscular man, shirtless and with tattoos that covered his arms and forehead, came from the passenger seat of the first one, while a black woman in military fatigues left the driver seat.

A man, with long whitish blonde hair reaching his shoulders and a well-cared mustache, left the passenger seat of the second car. The trench coat and the fine gentleman beneath it, along with the gunslinger belts holding revolvers and the spurs on his boots made him look like one of the rich kind of cowboys in those older movies.

None of them gave any indication they could see Taylor either.

“General Ivan”, the giant said with a deep voice. “I believe we found our fugitive. But I don’t think we should move any closer to her.”

The gunslinger moved to the giant’s side. “One of your visions telling you that, shaman?” he asked as he stopped to look at the girl.

“The girl bears the mark of the black mantis”, the ‘Shaman’ answered, solemn.

“She looks like hell spat her out”, the woman remarked. “An illness?”

“No. Worse.” Another raven, or maybe the same one from before, landed on Shaman’s shoulder. Taylor cringed at the thought of how much those claws must hurt, and how unconcerned Shaman seemed by it. “The raven saw the spirit who helped her to escape that house of horrors. An evil scavenger who searches for trapped victims and teaches them to survive. They say those marked by the black mantis become strong enough to live another day, until the day it returns to collect.” He shook his head. “But the greater the strength they gain, the more they lose of their mind and soul. And the price owed is never fair. She’s doomed to a terrible end, her life a pending cataclysm over all that she holds dear.”

The girl was passing out, exhausted by the effort. How long had she gone without sleeping, anyway?

“A shame”, ‘Ivan’ said. “She might have seen or heard something that could help to revert the effects of Operation Condor.”

“Gotta love when there’s no way to clean up the messes of our government, huh?”’, the woman muttered. “We could at least have our local escort back at the base take her to a hospital?”

“Maybe”, he conceded. “I’ll have someone keep an eye on her for a few weeks. Maybe our dear doctor will want to take a look at the effects of this ‘black mantis’.”

Ivan took a step forward, but the girl gave out a last shriek. Shaman raised a hand in front of Ivan, blocking his advance as a pebble shot to the air, almost hitting him.

“Huh. That happened”, the woman muttered.

“Not us. The female mantis devours the males”, Shaman told Ivan. “And we don’t really know what she’s gone through.”

The woman looked at Ivan. He gestured towards the girl with a shrug. “She’s all yours, Panther.”

Panther nodded, moving to the girl. “You ask so nicely sometimes, Ocelot.”
Taylor charged forward just as the girl passed out.

Taylor found herself laying down on a bed, inside an aseptic room with dim lights.

“I’m not comfortable having him around.”

Taylor turned to one side, and saw Ocelot, older and with his hair completely white now, talking with an old woman, talking at one side of a folding screen. She was petite, with short greyish hair, wearing a miniskirt, blouse, and scarf below her lab coat.

“You know he’s not interested in any of it; he won’t even tell his dear friend if we explain it nicely”, Ocelot told her, as Taylor sat up, looking around the room. It seemed like an infirmary slash high tech laboratory, with a set of crystal panels separating it from a larger and more conventional infirmary. Through the windows, she could see a few patients resting as they recovered from whatever they were there for; the room had its lights off, with only a few beds illuminated by their own private reading lamps. “Did you look into what I asked?”

Through the glass, Taylor could also see two thin figures in the same bed, one of the few with its lamp on. One of them was sitting at the edge, but Taylor couldn’t properly see their features. The girl from the basement was laying on the bed, eyes open and unfocused.

“I studied her case”, the doctor said. “The state of her mind is a complete mess, between parasites, bacteria and a myriad of other infections from the blood and flesh she consumed…”

Maybe this was FOXHOUND’s base? And if that were the case, could the doctor talking with Ocelot be…?

“Her body can recover, in time. But she’s lucky her brain can still recognize what happens around her, even if her cognitive functions are shot. With common medicine techniques, you’ll get luckier trying to set up a peace meeting between doctor Van Helsing and Dracula than returning her to full mental health.”

Jumping to the floor, Taylor turned to them and moved closer, getting a better view of the identification on her coat. It read, ‘Dr. Clark’.

Para-Medic.

“What about the alternative medicine?” he asked.

Clark raised an eyebrow. “Have you tried asking a parahuman healer?”

Ocelot inclined his head towards a sealed door. “I was actually hoping you’d accept her as a test subject for your research.”

Clark shot him a glare. “Your altruism knows no bounds.” She then moved to the door, starting to open the numerous locks, mechanical and electrical. “Come say hi.”

The door opened, allowing entry to the two Patriots. “I can’t tell you much about her mind. You’ll have to talk with a psychologist about that.”

