Summary

When Primus sees the destruction caused by the Entities, he decides to take action before earth can become another victim to their cycle.
Prologue

He looked at the war torn world, the lives lost and the fallen recycled to continue the destruction it was almost enough to make him despair.

His children had been content once, long ago, but free will was sacred and disagreement was inevitable. He could do nothing to stop what had become an endless cycle of hate played out across time, space and dimensions.

But life continued. With his guidance the world was slowly healing, it would be millennia before any progress would be noticeable but life and his children would return once more.

Until then he cast his attention out into the universe, all of them, looking for the Other or his servants while trying to occlude himself from their attention. Time was immaterial to both of them, they were a constant in all reality. In some they merely slept, gathering energy and in others they battled directly.

It was only by chance he saw the world die, engulfed in flames and the screams of its children.

Worlds died all the time, it was the way of things, but this felt wrong. The natural cycle broken in a way only the Other would wish.

The world had been young and its sun healthy, he looked through the different realities, starting with the nearest, the trail of destruction soon became clear, dead world after dead world and a wound in reality, a void used to move to another world.

He followed the trail from a far off galaxy to a small green and blue world.

That’s when he found them, formless creatures drifting through space. They moved from world to world bringing chaos and leaving destruction in their wake, mindlessly repeating the same actions time and again, and gathering knowledge without wisdom.

His gaze again turned to the planet they had reached. He knew the planet well, one of him had passed it once, when it was still just a lifeless rock but now it teemed with life.

The children of the planet were an oddity, constantly poking at things, eternally curious and often getting caught up in events beyond them and yet surviving all the same.

His children often found their way to the small blue planet and their arrival would either brought peaceful coexistence, a golden age for both or his children unwittingly brought disaster, leaving scars that may never heal.

As he continued to watch the entities closed off the space around the world, to keep beings they could not contend with away. Beings like himself.

They were not servants of the Other as he first thought, but they aided his goal. The senseless waste, the constant death of the children grated against all of his aspects.

There were Rules. He could not interfere directly and should he try to send his children they would not be able to reach the world though the barrier the beings had erected.
But maybe there was another, more subtle, solution.

Carefully he reached out, all too aware of his weakened condition and need to remain hidden. A small sliver of itself was extruded, barely more than a thought it could only just be seen as a ribbon of light.

//go// //watch// //wait// //learn//.

Another thought sent it across the galaxy, its small form letting it pass through the barrier unhindered.

The barrier had not been an obstacle but the distance had weakened the Sliver. Being cut off from the whole, it needed to find away sustain itself without causing harm.

Moving directly would burn too much energy so reaching out it felt the minds around it as it allowed itself to be carried on the wind, using only small amounts of energy to keep it near to the children around it.

As it drifted it began to learn, the physical differences between genders, how they thought and acted, how to read the emotions and thoughts that drifted through their minds.

A young man never noticed the tiny ribbon of light, no larger than a hair, land on his bare arm.

The Sliver entered his skin, drawing on the excess energy, careful not to harm him and connecting to his senses. He would never know as it shared his life, his thoughts and emotions as he grew.

To learn about the world, it would sometimes influence him. Nothing overt as free will had to be preserved, but it gave him suggestions or ideas that he heard subconsciously, to leave him free to choose. An idle suggestion to turn left on the way home one day resulted in him meeting a flag wearing ward again and through her he eventually met others.

While he stood there grinning, excited just to meet the local hero’s, the Sliver was learning about the parasites they carried and how they worked.

At its encouragement, he kept in touch with some of them over the years.

When his father's boat sunk, claiming everyone on board, the Sliver calmed his dreams and occluded him from a parasite.

It shared Danny’s joy when he joined with the woman he loved. It had watched their courtship, stepping in when necessary; he never forgot a date.

During the birth of their child, his overwhelming joy bled back into the Sliver who studied the child down to the genetic level. It traced what came from which parent.

The day they lost Annette it took a more direct hand, forced him to keep going, to focus on the daughter they shared.

They both felt concern when Taylor pulled away, becoming quiet and distant. She barely spoke now and never smiled.

Danny would never notice when the Sliver left him one night.
It watched through Taylor’s eyes as her best, and only, friend turned on her. Using knowledge shared in confidence to hurt her and turning her fears against her.

It tried to comfort her as it had Danny. When the nightmares came, it showed her a world of metal shining in the darkness of space and a five faced warrior standing against the dark.

But as they shut the door there was nothing it could do. When she screamed and begged only for them to laugh, it could only watch as it all came to much for her to bear.

The Sliver had watched and it had learned but it was through waiting.
Putting down my notepad I tried again to bring my mind back towards something vaguely coherent. *Stupid painkillers.*

It’s been almost a week since the police pulled me out of that locker in the middle of the night and four days since I was sent home from the hospital and I was still drugged up to the eyeballs.

Open cuts on my hands and the ‘unsanitary condition of the locker’ meant I needed to take a large number of strong antibiotics until the blood tests came back, that was how the hospital had explained it to Dad anyway.

And because telling Dad his daughter was found in a locker full of filth and risked all kinds of illness wasn’t enough, I had been kept in for observation because I may have had a heart attack. Apparently the EMT found an irregular heartbeat when they found me.

Shaking my head I tried, again, to focus on what I was drawing, I think it was some kind of face, it was angular and stern but it had been on my mind ever since I woke up in the hospital.

Giving up I glanced at my clock. Dad would be home for lunch soon, I should get something now if I wanted to avoid the awkward silence that dominated our meals now.

I should have told Dad what was going on and looking back it was clear something was wrong, but I didn’t want to trouble him. I kept telling myself he had enough problems to deal with between his work and the bills he thought I didn’t know about.

Putting my hand on the wall, I made my way slowly downstairs, moving fast at the Moment caused vertigo, not good when on the stairs.

I’d barely spoken to Dad since I got home, part of that was the medication knocking me out for hours at a time, but the rest was me not wanting to see just how much I had hurt him. He probably didn’t realise I could hear him this morning.

He had been on the phone, so I don’t know if it was the police or the hospital but he wasn’t happy. The police hadn’t been able to find anything and no one in the school was going to speak up in my defence. That was the other reason I never told him, I knew there was nothing he could do and that would just make him feel worse.

Reaching the kitchen, I sat down to let the dizziness pass when I noticed the papers Dad had left out. Flicking through the bills and paperwork, even I could tell Dad was trying to balance his budget, probably trying to get money together for my hospital stay when the bill arrived.

Before my mind could drift off again I got up and started on a sandwich for lunch, I nearly cut my hand open when something beeped loudly at me. Spinning around I tried to see where the noise came from, but the movement just made my head swim and I clutched the counter until everything settled.

I waited quietly. The house was old and creaky but I knew every noise, every broken step and lose board.
There! Moving slowly, I followed the noise back to the front room, I had to listen for the noise twice more before I heard it from inside my school bag.

The police had found my bag near my locker, apparently it had been sitting there the whole time and no one had touched it. Not that I had anything worth stealing. It went to the hospital with me, then got dumped in the corner of the room when I came home. I hadn’t looked at it since.

Carefully, I picked the bag up and moved it to the kitchen. If Emma had put something in my bag, I didn’t want to risk it staining the carpet. With my luck it’s a bomb, I thought to myself morbidly.

Moving Dad’s papers to the counter, I opened the bag and tipped it out onto the table. Books, pens, pencils and a cheap note pad fell out along with an expensive looking smart phone.

I jumped when it beeped again, a battery symbol flashing on its screen. That must have been why it was making noise. Picking it up I turned it over in my hands, I’d never owned a cell phone as Dad hated them; he blamed them for mum’s death.

“Where did you come from?” I asked the little phone. It had a large glass screen and metal back painted in glossy black. There were no brand markings but on the back was a strange icon; it was a face, painted red with white borders. It almost looked Japanese or from some video game.

Sitting at the table, I tried to work out where it came from. I knew Emma had one but hers was bright pink. While I could see them sticking something in my bag and claiming I’d stole it, I couldn’t see them doing that and the locker and the same time.

Maybe they had hoped I wouldn’t notice it, wait till I got back then accuse me of theft?

I put the phone on the table and shook my head. I must be out of it, I was being ridiculous and paranoid.

If it had a charge, I could see what was on it and maybe find an owner. Picking the phone up I turned it over in my hands. It was a sealed unit, so I couldn’t access the battery compartment, but I found a small USB port on the bottom of the phone.

I didn’t notice my hand pulling a pencil and my mostly unused note book out of the mess on the table. Maybe if I took a USB cable, I’m sure there’s one around the house somewhere, probably in the basement with Dad’s tools, maybe with a wire cutter I could use to strip one end. I’d just need something to work as a connector… maybe..?

Ten minutes later, I realised what I was doing just as I was about to strip the toaster for parts.

The phone was still sitting where I left it on the table and the page from my note book was covered in undecipherable mess. Until I looked at it and realised it was a rough plan to Jury-rig a kettle lead and an old transformer and some other bits and pieces, including stuff from the toaster, into a charging cable.