Taylor ran to catch up with them. “I have someone in mind for that”, Ocelot said from the other side of the door.
“I think I know who you mean.” Taylor stopped cold on her tracks once she was able to see inside; a chamber that looked like a bank vault slash surgery room slash engineering workshop. “But anyway, the drug and nanomachine therapies are exceeding my expectations.”

And in the center, being observed by Ocelot and Clark at both sides…

“And I’m reasonably sure the same techniques could be used to restore the physical damage her brain has suffered.”

Taylor stared at their object of interest. “Oh… oh fuck.”

“But the personality? The memories? I’m afraid you’ve lost your witness.”

She turned around and ran away.

“Well, it was worth a shot”, Ocelot said. “Will you treat her then? It’d be a shame if we just let such a hardy lady go to waste…”

Taylor shambled away from the chamber, crossing the lab as she ignored the rest of the conversation. She didn’t want to know anything else to do with what was happening back there.

She moved through the open door to the main infirmary room, leaned on the wall, and retched.

“Christ…” Taylor felt nothing in her stomach, but not for lack of trying. How long had she gone without eating?

“Oh, it’s worse than that.” Taylor turned to the voice. It was the figure sitting with the girl. “His life is spent entirely in dreams. And those dreams are the agony of a man who shouldn’t be alive.”

The voice of a man muffled by a gas mask.

“Don’t be surprised, Taylor Hebert”, he said, not turning around, seemingly busy with something he was working on with his hands. “I am not the first mind reacting to you in these memories, am I?”

Taylor started to take tentative steps to the man. He looked thin, almost emaciated. But the sleeveless shirt showed fairly toned arms. “Memories? First?”

“Please, you must have you realized already.” He sighed. “I guess I can’t be helped. You are nothing but a feral child, flailing her way around a first mind reading that you are neither prepared or talented for.” He chuckled. “You will only burn yourself away.”

Taylor scoffed. “Well, I am here, so I must be doing something right.”

“Right? No. Unwise, yes. Brute force can only carry you so far.” He shook his head, and then brought his hands to the girl’s, leaving a crude stuffed doll for her to embrace. She didn’t react to the exchange. “She, on the other hand, has a powerful gift. Of course, not as powerful as mine… but she has great potential to do as she pleases.”

Now closer, Taylor took a better look of the girl, who was now clean. Her hair, her skin, the face… “She’s… she’s Screaming Mantis. Andrea.” She glanced at the man. “And you are —”

Andrea sat at the table where two other girls were waiting. Taylor looked around, but they were the only ones around in the cafeteria, and food had already been served to them.

“So”, Andrea started with trembling lips. “You… ah, you’ve gone through the same therapy?”
The blonde, the smallest one, nodded frantically, not looking away from the foot in her plate.

“Yes. They said we’d be training with you”, the tall one said. “I’m Nika. She’s Paula.”

“Andrea”, she said with a nod. She looked at Paula. “Is she alright…?”

Taylor studied their features. “You gotta be kidding.” All three were the HAVEN members, just younger.

Nika shrugged. “I don’t know. Ocelot said she hurt her throat. Laughing. I heard the ones who did it to her were calling her the ‘Devil’s child’ before she was brought in.”

Andrea nodded. “I’m sorry.”

Paula shifted her shoulders in response. She kept looking at the food, the fork in her hand hovering above it.

Nika took a breath. “I’m… kind of lucky. I still remember everything I did, but… It could have been worse than just getting some fits of rage, right?” She offered a weak smile. “You?”

Andrea shook her head. “I… I don’t know.”

She took her fork and poked at the food.

“I don’t remember anything. He told me that I killed one man at least, and then… I died.”

Paula surprised Andrea with a hug, leaned against her while keeping her gaze straight.

Nika’s smile wasn’t so weak now. “You’ll fit right in.”

“How the hell did you turn from this”, Taylor wondered to herself, seeing Andrea returning the gesture with a hand over the hair of the other girl, “into the bitches you are now…?”

From the roof she was sharing with Mantis, Taylor looked at the skyscrapers surrounding them.

Most were damaged beyond recognition. A few completely ruined. There were fires everywhere. A very distinctive type of siren wailed.

“Where…?” She was already dreading the answer, and she turned to where Mantis was looking at. A large extension of what was once a green zone in the middle of the city. A very recognizable one, in fact.

Central Park, in New York.

“There was a moment, a lull, during the fight, where everyone had fallen back.” Taylor saw as Mantis took off his mask, although she couldn’t see his face from that angle. “With age, I learned to control my power, instead of it controlling me. My mind reaches the entire planet, sensing the minds of every living human.”

He raised a hand towards the park.

“I learned to filter their thoughts from mine. But those particularly near to me, say, a few kilometers… well, without my mask, it gets hard to know who’s thinking what. It makes my control over my power sloppy.”
Taylor held her breath as she saw the ground cave in and the trees burn as they fell to the breach.

“And like this…”

Then came the brightness and fire.

“I can let loose completely.”

Behemoth. The Hero Killer.

He was floating, rising from below the ground, struggling as he was kept in the air.

Never going above the buildings. But he was there, in the clear. Throwing all kinds of energy attack at Mantis.

The building the psychic was levitating over rattled and crumbled under the onslaught. And he was untouched.

“But why?” Taylor asked. “Why?! If you could do this — ”

“It would have been my pleasure”, Mantis interrupted. “But I learned something here.”

Two lights descended from the sky. One green, the other gold.

“All your fights, all your struggles”, he spat with utter disgust, “are all pointless.”

She let the doll fell to the table with a cry.

“Sorry.” Andrea took a breath. “That one gave me shivers.”

The older woman sitting in front of her offered her a smile. “It’s fine. We can’t expect every try to go well.”

“I’m just tired, Cassie”, Andrea said, turning to the window. Outside, in the open space that passed for a central plaza for the small community, a big bearded man laughed with the few kids. A few toys floated among them, entertaining the children with the ways the objects flew around.

“Feeling burned out?” Cassie suggested. “Nobody would hold it against you, you just started again…”

“No, it’s not that.” Andrea’s shrugged. “He suggested me to go through command training. Lead the others.”

“Sounds like he has something important in mind for you.” Cassie nodded. “So the problem is…?”

“What if he only wants me for that because of my talents?”

“I don’t think you’re worried about being reduced to that. You’re too loyal to him for that.”

“I can’t repeat it again.” Andrea pointed at the doll. “I’m not ready.”

“Are you really equating your talents to your capacity as a leader?” Cassie asked with a raised eyebrow. “Because, well, I don’t know anything about the military, but I’d dare say that training is what’s intended to solve that particular issue.” She chuckled. “Besides, we’re a very laid back bunch; I don’t think Ocelot expected anything of the sort, having you living here.”
“He could have sent me to live anywhere”, Andrea said. “Instead he sends me to the best medium in the States.”

“Oh, did Ocelot say that? No, I guess it was Raven”, Cassie said tilting her head to the window, amused. “Shamans can be such charmers. But I wouldn’t say I’m the best one by any mileage. And compared to what you’ll be able to do, I’m little more than an spiritist with a glass, a board, and a stupid list of questions.”

“Yeah but at least you can interact with the spirits”, Andrea muttered. “The only ones who want something with me are in my head planning to ruin my life.”

Cassie sat up and went behind Andrea. “Look. I know you care about all that; and that you worry about the traditions of old. And I don’t think I can’t help you much with it. But listen to me, alright?” She passed a hand over her shoulder. “You have been granted new life. And it is your right to spend it as you see fit.

“But whatever happens, I want you to know you have a place with us.” She squeezed her shoulder. “I know we don’t talk much about it, with just trying to simply live. But you are one of us. So I hope you can find at least some relieve in the knowledge that you’re always welcome here.”

Andrea managed a small smile, and reached to Cassie’s hand. “Thank you.”

“Now”, Cassie said as she gave her back the doll. “Let’s go over the basics another time, alright?”

With a nod, Andrea took the doll with both hands, and closed her eyes.

She then started reciting a mantra. “The body is the mind, is the soul, is the will, is the soul, is the mind, is the body…”

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**MGS4: Guns of the Patriots - Mantis' Hymn**

“You monster!” the girl shouted.

Snake raised a hand in front of her. “Let him talk. He doesn't have much time left.”

Mantis’ eyes bored into Snake’s. “I've seen true evil. You, Snake. You're just like the boss…” He paused. “No, you're worse. Compared to you, I'm not so bad.”

Taylor wasn’t expecting Mantis’ hand to reach and grab her face.

“And you, Taylor Hebert… You are the worst of your cursed family!”

*The people started to accept her authority, desperate.*
The heroes were watching from a distance, impotent.

She was untouchable.

Taylor gasped, stumbling around.

“I wasn’t able to read the future…” Mantis wheezed on the floor.

“A strong man doesn’t need to read the future”, Snake said, kneeling at his side. “He makes his own.”

“You’re not a killer.”

Him, on his knees, and her, looking down at him with a gun.

“No. But I suppose, in a roundabout way, you made me into one.”

Hitting the desk with her leg, Taylor tried to pry the hand off her head, but it just wouldn’t let go.

“I thought my father was going to kill me”, Mantis confessed. “That’s when my future disappeared. I lost my past as well. When I came to, the village was engulfed in flames…”

Snake narrowed his eyes. “Are you saying you burned your village down to bury your past?”