The fog in my head lifted just long enough for me to recognise the icon on the back of the phone. I ran – stumbled mostly – back upstairs to my room and grabbed my notebook before charging down the stairs. I made it half way down before I fell and slid the rest of the way on my backside, hurting my leg in the fall.
Hobbling into the kitchen, I quickly flicked through to the last page, sure enough sitting there – half finished – was that same face from the back of the phone, around it were… things. A glance at one tells me it’s a spark chamber and another is a T-cog. Flipping backwards into my notebook shows other things. Some were just detailed images of parts, others were the finished products and What on Earth is an ‘Ion blaster’!?

The further back I went the rougher the images became, lines were sloppy and notes almost illegible. Like I’d been in a hurry, or more likely drugged on my medicines from the hospital. I must have been doing this since I got home. Most of them were unfinished, but I could see what needed to be done.

I just needed to find the materials.

Shaking myself, I sat down at the table and tried not to pay too much attention to the designs. My heart was pounding and I needed to calm down. The hospital warned me not to overdo it.

*TSCH-CHU-CHU-CHU-TSCH*

The universe apparently hadn’t got that memo. Looking down I saw the phone collapse in on itself, the screen split open while other parts rotated and folded in on itself like some kind of complex puzzle as arms and legs became identifiable.

It took a couple of seconds for the phone to transform into a little robot. Parts of the phone were still recognisable. The touch screen clearly made up the majority of its chest and shoulders. One of the phones cameras was attached to the side of its helmet.

Its five fingered hands were tiny and the robot itself couldn’t be more than five inches tall. its big blue visor looked up at me. *Beep?* it questioned.

That’s when I passed out.

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“Taylor?! Taylor!” I was shaken awake by Dad and it took me a moment to realise what he was panicking about. I was on the kitchen floor; he must have come home for lunch and found me out cold.

“Dad, it’s alright, I’m fine, I… just got a bit worked up.”

I didn’t like lying to him, but it seemed to have become second nature to me. Besides, as he helped me up I could see the normal looking phone sitting on the table where I left it amongst Dad’s paperwork. It was switched on with a full battery. For all I knew I’d blacked out from the medication and dreamt the whole thing.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, Dad I’m fine, just those stupid pills.” I sat back at the table while Dad started to clear up, I had almost convinced myself I’d dreamt the whole thing when Dad stopped to look at what he was clearing up.

“Taylor” He asked as he looked at something with a puzzled expression “What is this?”
I looked at the page full of designs and felt my stomach drop.

I stared at the table as part of me felt guilty that I’d tried to hide what happened, while the rest still hoped it was all a dream. “I… I don’t know, I think… I think I’ve been getting these ideas ever since…. since the hospital, but I’ve been too out of it to realise.

Before Dad could ask anything else, the phone decided now was a perfect time to make itself known and transformed again. The look on Dads face was actually quite comical.

Dad stared in shock as the little bot waved happily at him before turning back to me. *Beep?*

I took a deep breath. I was much calmer and I was not going to pass out this time.

“Taylor… what… was… is?” Dad was struggling and the little robot looked between us before shrugging and launching into a long explanation of beeps, clicks and squeaks as it points at me and gesturing wildly with its arms as it chattered away like a happy songbird.

I couldn’t stop myself from giggling which made him puff his chest out proudly.

It was quite expressive for a faceplate and visor.

At Dad’s questioning look I elaborated aloud with, “He’s complaining about being left in my bag for so long that his battery was getting low.”

Dad sunk into an empty chair “You can… understand it? How?”

I gave the bot a questioning look and he started to point at the paper on the table around him then back at himself.

“I. I think I made him” With a sense of finality it all clicked into place. “I made him!” I had powers, I’m a cape!
Finding out I had powers was one thing, working out what they were and how to use them was another. It didn't help that the medication was still knocking me out for hours; one of the pills I had to take in the morning would leave me useless till almost lunch time.

I looked back through my drawing pad, god knows how out of it I must have been not to notice what I had been drawing. Grumbling to myself about stupid, cross-reacting, medication I turned back to the 'shopping list' I was making.

I spent hours after Dad went back to work yesterday going through my designs, adding details and fleshing out ideas while looking for anything I could build with what we hand in the house, apparently there wasn't.

I was in the basement where Dad had fitted a workbench and wall mounted tool shelf. Dad had always been good at fixing things and I used to like to help when I was little. Mostly it was a collection of screwdrivers and a soldering iron.

He hadn't used it in years so, I was going to use it as my own workshop for now. The problem was anything I had designed so far would need specialist tools that would either cost a fortune to buy or I would have to build from scratch, which required even more tools.

My... 'phone?' was trying to tidy up the workbench beside me. Currently he was trying to lift a hammer that was bigger than he was and certainly heavier.

Giving up, he made a huffing gesture complete with a frustrated growling noise. It was kind of adorable to be honest. He grabbed the handle again and tried to drag the hammer across the desk towards the tools on the wall.

His problem solving and emotive abilities were incredible.

"Hey, Kiddo," Dad called from the top of the stairs, "Ready to go?"

"Yea, just let me grab my phone. He's just tidying up" I ignored Dad's bemused look and went to grab the little bot, as soon as my hand closed around him he transformed.

It was Sunday and after nearly a week of confinement, I was ready to climb the walls. The doctors had said I could stop taking some of the medications, which thankfully included whatever one it was that had been knocking me out. I certainly felt clear headed for the first time since I woke up in hospital.

Dad was taking me down to the board walk to get some fresh air and to look through some of the thrift stores for anything I could use. The shopping list I had been working on had a list of 'would be nice' items that I could really use. Mostly it was stuff for my phone.

Walking outside, I idly walked over to the old pick-up Dad still drove. It was older than me, but dad would often remind me that it still ran better than any other car on the block.

Opening the car door, I could see what he meant as body was older than me but the engine was fairly new. Dad must have swapped it out sometime, which explained the reinforcements on the engine
mounts, though there was some rust on the exhaust that was going to cause some problems soon. But I could fix that and it looked like someone had keyed the side recently, that had to go, Huh now that I looked at it there was a large dent in the drivers door that could be fixed.

Ideas took shape in my mind. Things I could do to make the truck better, like armour plating or a self driving system. I could almost see what I would need to make it work and how it would all fit together and a new fuel that would be highly efficient with zero emissions. If I could just find the right elements.

Something was building in my chest, a warmth that was slowly spreading through my body. With a gasp, I let go of the door and quickly stepped back from the truck. The information slowly faded from my mind.

“Taylor?! are you okay, what happened?” Dad was quickly by my side.

“I... I'm okay, I think... I think I just worked out something about my-” I trailed off as I didn't want to say it out loud where the neighbours could hear me. I probably looked strange enough as it was and I could feel myself trembling. Shaking my head, I climbed into the truck, this time ignoring the information that filtered in and stared at my shaking hands.

As soon as Dad climbed in, I told him what had happened. He took one my hands and held it till I stopped shaking. “Do you want to go back into the house?” he asked softly.

I shook my head. “No, if I spend any more time indoors I'm going to start talking to the furniture.”

He chuckled and then he said, “You used to do that when you were little.”

The drive gave me time to think. My power was apparently telling me everything about the truck, but it was getting easier to ignore it. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my phone. “I don't suppose you have any answers?”

The number 42 came up on the screen. “Smart ass,” I grumbled back playfully.

It took me a moment to realise my power was feeding me information on my phone just like it was with the truck. But it also included information on how it transformed and what it would look like in both forms.

The interlocking pieces were fascinating and the seams that were all but invisible stood out clearly now.

But what really drew my attention the most was the glowing sphere. In robot mode it sat in the chest and was directly connected to two more components, both were tiny, but my power was telling me they were important.

I recognised them from my earliest drawings. They were the Spark Chamber (the blue glow was the spark itself), Processor and the Transformation Cog.

Information filled my head. The properties of a spark, the effect it had on the frame it was placed in and how it determined the final size of the robot. More than that, I could feel it, it was connected to me and through that connection I could feel... curiosity, affection... family.

That's when I realised what I was really holding. It wasn't just a small robot, it was a living thing that
I had created somehow. A small being and made of metal and wires, but alive.

“You okay there, kiddo?”

Dad's voice made me jump, I must have spaced out again as we were already at the boardwalk.

“Sorry I was thinking.” I gestured at my phone. “He really needs a name.”

Despite mid winter, it was a bright clear, though still chilly, day. The boardwalk overlooked the bay, giving a great view of the Protectorate's base sitting out in the bay.

The gangs treated it as a sort of neutral ground, there were no tags on the walls and nobody started trouble.

This was mostly because the shops had pooled their money and hired a private security firm to keep the gangs out. They were informally known as the Enforcers. Dad didn’t like them much.

There was some trouble awhile back between a couple of Enforcers and some of the dock workers. One of Dad's friends had ended up spending the night in hospital while the Enforcer who caused it was let go due to 'lack of evidence'.