“I see that you have suffered the same trauma.” A laugh, weak and wheezy. “We are truly the same, you and I. The world is a more interesting place with people like you in it… I never agreed with the boss’ revolution. His dreams of world conquest do not interest me. I just wanted an excuse to kill as many people as I could.”

She brought the girl back home.

The girl gave her two orders.

She obeyed without a question, burning all that grounded her.

She bumped now against the wall, blinded and confused.

Mantis looked up at Snake. “But you, you are different… You’re the same as us. We have no past, no future. We live in the moment. That’s our only purpose. Humans weren’t designed to bring each other happiness. From the moment we’re thrown into this world, we’re fated to bring each other nothing but pain and misery.”

The man staggered, venom injected from a thousand mouths.

Her idol flew up, fast and high, her lungs sabotaged.

She passed out a victor and a destroyer.

“No!” Taylor shouted as she pushed herself away from the wall with a hand. “NO!”

The girl in camo pants and a tank top approached them.

“In my lifetime I have read the pasts, presents, and futures of thousands upon thousands of men and women”, Mantis said as Snake took off his mask.

The girl’s hand went to her mouth. “Oh, gross.”
Mantis licked his bloodied lips. “And each mind that I peered into was stuffed with the same single object of obsession. That selfish and atavistic desire to pass on one’s seed… It was enough to make me sick. Every living thing on this planet exists to mindlessly pass on their DNA. We’re designed that way. Conflict is inevitable. Animal, human, parahuman, it doesn’t matter. It’s just a natural part of the world.”

Everyone followed her every command without a single word being exchanged.

A battle like none has ever raged on this Earth.

She dared bare her fangs at god.

Her foot caught on a chair, and Taylor fell back, screaming as she felt being grabbed by the neck of her sweater.

It was night when she arrived. By then, the fire had been extinguished.

Andrea stood in the plaza, among the ruined houses that were illuminated only by the lights of her car. The firefighters had raised a perimeter, but most of them had left already. She was alone.

Only her, and the ashes.

Her fists closed tight, she kept her eyes on the ruins.

And then, she screamed.

She gripped at the empty air, and pulled.

Grunting, Taylor fell to the ground on her shoulder.

She started to get up as she saw Andrea stare at her. “What the hell…?

“What are you doing here?” Andrea demanded. “No, scratch that, how are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“You don’t…?” Andrea’s hand went to her forehead and started pacing around. “No, no no no, this can’t be happening. It doesn’t make sense!”

“Hey! I wouldn’t mind an explanation either”, Taylor said as she stood up.

Andrea turned back to Taylor and reached out to her. “There’s no time, you need to leave now.”

Taylor took a step back. “Forget that! First, you pull that shit at the meeting, then make me go through all this shit. And now you want to make me go? Start talking!!”

“Goddammit, Taylor. You might die at any moment if you don’t leave now!”

“What?” Taylor took another step back, a more cautious one. “Why?”

Andrea raised both hands. “I’m not threatening you.”

“Oh, and you think you gave me any reason to trust you on that?” Taylor said with a scoff. “Sorry, not buying it.”

Andrea stood there, glaring at Taylor for a moment, and then turned around, mouthing a ‘fuck’.
“I guess as long as you don’t make another jump, you should be good for a few minutes.” She then turned back to Taylor. “All right. You must know at least what’s been happening since we fought.”

“I’ve been reading your mind?” Taylor ventured. “But I don’t know how I could be doing that. Colonel Campbell said my talents were progressing very fast, but I could only feel emotions and intentions around me before this.”

“Well, you’re not a lost cause yet.” Andrea crossed her arms over her chest. “Yeah, you’ve been seeing my memories.”

“And how could you tell? You didn’t react to me before.”

“Memories aren’t categorically filed and archived in one’s mind.” Andrea swung an arm to her side. “Memories are just a bundle of information, dispersed all over your brain until you need to recall one in particular. I just wasn’t aware of what was happening until now, when you screamed loud enough to feel it with my real ears.”

Taylor raised an eyebrow. “Wait, your real ears? I thought we were in your mind.”

Andrea sighed. “Might as well be me who tells you this now. So, your first lesson”, she stated firmly. “The body is the mind. The mind is the soul. The soul is will. Each one reflects the state of the others, because all four are one and the same. And will? Will is everything. The will to perform life-saving surgery on yourself when stranded and trapped in the wilderness. The will to turn around the fate of an entire country. The will to take down entire armies by oneself in a suicide mission.

“This is true for everyone, but in particular for a psychic. Your body could be mortally wounded, half your brain a souffle on the ground, and your soul broken and twisted, but as long as your will is strong enough, not even death can stop you.”

“All right, that sounds like, well”, Taylor started as she furrowed her eyes. “Like something, I guess. But what does one thing have to do with the other?”

“Before they can read an entire lifetime from someone’s mind in seconds, without anyone noticing, most telepaths who start practicing their gift have to enter some sort of trance. As they start experiencing one memory after another in real time, they lose enough of their self-awareness that they start mumbling loudly what they say inside those memories.”

Taylor pointed a thumb to the night sky. “You mean, everyone has been listening to me all this time?”

“Just bits, probably nothing coherent. It’s no different from speaking in your sleep, people won’t understand everything you mumble. And I’ll bet they are listening to me as well, now that both of our consciousness are in contact. One doesn’t start acting out in their own memories, but once you apply an external influence, things begin to feel dissonant.” Andrea started to pace around Taylor. “Mind, I’m just grasping at straws here. It’s not like anything of this sort ever happened to me.”

“So. You felt me disrupt your memories”, Taylor tried to redirect the conversation. “And then you pulled me to this one in particular.”

“Probably the best thing it could have happened. You were jumping like, well, someone without experience, from one memory to another.” She glanced aside. “Now that I anchored you here, your mind will have a moment of respite. If I hadn’t done that, you would have eventually suffered an information overload.”

Taylor relaxed her posture. “Meaning?”
Andrea brought up a finger gun to her temple. “Your mind gets fried.” She then mimicked getting her head blown off. “I saw that happen once; a man who awakened to his talents in his late twenties. He had been practicing for months until he got impatient, and well, he’s been decorating a retirement home as a vegetable ever since. Too much information, too fast, from too many people at once. They said he was lucky to survive.”

“All right, I see why you would be so worried.” Taylor started rubbing her cheeks. “Does it only happen to whoever reads a mind, or…?

“Yes, it’s a two-way street. I can’t do it, just send ideas and images, and only to people I know very well, like my teammates”, Andrea clarified. “But a skilled telepath can impart their memories into another person, or any memory they have read off someone else. Maybe even at the same time you’re reading theirs. But until you’re skilled enough, you run the risk of damaging their mind.”

“I’ll keep that in mind”, Taylor promised. “By the way, I thought you were a telekinetic?”

“I have several talents, it just happens that my telekinesis is the most obvious one, and my telepathy is just so subtle.” Andrea sucked a breath through her teeth. “More than that, I am a medium.”

"You mean, you see the dead? Like that one man in the Cobras, the Sorrow?"

"It's different for me. Imagine voodoo, or at least the popular image of it. I don’t really see or talk with the dead, but I can expand my skills with those of dead psychics, with the help of special dolls in their likeness.”

Taylor took a step back, in guard.

Andrea raised her hands. “Hey, I don’t kill other psychics. They, you, are my people. I only craft dolls of those who are already dead and participated willingly in conflict. The list isn’t really long, let me tell you.” She then lowered her hands with a mischievous smirk. “Though something I don’t need any dolls for is controlling the bodies of the recently dead to fight for me.”

Taylor grimaced, but otherwise relaxed her pose. “Ok, that’s… an unnerving thought.” She then pointed her thumb behind her shoulder. “Talking about the dead, what’s the deal with the mantises?”

Andrea frowned. “What?”

“I saw Psycho Mantis. I mean, I think it was him, and his memories as well. He also started to talk to me.”

“I know that”, Andrea interrupted her. “You said mantises, plural? There was another?”

“You were hiding in a basement.” Taylor took a breath. “I don’t know why or where. You were younger, and hallucinating a black mantis. In the end, you were drinking the pooled up blood and eating corpses before you escaped and Ocelot found you. A big guy with tattoos started rambling about you being marked with — ”

“Wait, you mean you saw the black mantis?”

“Saw?” Taylor scoffed. “It talked to me, said it owned you. That wasn’t you?”

“So it is true.” Andrea’s eyes flickered to one side. “I am marked.”

“Marked for what? Seriously, what does all that mean, and why do you have Psycho Mantis’ memories?”
“You shouldn’t worry about the black mantis”, Andrea said as she put her hands on her hips. “That’s my burden to bear. And as for those memories… What, you thought you and Ahab were the only ones Mond performed his identity procedures on? I know what you saw in my mind, Taylor. Take a guess.”

“I saw Ocelot talking with Doctor Clark. They were talking about using drugs and nanomachines to treat you. And hypnotherapy”, Taylor said, biting the last word more than speaking it. “They had the same done to you?”

“Not quite. Andrea Zafra, the real one, died years ago in that basement you saw. They got enough information about Big Boss’ identity to implant it in Ahab, and you had enough of a known psychological profile so that Mond knew what not to deviate from.” Andrea pursed her lips. “Me, I’m just the best guess at who the real Andrea might have been. Mond constructed a whole new identity, one that nobody was sure would be anything like the previous tenant of this body. Clark’s work healed the body, and helps keep everything stable.”