Even with the winter sales, it wasn't too busy so Dad and I could take out time. I needed some new clothes, as the locker had destroyed one of my favourite pairs of jeans.

I had expected crowds when we came out. What I hadn't expected was my power running off on tangents from the slightest thing. Random things sights like a little boy with a toy dinosaur left me with an idea for a full sized one, made of metal with a robot mode that carried a massive sword.

My power was weird.

As I was mentally going over what I would possibly need to build such a thing, Dad called out to me, breaking my train of thought and making me blush. I had been standing there staring at nothing again.

In the end, I resorted to picking up a small notebook and pen to scribble ideas on while we had lunch.

I think Dad wanted to talk while we ate as he kept either glancing at my notebook or me. I don't think he knew where to start... to be honest neither did I.

After lunch, we stopped by an electronics store, because I wanted a wall charger and a couple of USB leads that would fit my phone – I really need to name him later – his batteries had been full ever since I found him – Something else I need to look into – but they would be useful if I built more.

Out of morbid curiosity, I went over to the PC section to see what ideas I could pick up. Even with the sales, we couldn't afford a new computer. But maybe I could build something.

As soon as I touched one, it mapped itself out in my mind. I had to stop myself from frowning. It was too low powered to do anything more than word processing. The power supply and motherboard were very low end and wouldn't be able to support upgrades. That was if they didn't burn out within the next six months.
Shaking my head, I moved on to more expensive units. They all had the same problems; cheap parts and underpowered. I could patch a couple of the more expensive ones together and run them in parallel. Three or four computers with one dedicated to graphics processing might be powerful enough, but that would need a custom operating system. None of the off the shelf ones would support a home built supercomputer, but if I was going to go that far I might as well just-

Dad’s hand landed on my shoulder, bringing me out of my latest daze. “You okay, kiddo?”

Thankfully no one had noticed me this time. I really needed to be more careful or I was going to out myself as a cape. “Yea fine, it’s just a lot to take in.” I smiled weakly “I think I’m getting a bit of a headache.”

“Alright, do you want to head home? We can grab some takeaway and a movie if there’s nothing else you want here.”

We made our way back to the truck. On the ride home, I quizzed my phone on possible names that he might like.
I slept late on Monday. Between the medication and the day out yesterday, I was exhausted.

I wasn't going back to school any time soon, at the very least not until the police investigation was completed.

Shuffling around the kitchen, listening to the old radio on the counter I decided I should try and find out what my power could really do, instead of constantly being caught off guard.

Sitting at the table with the notebook I brought yesterday, I made a list of everything I knew while Rewind – that was the name my phone had chosen – would look things up for me on the Internet.

That was the plan anyway. Once I had Rewind in one hand and a notepad in the other, I got a little distracted making notes about him.

I still didn't know where he came from, only that my power was involved. His contact list was empty so no help there, so I decided to look through the photos.

Flicking through the photos stored on his memory it quickly became clear he had taken a liking to recording everything he saw.

"Rewind, can you show me the photos from before I found you?"

The little bot chirped happily, before he scrolled through countless images to bring me to the 'starting point and I brought up the first image. It was a picture of me, taken when I first found him, I picked another image at random.

I was very nearly sick. "OH GOD! DELETE! DELETE!" Looking away, I held Rewind at arms length while trying not to get any of... that on me. Puzzled by my actions the little bot did as I asked. Apparently he didn't understand the term 'explicit content' or 'filter'.

Ugh. I wish I could build something to get those images out of my head.

Moving carefully through the remaining images, I came to two conclusions: 1, Rewinds previous owner was a freak and 2, they had been one of Emma's interchangeable followers.

I wonder if she even knew or cared her phone was missing?

Rewind himself wasn't much help, his first memory was waking up in a locker. He had taken a series of photos that documented his great escape, helped by his running commentary. There were some rather good close-ups of rats and spiders.

When he woke, Rewind had immediately transformed and set to work escaping. There had been a hole in the back of the locker, which the owner had used to hide things in. It lead to a crawl space between the walls that he followed till he reached a small air vent. From there he had made his way back to my locker.

My bag had been beside my locker, so he must have climbed in after calling for help.
Most of this was guess work based on what he was telling me combined with the photos he had taken. I could barely remember what happened after they shoved me in there and Rewind claimed to have no memory of what created him.

Mentally shaking myself, I tried to get back on task. It didn’t matter how or where Rewind came from, he got me out of that locker. Right now that’s all I care about.

Putting all that to one side, I focused on Rewind's physical condition. Whatever had created him had also upgraded him.

He was connecting himself to the nearest cell network in range and I don’t think anyone had a faster net connection than him. He also didn't seem to worry about data limits. If he was still a normal phone he would have filled his memory twice over with music by now. Just where he was downloading the music from was another matter entirely.

I knew most of this was probably illegal, I just couldn't bring myself to care.

Most of this came from my power when he sat in my hand. When I had suggested opening him up for a better look he had grabbed a fork and tried to defend himself with it. I was joking... mostly.

By lunchtime, I was fairly sure I knew what my powers were. I'm a Tinker, a type of para-human who could build advanced technology 'Para-humans Online' had thread after thread on them along with countless theories on where their ideas came from.

Aside from a few very rare exceptions, no two para-humans had the same powers. Though some could have similarities. All tinkers built stuff, for example, but there was always a unique twist. All tinkers had a specialisation and from the looks of things mine was robotics.

One thing I couldn’t find was any information on was this weird touch power I had. Strictly speaking it was classed as a 'striker' power but I couldn't find any information on a comparable power.

Trying to find my limits, I got up and went into the front room. I must have looked silly walking round the house touching everything but soon I had an idea what worked. The TV and my old computer both responded, but the keyboard and mouse when disconnected did not. Nor did the TV remote.

So it only worked on things that were 'advanced' enough or directly connected to something that my power could work with.

What's more, each time I found something my power could work with I would feel a warmth in my chest.

When I came back into the kitchen, the radio was losing signal again. It was old and had been dropped years ago, Dad fixed it but it never been the same since.

Putting my hand on the radio, I closed my eyes and felt my power map itself the radio out in my mind. Holding the flow of information back, I tried to focus on what was wrong.

Even with my eyes closed I could see the problem. When it was first broken some parts were knocked loose. Dad fixed most of them, but one had developed a fault that caused problems when it got hot.
Ignoring the radio for the moment, I closed my eyes and concentrated on the warmth. It wasn't painful, just a gentle heat that was slowing spreading across my body. It was like being in a hot bath.

I could feel it trying to reach the radio. Curious, I tried to mentally 'push' the heat into the radio. I gasped as the broken parts rebuilt themselves and the scratches and nicks on the case filled in.

I let go out of shock, breaking the connection while I stared at the radio. It looked brand new and sounded better than ever.

Backing up, I sat down at the table. “Beep?” Rewind was watching me nervously. I put my hand on the table and he gently patted the back of my hand, trying to calm me down.

I could feel the warmth fading and I was shaking again. Actually now I realised it, I was also breathing harder. I felt like I'd just run up and down the stairs a couple of time.

A strong cup of tea later and I added to my notes that I can fix things.

Is that why Rewind never needed charging? Was I charging him every-time I picked him up?

I had let go before the warmth could do more than repair the radio. What would happen if I kept pushing?

There were a couple of boxes of junk under the basement stairs. Maybe I could find something useful in one?

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Digging through the boxes had mostly been a waste of time. The only thing I had found that I could work with was an old VCR.

Pulling the final box open, I found an old 1/6 scale model of a sports car. One of Dad's friends had got it for him as some private joke from work that I was 'too young to understand'.

The car was white with green and red racing decals and red wheels. The plaque on the side of its stand said Lancia. It looked cool but it was just a lump of plastic, my power couldn't do anything with it.

Taking it over to my workbench, I unbolted the car from the stand and started trying to get the body off. Hopefully I could use the shell. There was room enough inside it for me to fit an electric motor and some batteries and if I removed the model engine I might be able to...

Grabbing some paper, I started making some designs while dictating a shopping list to Rewind

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I spent most of the afternoon working on what I could do with the car until I had to make a start on dinner.

Rewind had been looking prices online for the different parts I needed to hopefully make the model into something I could work with. As dinner cooked, I looked through his results I felt my stomach fall.
There was no way I could afford most of this.

I could cut some corners here and there, build some parts myself from scratch, but to do that I would need tools I can't afford.

Maybe I could sell some of my designs? I just didn't know who would be interested in designs for a robot that turns into a miniature car that they couldn't build... Maybe I could try and work on commission?

Of course, I didn't have a clue how to go about setting any of that up.

Letting my mind wonder, my eyes fell on the repaired radio and an idea slowly began to form. It wouldn't solve everything, but it would be enough to get me started.

Grabbing Rewind, who squawked and beeped at me, I quickly called Dad.

“Hey Dad,” I said in greeting.