Having reached the car, Andrea then sat on the hood. “My entire team, me, Octopus, and Raven, have gone through very intense traumatic situations; the nanomachines are the only thing that keeps us emotionally stable”, Andrea said as he rubbed her forehead before she looked up to the sky. “Doctor Hunter, if you are listening, please prepare me for a recalibration. I fear my nanomachines might have been affected by this event.”

“Affected how?”

“Well, our codenames aren’t for show; they reflect our traumas.” Andrea swiveled her head from side to side slightly. “Imagine being paralyzed by the most intense fear you could ever conceive, and being capable only of screaming. And it happens with everything you see. That’s what happens when my nanites fail for even just a second.”

“I’m sorry…” Taylor said with a grimace.

“It’s fine”, Andrea dismissed with a tilt of her shoulder. “It’s been years since I had a relapse.”

“All right, but that doesn’t explain Mantis.”

“They were afraid that the new personality wouldn’t be able to control the psychic talents. That I would lose them, or worse, that they would become a danger to myself and others. So as the best known psychic working inside the Patriot’s sphere of influence, and one of the most powerful ones, Ocelot provided Mond with Mantis’ profile. Or maybe it was to have better control over me, but I can’t really know that.” Andrea raised her hands. “I’m not Psycho Mantis. I don’t fully understand how any of this works, but in the end, they decided that the implanted personality should run only subconsciously. Think of it as the mortar for the foundation of the rebuilt personality.”

“So you got his memories. But why would he react to me before you did?”

“Remember, the soul is the mind. Put enough of someone’s mind in a different person, and their soul will be attracted to the new recipient.”

Andrea left the thought hanging, as Taylor kept staring at her in silence for a moment. “You gotta be kidding me.”

“That’s for me to worry about. What you should be worrying about is finding why your abilities are evolving so quickly. I can’t help you, because telepathy isn’t my thing, but you should find why are you taking such large steps with your talent at the same time you train and learn to control it.
Seriously, it’s not normal.”

“Maybe I’m just talented?” Taylor offered with a grin.

Andrea didn’t look impressed. “You don’t want to be talented. Colonel Volgin was talented. Psycho Mantis was talented. ‘Talented’ psychics do not tend to be exactly sane.”

Taylor shot her a pointed look.

“Don’t”, Andrea warned. “You don’t really want to play that game, Taylor. I know what Mantis forced you to see when you were screaming. See, one of his less known abilities is predicting a person’s future. Not precognition, not quite. When he read someone’s mind, he was also naturally reading their past. But he had a knack to read their future with that as a starting point.”

“Bullshit. I saw when he died to Snake, he said he couldn’t see his future. Maybe he wasn’t as powerful as he thought”, Taylor countered.

“And no wonder”, Andrea agreed. “Do you really understand the kinds of odds that man has overcome? Remember what Snake told Mantis in that memory. A strong man doesn’t need to read the future, he makes his own. Will, again, is everything. Have you ever heard of the Spirit of the Warrior?”

Taylor narrowed her eyes. “Sounds familiar, somehow. But I can’t say from where I’ve heard that if I did.”

Andrea crossed her legs, in a graceful way that caused some envy in Taylor. “It’s not a common concept. It originated among psychics, back when we were still considered as the gods of myth.” She scoffed. “But all myths have a core of truth, and these gods had to share their legends with normal people as well. Heroes and soldiers. Warriors.

“Nobody really knows by now what it actually is or means, or at least what it did back when the concept was born. A recent interpretation says that it is just a very particular state of mind, others think it’s a personal quality. The oldest belief is that it’s some sort of entity, maybe a spirit, or the soul of a legendary hero, keeping watch over soldiers, whether they are psychics or not.”

“Sounds like a religion to me.”

“At first, it probably was”, Andrea agreed. “There is an archaic idiom to wish someone to endure in their endeavors, ‘may the spirit of the warriors always be with you’. But considering that shamans and mediums like me know for a fact that spirits and souls actually exist, it’s not something that mattered much by the past century. Whatever it is, most people agree it brings inspiration and strength. To keep struggling no matter the odds, to never yield against a superior opponent, to never betray your goals. The will to see you through anything, be right or wrong. Some say the spirit of the warrior was with Big Boss and his sons, all through every obstacle during their lives.” She chuckled. “If such a spirit exists, it must really like that family, and Snake in particular.

“Now, you are a different matter. You might share a similar drive, but you are a teenager, most people at your age have an iffy will. Still growing, still finding your identity. Nothing is sure. And in those visions Mantis gave you, you seemed to be a parahuman. So I think Mantis was seeing a different future, one where you underwent a trigger event shortly after being trapped in that locker if Ocelot hadn’t intervened. And from the way you were acting in them, I think you choose a very appropriate word.” She then leaned forwards. “A monster, and a very strong-willed one at that.”

“Fuck you”, Taylor spat, pointing a finger at Andrea. “You were the one screwing with my mind
just now at the meeting!”

Grabbing her by the arm, Andrea stood up and pulled her away. It wasn’t enough to throw Taylor off to the ground, but it was enough to make her move a few steps towards the ruins, forcing her to face them.

“Look at that.” Andrea pointed at the burnt remains. “Look at that!”

Taylor looked around. There wasn’t much to it, really. A plaza with a dozen houses around it distributed in two layers. It didn’t even deserve to be called a suburb even before their current state. “What is it?”

“2006. Fifty lives lost in the fires. Of them, thirteen were psychics. All vanished without a trace. Evidence of fighting was found everywhere, but all official reports concluded it was just an uncontrolled fire.”

Taylor turned around on her heels. “What?”

“You think they were the first or the last?” Andrea said extending her hand to the ruins. “No. We psychics have managed to be left alone for a long time. But here come the successors to the Patriots, and the same happens to another settlement each year. Friends, families, communities, all lost. Nobody even knows what happened to them or why, or if the same is happening to those without a community. And it’s happening everywhere. Not even the Soviet Union had this much interest in us.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to manipulate others as you did to me.”

Andrea’s face fell down, and she sat down again on the car, taking a breath as she looked at the ground. “You want me to apologize for causing you pain? To say I’m sorry?”

She looked up at Taylor’s eyes. “Yeah, I am sorry! I fought Ocelot against carrying out the plans for the VSS, asked him to reconsider over and over again. What he planned — what we did to you was not right.” Her eyes hardened at this point. “But we are at war for survival, Taylor. And make no mistake. Even leaving aside your blood, even if you don’t become the new Big Boss that Ocelot wanted you to be. Just by virtue of awakening as a psychic you’ve now become a part of this as well. It doesn’t matter if you had tried to go back to your old life as if nothing had changed, the battle would have found you sooner or later.”

“So you went along with his plan to get another body to throw at the fight”, Taylor concluded. “And now I have to be grateful for it or something?”

“My loyalty doesn’t lie only on Ocelot.” Andrea sat up, walking towards Taylor. “I am loyal to my people, your people, and he promised a way out for all of us. And we are desperate. All of us, including Ocelot, and I will not apologize for trying anything that will help us survive, as despicable as it might be.” She sighed. “If I am to become a monster to save others, so be it. Who is anyone to decide if I should pay the price?”

“That’s funny”, Taylor whispered. “Not only I am the one paying that price, the black mantis told me something similar when I tried to stop you from eating a corpse.”

“And you know what?” Andrea said unfaced. “We are still here to fight, both of us. You’ve lost much. But you still hadn’t really, truly, realized what it means to lose everything.” She shook her head. “When you do, we’ll see if you’d have changed your mind.”

Taylor hesitated before stepping forward. “If I do, I won’t repeat your mistakes.”
Andrea raised an eyebrow and scoffed, amused. “Let’s hope so. But it’s not my mistakes you have to be concerned about repeating…” she said with a smile. Maybe the most sincere smile Taylor saw from her since meeting each other. “We’ll talk later, but you should go now. And I insist; it might not mean much, but I apologize for before.”

“And that apology should matter to me now, because?”

“This is my mind”, Andrea answered with a tilt of her eyes to the sky. “When one is conscious, you may lie to yourself. But there is always a core part of yourself that is never fooled, that always knows the truth. In a place as raw and unfiltered like this, how can I be dishonest?”

Taylor finally exploded. “Fine, then!” she exclaimed. “If you can’t be dishonest here, then stop avoiding the question and tell me why you treated me like this!”

Andrea looked at her like a deer in headlights. “Taylor, you have to—”

“No. I won’t leave until you tell me”, Taylor cut her off. “Are you really that sure I’ll die? Talk fast.”

Closing her eyes, Andrea hung her head down and turned aside.

“As part of your hypnosis, Mond included two sets of keywords, based on a conversation Ocelot had with Big Boss when he was still known as Naked Snake. They were supposed to be used in the case that you deviated from the expected behavioral progression; we’d ask you for your name until you answered satisfactorily. One was prepared for Ocelot, and the other for me, so no matter who found you first, we both would be able to turn you around.”

Taylor nodded slightly, considering the information. “So you could use it again, once we’re awake?”

Andrea shook her head. “No, each set only works once, Mond didn’t have enough time to get you conditioned for more. I failed, so I can repeat it.”