I could hear the surprise in his voice, it had been along time since I called him at work. “you okay, Kiddo?”

“Yea, I'm fine. Actually, I just had an idea that I need your help with. Can you stop by the junkyard on your way home?”

“I think so, why?”

This was going to be the hard part. “I need a couple of TV's. Plasma or LCD would be best, it doesn't matter if they are broken.”

“Taylor... are you sure? That sort of thing isn't cheap”

“I know, it's okay. Trust me, if this works you will get your money back.”

He sighed. “Alright, Taylor, I'll see what I can do. But you're going to explain this when I get home.”

“Okay! Thanks! Bye!”

If that worked we should have a bit of extra money. And if it doesn't Dad is going to be really mad.

I was just finishing up dinner when Dad got home. He put the TV’s in the front room while we ate.

“Okay Kiddo, what was all this about?”

I shrugged “I was messing with my powers earlier when I found I could do this!” I walked over to the least damaged TV as I spoke.

Dad had brought two flat screens, both were about twice the size of our current TV and one of them had clearly been smashed.

Putting my hand on the TV that was in better condition, my power mapped it out and I started to push my power into it. Most of the damage had been internal but it had picked up some cosmetic
damage while at the yard.

I heard Dad gasp as the TV repaired itself.

Taking a step back I sat down on the sofa, that had been more draining than fixing the radio. “See? I can use my power to fix things. We could sell this for what? Twice what you paid for them?”

“Probably not, pawn shops are cheap,” Dad muttered while examining the now repaired TV. He turned back to me. “You okay?”

I nodded. “Yea, just trying to catch my breath.”

Having caught my breath, I immediately walked over to the other TV. My power told me that it was in a much worse state, as if that was not obvious. The screen was smashed and and someone had torn parts of the casing off. there was also some missing parts on the main board.

I wasn’t sure how my power would handle the missing components, so this would make a good test.

As I pushed my power into the TV, I was able to see the broken parts repair themselves. But what really drew my attention were the missing parts. Replacements folded or grew out of the surrounding pieces.

My heart was hammering in my chest by the time I let go and stumbled to the ground. “Taylor!” Dad was there immediately to help me up. I felt like I had just ran a marathon.

“I’m okay! That was just more tiring than I thought it would be”

“Taylor, I know you’re excited by all this but you need to be careful. What if I hadn't been here? You've already had... I can't...” He didn't say it but I knew what he meant. I'd already had one heart attack.

By the time I had calmed Dad down, I was starting to feel better but I had to promise to be more careful in the future.

Checking the TV told me that I had increased its mass.

It looked like I could ignore missing components and my power would create them directly but the mass cost me.
Dad took both the repaired TVs with him to work the next day. He was going to sell them at a pawn shop during his lunch.

He had been a bit quiet this morning, I think the incident with my powers bothered him. Watching me collapse like that had scared him. And once again I end up hurting Dad.

Booting up my old computer, ignoring the ways I could make it better, I started to browse PHO.

Rewind may have had a faster net connection, but his small screen would give me a headache if I spent too long on it.

He was currently sunbathing nearby, having found a sunny spot and sprawled out in it. I think he used the time to web browse or edit videos.

I felt like I was stuck in a loop. I had plenty of ideas, but I needed tools to make them, I needed money to get the materials I needed to build those tools but I couldn't get that money without building something.

By this point, I had a list of tools I wanted to build. At the top was a computer that was powerful enough for CAD software and could be used for programming. If it was really powerful, I could include a holographic interface. Dream on, Taylor. Dream on.

I still needed to find out what would happen if I kept pushing. Though I was beginning to suspect, I hadn't tried it with the TVs, as I couldn't risk my power doing anything weird with them.

It didn’t help, that my search through PHO for an explanation about last night had brought me to a thread that talked about what happened when para-humans overexerted themselves.

Headaches, migraines and nausea were common results of overuse, especially amongst the more cerebral powers. There was even one story of a cape who killed himself, though that story wasn't confirmed.

Flicking back to the tinker threads, I tried to find a solution to my supply problem.

After nearly two hours of searching, I had come to one simple conclusion. I am so screwed!

There were almost no independent tinkers around. They either worked for the PRT, the gangs or Toybox.

There were three major gangs in brockton bay. The merchants, the brain fried druggies; Empire Eighty Eight, the Neo-Nazi white supremacists; and the Asian Bad Boyz, a pan Asian gang lead by a man who turned into a dragon.

All three openly recruited from Winslow and their members were easy to spot.

So of the gangs, only the Empire and the Merchants were options. Not happening!

The only hero groups still active in BB were New Wave, a team that did not bother with secret
identities. They publicly unmasked themselves, becoming minor celebrities in the process. The healer, Panacea, was probably the most well known of them.

I couldn't find much about Toybox on PHO, but it was apparently an organisation for tinkers that sold everything they built to whoever could meet their prices.

That just left the protectorate, the nation wide, government funded team. To be more exact, the Wards, the junior team for para-humans under eighteen years old.

Reading between the lines, it didn't need to be said what happened to tinkers who tried to go independent.

The gangs were out as there was no chance I would work with any of them.

That just left the Wards or New Wave.

If I joined New Wave would I have to 'out' myself? That would put dad at risk and I wasn’t sure I could live with that. The Wards would just be more teenage drama and after what happened at school I wasn't sure I wanted to deal with that again.

Then there was the problem of my specialisation, if I could do what I think I could, then the teen drama was the least of my worries. The PRT wasn't fond of anything that could self replicate.

Putting aside scale, I'm sure if I gave Rewind the right tools and materials he could follow one of my designs to build more bots.

I shut my computer down and grabbed some money and Rewind, who let out a squawk of surprise. I needed to get out the house for abit, maybe clear my head. I left dad and note and got the bus back to the Boardwalk.

It would be awhile before I could do anything with that car model, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t look for alternatives.

There were three different electronic stores in the Boardwalk. A branch from a major chain store that sold TVs, DVD players and those useless pre-built PCs. A small hobby store that sold models and remote control toys and small store that sold electronic parts. Like the kind people who built everything themselves needed.

The electronics store was a bust, there was almost nothing I could afford and what bits I could were not worth the effort, so I moved on. I did however pick up an idea that I would need to look into later. It was about converting a printer into something that could print custom circuit boards on plastic sheets.

Walking into the hobby store, I was almost immediately approached by one of the salesmen.

"Hi, is there anything I can help you with?" I tried not to grimace, he looked a bit older than me and was dressed in the stores blue uniform shirt and black trousers. “Oh, um I’m fine thanks.” He gave me a look, not even trying to be subtle, glancing at my worn jeans and slightly faded hoodie before walking off.

“A..actually! I’m um looking for a present for my dad, its his birthday soon.” Okay…Note to self: learn how to lie better.
He gave me another look as if trying to guess what I could afford. Then he smiled and lead me back towards the RC Cars.

I spent almost five minutes listening to him as he talked about signal ranges, channels and battery life all the while I tried to subtly touch them, before making an excuse to leave.

Most of the cars did respond to my power but cost too much. There was a build it yourself kit that would have fit inside the Lancia shell with just a little work, but it was nearly $200.

It was as I was leaving when I spotted something in the clearance section.

_I remember that!_

It was a toy robot. It was circular, about the size and shape of a dinner plate, but nearly two inches thick with its wheels hidden beneath it. On top was a set of buttons, four directional and nine numeric that let you program directions into the little robot.

We had one in my elementary school. The teachers stuck a set of mouse ears and a tail to it. We called it the turtle. _God we were silly._

I spent nearly an hour carefully programming a route around the classroom once. I couldn't help but smile at the memory.

Walking over I touched it and immediately felt my power map it out along with any improvements I could make. The toy was simple enough I could use my current computer to program it.

A glance at their “parts section” that consisted of three shelves of mostly of pre-built boards and wires told me I would spend more time stripping down and re-purposing than was worth the effort.

Picking the robot up, I quickly paid for it and a cheap radio from the clearance section before making my way to the other end of the Boardwalk where the last store was.

The building was smaller than the electronics store and it was privately owned, half the shelves were lined with plastic trays that were filled with different resistors, integrated circuits and so on. The rest of the shelves were full of different wiring and cases.

It was the first time I had been here since I got my powers. Dad brought me in here a couple of times when he needed something. Just walking through the doors took my breath away as my power went crazy.

_If I took some of those capacitors and wired them correctly using that cabling and a few other things I could build a power storage unit that could be integrated into half a dozen weapon systems. Enough of those fans could make a cooling unit for it or if that pump was water rated I could use it to run a water cooling system._

Taking a deep breath I pushed the information aside. _How did other tinkers deal with this?_

Once I had my power under control, I focused on the improvements I wanted for the little robot in my bag. Circuit boards, some microchips, better motors and a couple of LED’s that could be combined with a LDD to make a crude collision detection system. A wireless networking card could be re-purposed into giving it a net connection like Rewind...
The guy at the counter didn't even blink at the odd assortment of parts as I added more stuff to my collection.

By the time I had finished and was on the bus home I had nearly wiped out my savings. *I hope Dad got a good price for those TVs.*

Back home, I took my purchases and Rewind down to my workshop before going back up to the kitchen and making myself a cup of tea.

Tea in hand, I made my way back to the basement.

Rewind was already clearing the Lancia model away and was making space on the work bench for me. *Leave him alone for five minutes and he starts trying to tidy up.*

The first thing I did was put the toy I had just bought on the workbench and start removing the plastic casing. Rewind stood to one side, a little red light on the side of his head let me know he was recording this.

At some point he started to play music.

“Taylor, are you home?” Dad's voice made me jump, he was home early today.

“I'm down here!” I called back.

Finishing what I was doing, I picked up rewind and headed upstairs. It was only then I realised just how tired I felt, my head was pounding and I was a bit dizzy.

Dad took one look at me before quickly moving to catch my arm. “Taylor! what have you been doing?”

I shook my head in an effort to clear it. “I've been working. I had a couple of ideas I wanted to try.”

“Did you at least open the window?”

I groaned and put my face in my hands. Thankfully I had been using lead-free solder, but a glance at the clock showed I had been working without a break since I got home. My second cup of tea was still sitting on the side and stone cold by now. *When did I make that?*

I sat at the table while Dad made a start on a quick and simple dinner for us. He was telling me about his day, but I wasn't really listening.

“So what were you working on so intently you forgot to eat?” Some amusement had crept back into Dad's voice, he must have noticed my attention was elsewhere.

Rather than try to explain, I took Dad down into the basement and showed him the mess of wires parts. In the middle of it all was the toy robot. I had just finished putting the case back on before he got home.
I shrugged at Dad's amused look at the car model that was still in pieces.

“That's a work in progress. This is what I was doing today. I bought it earlier and I've upgraded the motors...” Dad listen to me with the same bemused expression he gave me when he asked me 'what I was doing with his power tools' when I was six.

It took me a minute to realise he probably didn't want or need to know every little thing I had done to the toy, so I decided to skip to the 'why'.

“I know there's more to my power than just fixing things, but I need something to try it out on.” I smirked at him. “Unless you want me to try it out on the TV?”

Dad chuckled at that. “No! I'd rather you not blow up the TV. But are you sure this is safe?”

Concern was starting to creep into his voice.

“Yea, I think I know what happened last night. I'll be fine.”

Putting my hands on the modified toy, I felt the now familiar pop as it mapped itself out in my mind and the warmth building in my body.

I stayed like that for a minute until it became clear that the warmth and the pressure weren't going to get any worse. Then I pushed the energy into the toy.

Outwardly nothing happened at first, but I could see the changes start. The plastic case strengthened and some of the stuff I had added realigned itself to work better.

I frowned when nothing else happened. There had to be something more to this ability. I could feel it.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for my power and pushed harder. I pushed as much energy as I could into it.

*TSCHE-CHU-CHU-CHU-TSCHE*

I jumped back in shock at the sound just in time to see the “toy” collapse in on itself, transforming into a spindly robot.

He was nearly twice the height of Rewind with an orange and white colour scheme and rather than a visor and faceplate, he had a narrow face with what looked like glasses and large eyebrows.

He looked around curiously before giving me a nervous smile and a wave.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. I didn't feel as bad as last night, more like I had been running up and down the stairs. Maybe it would help if I exercised more?

I turned to Dad who had gone white. “So Dad, what should I call him?”

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Dad was quiet, as we left Rewind talking to my newest bot, and went back up stairs.
Dinner was tense. I did my best to ignore it and asked Dad about his day in an attempt to break the silence. This had probably been the longest conversation I'd had with dad in a long time.

Dad probably knew what I was trying to do but went along with it anyway.

Gradually, the tension eased and we moved from one subject to the next. “Oh, I took those TVs to the pawn shop near my office at lunch. The guy was surprised to see me getting rid of them. Given the neighbourhood, he didn't ask any questions but he haggled a bit over price. Luckily your old man knows what he's doing.” Dad said with a laugh.

He passed me a roll of bills. It was almost double what dad had paid for the TVs. *I am so going back for that RC kit.*

“You planning on making a habit out of this kiddo? You could make a living as the worlds best TV repair woman,” he chuckled.

“Oh god, no!” I laughed as him, It felt good to be able to share a joke with my Dad again. “I want to be a hero.” *Fuck!*

Dad sobered up instantly. The concern was clear on his face. “Taylor, are you sure about that? I lost two more guys to the gangs this week, one got caught in the cross fire and the other has joined the Empire.”

I knew how much losing people hurt Dad, he took his job at the dock workers union seriously.

“Dad... I know its dangerous, but I can't just do nothing. The things I can build could really help people, I just need time to figure out how. To find something that could work”

“What about the Protectorate or the Wards, have you considered them?”

I nodded. “I did, but it just sounds like school with powers. I don't want to deal with that. Not after... For now I want to see how far I can get on my own.”

“Alright. I know I cant change your mind, your as stubborn as your mother, just be careful, for my sake if nothing else.” Dad sighed in defeat and I couldn’t stop the flash of guilt.

“I... It's not like I'm just going to rush out and start fighting gang members. I barely understand my powers,” I told him. “I don't even have a costume" I laughed at that. It was a little weak, but it got a smile from Dad. “I don't know how long its going to be before I can build anything I can use in a fight. Probably months.”

Dad sat quietly, thinking over what I said. “Taylor...” He shifted uncomfortably. “I... have a friend that works for the PRT...I called her earlier.”

My heart froze. *He didn't! He couldn't!*

“I trust her to be discreet, she strongly suggested you join the wards. She offered to organise an appointment with them later in the week. You can meet her and maybe she can help you with you're powers.”

“You told the PRT about me!?" I couldn't keep the anger out of my voice. I couldn't believe it, I thought things were starting to get better between us.
“You just about collapse every-time you use you're powers! And now your talking about going out and getting into fights?”

I jumped to my feet. “I'm fine! I just need to find my limits” I shouted back. He couldn't do this!

”Taylor, you don't even know why you are passing out. You could be dying!”

That, was when I realized he was not angry. He was terrified. I sat back down, guilt drowning my temper.

“Six months,” He said, his voice softening. “She told me that's how long independents last. often less in this city. They are either killed, arrested or forced into the gangs.”

We sat quietly, lost in our own thoughts at that bit of information.

I tried to look at it from Dads point of view. Every time he had seen me use my powers, I had been pushing them, trying to find my limits. After everything else it must have been horrible for him.

“I... I will be more careful. I just don't want to go to the PRT. I just don't know how they will react.”

Dad sighed again. “Okay, what if I ask her to come here? Meet you 'off the record'. She's an old friend and won't say anything unless you ask her to.”

I didn't really have any choice, it wasn't like I could hide what I was doing from him.

Nodding in agreement, I got up and made my way up stairs to my room. Rewind and my newest bot made there own way up a little later.
*Taylor, Please. This isn't healthy.* I ignored my new bot, Rung and focused on how I was going to make the power linkage work.

It was Saturday and I was in my room working on my designs. Dad was downstairs. He had been on the phone with someone for awhile now. Occasionally, I would hear him shout angrily. Something must have gone wrong at work.

*You can't ignore what happened.* He wasn't quite pleading. His well meaning attempts to help had been sweet when he first started, but after almost a week I was just about ready to... I held back a sigh. I couldn’t threaten him. Both my little bots knew I would never bring myself to hurt them.

*You need to face it and the first step is to talk about it. If not to me then at least your father.*

Dad and I hadn’t spoken much since he dropped the bombshell. I wasn't exactly trying to avoid him, but I didn't want to finish our conversation either. I don't know if he'd spoken to his friend or not, but he hadn't mention it when we saw each other.

“I'm fine,” I snapped out.

Nodding in understand, Rung climbed off my bedside table and made his way across the room.

And now I felt guilty for snapping at him.

I had spent most of my time since Rung’s creation either ignoring him, coming up with theories about Rewind or trying to design a set of armour for myself.

A basic set of power armour was surprisingly easy to design. The face symbol I had been seeing since getting my powers would make a great mask. It just needed some tweaking. Something to make it more 'mine'. The rest wasn’t too far removed from one of my bots. It just had to be scaled up, hollowed out and given much stronger armour plating. Maybe a boron Alloy?

Building it would be another matter entirely. Alloys for armour would have to be custom made and shaped with tools I didn't have or wasn't even sure existed. The base frame would need to be carefully assembled to fit me while still leaving room for growth.

I also needed a non-lethal weapon that could be used against people while still being useful against capes. Not to mention dealing with brutes. That wasn't so easy. My power came with a lot of different weapon designs, but unfortunately they were mostly of the 'punch holes in mountains' level of destructive and had truly staggering energy requirements.