Taylor exhaled. “But why? If you only needed to speak a few words… why the derision? Why trapping me with your power?”

“I told you we were emotionally stable, didn’t I? A pretty lie. Truth is, deep inside, our emotions betray us constantly, and sometimes…” Andrea chuckled to herself. “Sometimes we get carried away too far.”

She turned back to Taylor, looking regretful with her arms limp and hands crossed over her waistline. “I was jealous.”

“Jealous?” Taylor muttered. “Of what? I’m a loser. Whatever I have now left is because of your meddling.”

“Imagine my position. Ocelot saved me. He gave me a second chance for a life I never really knew I’ve lost nor that I remember. I am not just loyal to him, but I love him like a father. I became his little side project of sorts, training and grooming me. I became his right hand, his confidant, and I’d do almost anything if he asked.” Andrea huffed, looking aside. “I’m kind of pathetic, when I put it that way.”

“Seems like he was upfront with you, unlike with me. You got the better deal.”

“Maybe”, Andrea conceded. “But he had higher plans for you than he ever had for me. Do you know how many changes he made to his plans when he heard you had been hospitalized? Suddenly, most of our efforts revolved around you, and I didn’t realize anything had changed until he arranged
to for our transfer to Brockton Bay, so we could keep a better watch over you. I started to resent you. Ocelot created us both, and I was like the older child, resenting the younger one for hoarding the parental attention.”

“I never asked for this”, Taylor reminded her. “Not the hypnotherapy, much less the surgery or being used as a pawn.”

“No, you didn’t. But the sentiment was already there. But then the PRT building was attacked, and he had been taken. I’ve lost him, and all I could think was that it was because of you.” She turned her hands around, palms up. “I guess, I didn’t deal with my emotions as maturely as I should have. I was unfair and rough, and I have no justification for it. Again, I apologize.”

Taylor exhaled, tired. “I believe you.”

Taylor wasn’t sure what else to say. She didn’t feel she could trust Andrea, not yet. And neither she had much experience in receiving a real apology from someone who fucked her over with such intensity, at least not enough to differentiate truth from lie. But as much as Andrea tried to avoid the question, everything else felt honest enough to her. It was a start, Taylor guessed.

The mental image of Emma ever apologizing to her crossed her mind, and Taylor gave out a little laugh. Maybe in an upside down alternative world, and the odds still didn’t look good.

Would Ocelot ever apologize to her, if given the chance? He didn’t seem like the type to apologize for taking a path he had committed himself to.

“We’ll talk later”, she said, deciding instead to change the subject. “You realize you might have screwed up the meeting? With your alliance proposal.”

“Well, everyone has needs. I might have shot myself on the foot, but even if they keep me at arm’s length, I’m their only safe contact inside the PRT.” Andrea shrugged. “I’ll deal with the downfall. Besides, I doubt anyone up there will really balk at working along with each other. Everyone needs help after all, don’t we?”

Taylor hummed, undecided. “What now?”

“Now, I suggest you cover your ears. Just in case.”

Taylor bolted awake, sitting up as she covered her ears with her hands.

“Hold her down!” Taylor heard over the screams. The only hands on her were metallic ones, Dragon’s, who wasn’t forcing her back to lie down.

“Taylor?”

“I’m fine”, she hurried to assure Dragon. Taylor quickly realized she was back at the infirmary when she looked at one side to the source of the screams: Andrea. Both of them were laying on cots, the older woman held down by her teammates and Vamp as she trashed, crying and shouting.

It didn’t last long. Naomi came up with some sort of pen injector, sticking it in Andrea’s neck. It didn’t seem to do anything until Naomi turned around to a laptop and typed something into the keyboard.

Andrea calmed down instantly, exhaling as she looked at the ceiling. Octopus was kneeling at her side, cradling her head in her arms. Raven stood there holding a bag at their side, while Vamp
stepped back.

“All right”, came Narwhal’s voice from behind Dragon. And Taylor wasn’t looking, but they weren’t the only ones in the room. “Crisis averted, an explanation would be very, very welcome now.”

“Her nanomachines went haywire”, Naomi started. “I had to suppress them with a drug before rebooting them. Anything beyond that, they’ll have to tell us.”

“We’re all right”, Andrea croaked, patting Octopus in the head as she turned to look at Taylor. “Just had a little chat.”

“I don’t know if I can forgive you”, Taylor admitted.

“That’s fine. I wasn’t expecting you to.”

“But maybe I understand you.”

Andrea huffed in amusement. “More important would be, do you understand yourself?”

Taylor rose up and walked out of the room.

She wasn’t walking any fast, or with any particular place in mind.

Ignoring the voices behind her, she went to the elevator. The doors closed, and she pressed the button to the upper level.

She needed fresh air. She needed to think.

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