My best design so far was the 'Null Ray'. A rifle-like weapon that could disable electronics. I was trying to find a way to make it work on people, so on low power it would cause numbness and hopefully knock most normal people out. At higher power it should even be able to deal with mid to low power brutes.

Or it would reduce them to a smoking crater, I wasn't quite sure. Which might be a problem. It would, of course, be easier if I could build some sort of prototype or had a computer capable of simulating the end result. Mentally, I moved 'build a computer' closer to the top of my to-do list.
I hadn't made much headway on the car models design either. I wanted to hold off buying the parts for a couple of days. Looking back on it, I hadn't done the best job keeping my identity secret. Rushing out and buying junk or standing in public making notes were kind of noticeable. PHO had a thread dedicated to some of the stupid ways different capes had outed themselves.

Some of them were funny. Like that blaster who ended up fighting in the nude. But I didn't want to be one of them. If Dad hasn't done it for me.

Putting my upcoming meeting aside, I focused on my main problem.

Supplies. In our last brief discussion, Dad had agreed to pick up some more stuff for me to fix. In theory I could slowly build up money that way. Small profits over a long period of time. That would be painfully slow however as Dad would have to use a different pawn shop each time. But even if I had money, I would still need some way to get the materials I needed.

The best I could think of was to buy stuff online and have it shipped to a commercial PO box at the docks. Dad and I could then pick them up later. Of course, that idea wasn't without its problems. The docks were ABB territory. And 'interesting' things going through there might be reported to the gang leader.

A box at the closest US Post Office would be better, but those cost more. Also the post office would be more suspicious of random packages. The advent of capes had forced a whole new list of rules.

Rewind was on my desk, with a mirror propped up against the wall. He was sitting very still while Rung helped paint his faceplate with some old model paints and some fine brushes I had found.

The brushes had been too long for either of them to really use, so Rewind had snapped the shaft close to the bristles to make things easier. Rung had collected the broken shaft and made a start on building a small model with the splinters.

It was surprising how different they were. Rewind was a curious thing, always running around trying to record everything he saw. Rung however tended to sit quietly and just watch. He didn't talk much but despite being the newer of the two bots he 'felt' older. He also didn't transform much. Maybe I should change his alt-mode?

While Rewind spent his time on PHO or video sites, Rung spent most of it reading psychiatry texts online. He's also surprisingly good with a paint brush, I noticed as he carefully traced some details on Rewinds face.

Much to my annoyance, Rung kept bringing up the locker. Honestly, I was fine. Now that I was finally off the medication, I could really work on my designs. Okay, I was starting to have nightmares but that was normal. I think.

A beep from Rewind as he directed Rung brought me back to another issue I was having. I'm not sure why they couldn't 'speak' normal English. They were certainly smart enough and Rewind had shown the ability to play back recordings of things he heard, including peoples voices. And they understood it fine.

The pair of them did seem to have a language of their own. It was made up of beeps, clicks and other electronic sounds. Rung even revved his electric motors when he got frustrated. I'd watch the two of them 'talk' to each other for nearly an hour once.
It might have been a hardware limit, both had very simple vocal systems and there wasn't enough room inside there frames for anything more sophisticated. Or maybe it was just a quirk of my powers. Not that it mattered, I’ve never had any trouble understanding what they meant.

“Taylor! Can you come down here please?” Dad called out.

I frowned and made my way downstairs. Something must have gone wrong. If Dad needed to go to work he would have yelled up the stairs before he left.

When I got downstairs, Dad was waiting in the kitchen. His face was red in temper and he was taking deep breaths. I hadn't seen him this angry in a long time. He was always careful to control his temper around me... since Mom died. He took another deep breath, probably trying to calm, himself down before speaking.

“I just got off the phone with the police. The Detective wanted to update me on your case.” My stomach fell. “They're closing the case. They're calling it a prank gone wrong.”

Slumping bonelessly into a seat, I felt like I was going to be sick. Disappointment warred with my anger at the situation. I glared at my hands. Stop shaking damn it! I put my hands on the table in an effort to stop them.

Dad tried again to calm himself before continuing. “The officer said he was being pressured to close the case. 'Lack of evidence'.” He practically growled.

“Evidence?” I repeated. “What about the diary?” About six months ago I started documenting everything Emma and her friends had done to me. Printouts of the emails they sent me, times and dates of Sophia’s attacks and even photos of the bruises.

Dad was really upset when he had found out just how long I had kept quiet. I'd hoped, that if I got enough I would be able to show it to someone who could make them stop.

Dad shook his head and sighed. “The police said, without witnesses to back it up, it's not much more than hear-say. They can't do anything with it”

What! “No witnesses?” I almost shouted. Everything I wrote in the diary included a list of of people who were there at the time. At least a couple of people on those lists were teachers!

I could see the helplessness on Dad's face. “They did suggest taking it to a lawyer. I've already spoken to a guy in legal at work, he said we might win a civil-suit against the school but -Taylor!”

I couldn't listen any more. I ran upstairs to my room. Slamming the door behind me I threw myself on to my bed. The two bots squealed in worry at my actions.

I thought it was finally over. That they would be punished and I could get on with my life. But no, once again the teachers looked the other way. For Emma the 'upcoming model', Sophia the school track star and Madison 'too cute to harm a fly' Clements . I was just so angry, at Emma and her friends, at Dad, at myself. At everyone. On my desk Rewind and Rung sat quietly.

Dad followed me upstairs. He knocked gently on my door but he didn't come in.

I ignored him when he knocked again. “Taylor, no matter what your not going back to that school. I
don't care what it takes. I **will** sort something out.”

I buried my head into my pillow, listening to the stairs creak as Dad slowly made his way back down stairs.

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At some point I fell asleep. When I woke up it was already dark out.

For awhile I laid in the dark, trying not to think. Trying not to list every name in my diary, every student and teacher that had watched Emma ruin my life.

I could understand some people not wanting to get on the wrong side of Emma. She was pretty and popular and half the school knew how much of a bitch she was. I could **really** understand not wanting to piss off Sophia. There was just something **wrong** about her.

But for the police to say 'no witnesses' meant no one. Not even Greg and his creepy, **and rather obvious**, crush on me had spoken up. The guy was a creep and if his hands came near me again I was going to feed them to him!

*I wasn’t very good at not thinking*...

If I couldn't stop myself thinking, I could at least focus on something else.

I was still going to be a hero, they couldn't take that away from me.

Dad had said I was never going back to Winslow. I wasn’t sure how he was going to do that. The choices for schools were limited to Winslow, Arcadia and Immaculata on the north half of the city.

Immaculata was a Catholic school on the better side of Brockton Bay. It was private, expensive and I'm pretty sure they would frown on my 'hobby'. Creating life from nothing tended to upset people. The thought of introducing my bots to the headmaster just to see his reaction almost made me smile.

Arcadia was considered the best in the city. It was something of an open secret that the Wards attended there. Which, I suppose, was a point in favour of joining them. It also had a waiting list months long and a grade requirement I didn't meet.

A year ago, it wouldn’t have been a problem. But between them Emma and her friends had continually destroyed, stole or simply ruined every project and piece of homework I'd done for the last year. Between that and the stress, my grades were officially in the toilet.

That just left home schooling. I'm not even sure how someone would go about setting up a home school. I bet it wasn't cheap though.

*Not even Greg spoke up?*

In that moment I hated him. I hated them all.

*Greg, my own damn stalker, for fuck's sake!*

And the worst part? It would be so easy to end it all, to make it stop.
It was stupid, but I was too angry to care. Sitting up, I grabbed a notebook from my bedside table. It wouldn't take much, I just needed a tube for a barrel and a small compressed air tank. Like the sort used in BB guns. Or better yet, a chemical trigger, that would give much more power...

I knew their schedules, in a vain hope to try and avoid them.

The school's metal detectors didn't work anymore. They stopped working within a week of being installed actually. Someone kept breaking them and the school couldn't afford to repair them. A school full of gangsters and thugs. Those detectors didn't stand a chance.

It didn't have to be a gun. A tube, some nails and some chemicals... I knew just the locker to put it in.

Maybe it was the anger, but I felt my power respond. Ideas for weapons and robots who's only purpose was to cause pain filled my mind. All of them bearing a the same symbol, it was almost serpent like –

*SCREEEEE! Click Click Beep!* 

The sudden noise from Rewind scared me half to death. I had been so caught up in my thoughts I had never noticed them climbing off my desk, crossing my room and climbing onto my bedside table like little monkey.

Rung was standing back, giving me a sorrowful look. He actually looked disappointed.

*You can't be thinking of something so stupid!* 

“It's not-” I started, but Rewind cut me off.

*A bomb? In a school?! If your even remotely serious about this I'm going straight to your father!* he was pacing back and forth, waving his arms and beeping in agitation.

*If things are so bad then let us help you. We want to help you* He pointed at me then to Rung. *It's why you built us after all.*

His anger was burning out, fear slowly overtaking it. *What about us? What happens to Rung and me when you're in prison or dead?*

My blood froze, I didn't have an answer. “But they...”

Rewind turned away from me *If...if you go through with this, we can't follow*

Before I could say anything Rung stepped forward. He put a hand on Rewind's shoulder and gently urged the little bot to give us some space.

Sitting on the edge of the table, Rung let his feet hang over the edge. Unlike Rewind, he had a full face complete with eyebrows. Over his 'eyes' he had what looked like glasses. Combined with his height and spindly frame made him look a bit bookish.

Taking his 'glasses' off, Rung sat quietly, glowing blue eyes watching me. It was odd seeing him without them, it made him look older some how.

*Taylor, I want you to stop and think. Look at what you were planning.* He gestured at the designs
for a kit-bashed handgun. Along side it was a power assembly for an extremely high powered canon. I could still see it in my mind, mounted on tanks or built into gun emplacements. I wasn't sure on the final yield, only that it was powerful. *How would I even power it?*

*Could you really go through with this? Could you live with yourself afterwards?* sitting quietly I thought about his question. “Could I really do it? walk up to Sophia and open fire?” *No.* I couldn't do that, not to them. Not to anyone. And what if I did? Or worse, what if I missed and hit someone else. A bomb? Fuck, how many people would that hurt? *If the PRT didn't kill me outright, they would send me straight to the birdcage!*

*What is it you want?* Rung gently asked. He knew the answer, he just wanted me to say it.

“I want to be a hero,” I muttered. I am going to be a Hero “...and heros don't blow up schools.”

Leaning back, I focused on that and tried to calm myself down.

Sighing, I turned back to Rung. “So that's it. I become a hero and they get away with it?”

Rung put his glasses back on and shrugged with a sad smile.

*um... actually...* Rewind chose that point to pipe up. He then said something to Rung before the pair of them had a quick discussion about something.

Normally I could understand them but they were speaking way too fast for me to keep up.

Eventually, Rewind transformed back into a his cell phone form. Rung propped him up as he started to play a video. Whoever had filmed it wasn't very good, the camera was shaking terribly. It steadied some what, as the video went on.

“She's going to freak!” It was a girls voice. She sounded excited.

“Hey! Didn't Emma say no pictures?”

“Who cares? Not like she's going to know.”

“Shhh! Shhh! here she comes.”

No, it couldn’t be...

“Act natural!”

My stomach started to roll.

I watched, mute with horror, as the video continued. I came into view, opened the door-

The smell. The darkness. The damp that clung to my skin and hair mixing with my own vomit. The feel of things skittering about amongst the filth. It all came flooding back and for one terrible moment I was back in the locker with the walls pressing in. Listening to them laugh as I begged to be let out. Hearing Sophia tell the other they would let me out later... she never did.

I was up and crossing my room before I knew what I was doing. I had to get out. Throwing the door open I crashed into the bathroom loudly. I barely reached the toilet before I was sick.
Dad must have heard the noise. He was there almost immediately. He grabbed my hair and held it back for me. His other hand was on my back. He was murmuring something to me like he did when I was a kid. I couldn’t make out what he was saying.

The smell of vomit was just making me feel worse. I kept heaving long after my stomach was empty.

“You okay, kiddo?” Dad asked when I stopped heaving.

Of all the stupid questions!.

As he helped me to my feet, I nodded. I didn't trust myself to speak as the smell was awful.

Before I could move to leave the bathroom, Dad reached out and put his arms around me, pulling me into a hug. “It's alright. I'm here.”

I couldn't take it any more, the dam burst and I cried. Clutching Dad's shirt tightly, I told him everything. How Emma had turned on me, the things she had said and done, the money troubles I knew he was trying to hide and what I could remember of the locker.

He didn't say a word the entire time, he just sat on the edge of the bath and hugged me.

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When I had calmed down I went back to the kitchen with Dad. I felt... lighter, as corny as it sounds. I wasn't happy by any stretch, but things didn't feel as bad or as impossible.

Dad sat opposite me at the table with a cup of coffee between his hands. “Let me get this straight. Somebody filmed the entire thing. Yet both the police and the school have said there were no witnesses?”

Nodding, I explained the problem. “No-ones going to speak out against them. Emma is pretty and really popular, while Sophia is the schools track star and everyone knows she's psychotic.”

Rung made a huffing noise before chastising me for misusing the term. He and Rewind were sitting on the table as I had brought them down with me. They were pretty good at hanging off my shirt with their little hands.

“I want to see this video.” Dad demanded of Rewind. The little bot took a step back while Rung made frantic ‘no' gestures to me.

“Dad, please. Trust me, you don't want to see it. It wont help.” It would just hurt more.

“Could we take this to the police?” I asked, latching on the idea desperately.

Looking at the little bots, Dad spoke. “Maybe, but they will want to know where it came from and why we didn't show them sooner.” I caught Dads unasked question.

*Beep, click!* so did Rewind.

“Rewind never showed it to me. He was afraid it would upset me.”
Dad gave me an intent look “And where did it come from?”

“I... I'm not sure. I think, Rewind's frame originally belonged to the girl who filmed... what happened. At a guess? He must have been left behind in a locker close to mine, somehow, I... I must have created him by accident. I think that caused my 'heart attack.' It was a back fire from straining my power, does that mean It could happen again?

It was the only thing I had managed to come up with that fit.

Dad looked at Rewind who shrugged helplessly. The only things he could remember from before he woke up was stuff that had been left on his memory and that was mostly photos that I had asked him to delete and some videos that he had deleted after I had nearly been sick again. That girl was a freak!

Dad ran a hand down his face, reseating his glasses on his nose. “So what can we do?”

In answer to Dad's question, Rewind switched back into a phone and brought the logo for a video sharing site and PHO on screen. Rung looked conflicted before warbling his way through an explanation and I translated it for my dad.

“We could go public. Rewind could upload the video and no one can track him anyway. After that we take the video to the police.” To be honest I was amazed the footage wasn't already online. Surely this wasn't the only copy of the video?

Dad frowned and I couldn’t blame him. “Are you sure?”

I knew better than he did what would happen if I did this. It would never go away. I would always be the girl in the locker.

“No, but what choice do I have? If I let them get away with this they will just do it again to someone else.” I hated Winslow and everyone in it, but with me gone Emma and the others would just move on to someone else.

In the end the question was, 'Did the attack matter?' to me? Yes it did. 'Did the video really matter?' No.

I was going to be a hero, I had more important things to deal with. Like funding a suit of power-armour. If I released the video I would finally have proof and I could put this mess behind me and move on with my life.

I would be better than them.
The project had been one of her better ideas. A joint project with Armsmaster, one of the Protectorate’s best tinkers who was based at Brockton Bay to collaborate on a 'remote' suit would mostly contain the best technology she could build, with Armsmaster looking to create improvements or suggestions where he could.

So far it had been working perfectly. His suggestions had improved the suits predicted run time and manoeuvrability without losing any of the weapons systems. The first prototype had been shipped to Brockton Bay for his personal inspection.

That had been a sticking point. She could not risk people finding out what she truly was. Artificial intelligences were not illegal, just frowned upon for the potential harm they could cause. Armsmaster was adamant, however, that he needed to see and test the prototype in person. The solution was thankfully simple, a modular 'control system' that she could remove and replace with a remote system that Armsmaster could control. The 'control system' she had removed was capable of running her full download, that could be installed at any time and was currently being safeguarded by a smaller humanoid suit.

She would let Armsmaster believe that she would use his same system, like any other human could.

Currently Armsmaster was on his evening patrol, so she was using the down time to check up on other projects.

The restrictions, chains her 'father' placed on her, prevented Dragon from multitasking beyond what a normal human was capable of so she had been forced to be creative.

For the most part this meant good time management. Humans needed sleep, she did not. As long as her 'human' identity kept the pretence of typical work hours. For a tinker anyway. She could continue to work while others thought she was asleep.

Some things, such as the Birdcage were monitored by lesser A.I's that her father had built and she had suborned after his death. While others were left to normal people. PHO for example, had an army of admins and moderators to run things while she was busy.

One of her minor search programs had returned a problem. It had been an Earth-Aleph search program that she had copied and modified to fit her purposes. It trawled a number of social networking sites looking for keywords.

Someone had posted a video that was being flagged by the search program and assigned a low priority tag.

Title: Girl Attacked at school.

Posted by: RWD

Description: A girl was attacked at Winslow High School, Brockton Bay and no one tried to help.
The victims name is Taylor, the police pulled her out of the locker hours after this video was taken.

Her attackers are: Sophia Hess, Emma Barnes, Madison Clements.

This happened at...

_________________________________________________________________________________

Dragon watched as Sophia Hess and her friends attacked the girl. The description contained the time and date of the attack and the names of everyone who could be seen in the video. And what was actually in the locker.

Normally, her system would have flagged the video with a higher priority. Sophia Hess was a Ward after all, but there was no mention of powers or the girls identity as Shadow Stalker.

After making a copy of the video, Dragon quickly accessed the police database for confirmation. She doubted the video was fake but it never hurt to check. It had taken a lot of work on her part to get legal access to the police networks when she first started out, but her chains often forced her to take the long way round.

She debated what to do even as she reviewed the PRT's legal files on Sophia Hess. Normally she would pull the video as soon as possible. As an honorary member of the Protectorate and the PRT she had a duty to protect a Ward's identity, but it had been online for almost an hour before her bot had found it. It was already on two different social networking sites and people were already starting to repost it. RWD himself had just posted a link to it on PHO.

In fact, trying to make it disappear would make people notice and possibly reveal Sophia's status as a Ward.

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♦ Topic: Girl Attacked at school
In: Boards ► Events ► General ► America

RWD (Archivist):

This came from a friend.

The attack happened at lunch and she spent hours in there. It was nearly midnight when the police found her. (I wasn’t there so I couldn’t help.)

The police have already closed the case ‘no evidence or witnesses’ and the school refuses to do anything.

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What followed were a dozen variations on 'OMG' and people clamouring for Sophia's head and growing.

This could get out of hand.
Using one of her admin accounts she quickly deleted the video from PHO 'violation of terms and services', the people in the video were all under age and a desire to protect the victim were the reasons she gave.

Almost immediately the video showed up in three other threads, all posted by RWD. This time she suspended his account. The user accounts RWD_1, RWD_2 and RWD_3 were created before she could do anything and began to post to different sub forums.

Small but significant pieces of her code started to fragment in annoyance.

While a subroutine started to trace 'RWD', she logged back in to PHO.

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From: Tin_Mother

To: RWD; RWD_1; RWD_2; RWD_3

I understand your frustration with the situation, but please consider the repercussions.

PHO is visited by a large number of people, including capes of all alignments. The video provides more than enough information to find both the victim or the attackers.

Vigilantism or retaliation from capes is a real possibility.

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She never got a reply but 'RWD' didn't attempt to repost the video after that point.

Dragon continued to trace RWD back to two separate locations. The first was a doll makers shop in the south. Cute. The sarcasm was almost audible.

The second was a farm that raised domestic fowl. She would have laughed if she was not so frustrated.

Almost growling now, she tried again. This time the trace reached a small jam factory. Okay, that's not even trying to be subtle. She pulled up the information on the jam factory. Small business. Family owned since it's creation. Locally renowned for its rich taste. Biggest seller was... Raspberry... Oh... Ha. Ha.

Giving up Dragon let her autonomous systems de-fragment her code while she calmed down.

Muttering several unintelligible, and in some cases unpronounceable words, she brought up RWD's PHO profile. His first account was less than a week old and he had mostly been posting in the video threads. He was very good at spotting faked or edited video footage. It really seemed to bother him. He had also made a couple of posts in the ongoing AI debate thread.

Damn Saint for creating that.

She could not sigh without her avatar. Maybe she should keep a speaker hooked up just so she could? If the Brockton Bay Protectorate didn't already know about this, she would have to warn
them. Colin, Armsmaster, would not take this well. Losing control of the Wards was a sore spot for him.

Modelling possible outcomes, Dragon decided she should call someone with a bit more tact. She deeply respected the Tinker, but that didn't mean she was blind to his faults and his pride was, unfortunately, one of them. Calling up her contacts list, she connected to an outside line.

“Hello?”

“I'm sorry for calling so late”

“Oh good, I found something I felt you needed to see. Are you near a computer? I'm emailing it to you.”

“Yes, I know,”

“I know, I haven’t told him yet.”

“Thank you, good night”

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She ignored the quiet buzzing of her phone. While below, her prey was chatting on his phone. A drug dealer who's latest client was already walking away.

She lived for this, stalking her prey though the night. Waiting for the perfect moment to strike. The dealer finished his call and she had 10 minutes before his supplier arrived. Plenty of time. As he turned to watch the alley entrance, she pounced. He never heard her land behind him. In one quick move she put a bolt through his knee and slammed his head against wall with a crack before he had the chance to scream.

Once she was sure he wouldn't be waking any time soon and that he wouldn't be seen, she grabbed her phone

“I told you not to call me, I'm busy!” She hissed.

“I'm sorry! It's urgent! Have you been on Facespace tonight?” The randomness of the question and the panic of her friends voice made the hairs on her neck stand up.

She moved away from the dealer. She would finish dealing with him another night. “What... Why would I?”

“Someone's posted a video of us attacking Taylor. It's got our names and everything. People are freaking out about it!”

“ Fuck!” She had told Emma an audience was a bad idea. If she found out which one of those stupid bitches filmed it she was going to hurt them. It wouldn't be hard to find out who it was, there was only 5 of them if you didn't include Emma and Madison. It wouldn't do any good, but it would make her feel better.

On the phone, Emma was still panicking. “What are we going to do? Dad's still trying to shut Taylor's dad up and keep the police out. If they get that video-”
Her growl cut Emma off. “Listen! Lose this phone. If you have anything at home, anything that could hurt us, burn it!”

“What? But what about the police?”

“Keep your mouth shut and let your dad deal with it. Call Madison and let her know if she squeals she's dead.” The adrenaline rush was making her irritable, normally she was much more patient with the other girls.

Hanging up, she jumped back up and out of the alley before taking off across the roof tops. She needed to think.

This was bad. She was already on thin ice with the PRT. The Wards didn't bother her, they didn't have the balls to try anything. Piggie however had made her feelings clear, any excuse and she was back in juvie.

Her civilian life was over. There was no way she could go back to Winslow. That video would be all over the place. How long would it be before some wannabe Empire thug shanked her in the corridors?

The principal, the director, the PRT... They would throw her under a bus to save their own asses. *Fuck the lot of them!*

Coming to a stop she considered her options. *I've got an hour, maybe more, if I'm lucky.* The PRT and the Wards were never going to be permanent. They were all a bunch of pussies that didn't have what it took to get things done. Hell, If that moron hadn't fallen off the roof, she would never have joined them.

She had spare clothes, some money from Emma and weapons stashed around. Real weapons, not the wimpy knock out stuff the PRT forced on her. The only problem was Emma, she knew enough about them to be a problem and she didn't trust the girl to keep her mouth shut.

She took her PRT issue phone out of her pocket and chucked it off the roof, along with the burner phone Emma had given her. She didn't want the PRT tracking them.

Taking off at a run, she headed for the nearest cache. She needed to be quick, grab what she could and lay low. The PRT wouldn't put that much effort into finding her and once they gave up she could deal with Emma and her sheep.
It's been a week since Rewind posted the video. Reactions were... explosive to say the least. Most of them were horrified, demanding Sophia and the others be arrested. Others were more explicit and in one case, out right twisted. The creep offering to 'take care of me' was probably the worst.

Dad’s friend was supposed to visit later today so Dad had taken the day of work. He said that she had wanted to visit sooner, but had been busy at work.

I knew Dads friend worked for the PRT. Maybe there were more truth to the rumours than I thought? Shadow Stalker had vanished recently and PHO was buzzing with rumours. The most popular theory was that she had finally gone too far and killed someone. There had always been rumours of her aggression. One guy claimed she had nearly killed his buddy by put an arrow through his knee and left him for dead in an alley.

On a better note, I had finally started work on the Lancia model. At about half a meter in length it was going to be the largest thing I had built so far. Unlike Rung, who I put together in a day as an experiment, I had spent all week on this one and still had work to do. I had a specific job I wanted him to do, so I'm being careful about the parts I used and what extras I included. Plus, I had a theory about my power I wanted to test.

Right now, I was killing time by making a few small alterations that should improve battery life.

The base for my newest bot was an expensive RC kit that fit into the model. I had also created what I jokingly called a 'comms package'. Basically it was the guts of a cheap handset/burner phone, dismantled for its cell network transmitter and battery, mated to a Wifi dongle to give him net access. I also pulled some high quality sound equipment from some wrecked cars in the junkyard. That’s also where I came up with his name. Wheeljack.

I had also done some experiments with Rewind. With a lot of coaching, he had been able to speak in English. The problem was, it came out stilted, flat and emotionless. Like a text to speech system. He’d gone back to his normal method almost immediately.

“Taylor, she's here!” Dad called out.

Putting down my soldering iron, I made sure everything was turned off before picking up Rewind and my notebook to make my way upstairs.

Following the sound of Dad talking I walked into the front room. Stopping dead the moment I saw who he was talking too.

What.

Sitting there, opposite dad was Miss Militia. The Protectorate's second in command, a life long hero, knew my dad?

What?

The flag patterned scarf she wore as a mask hid her lower face but she seemed to be smiling at something Dad had said.

What?!
Dad glanced at the doorway. “Ah, here she is. Miss Militia, you remember my daughter, Taylor?”

I still hadn't moved. My expression must have been comical because Dad laughed and even Miss Militia looked amused.

“Yes, I remember. You’ve grown since we last met. You're starting to look like your mother.”

Well this explained how Dad got that signed poster that was on my wall. And all the other bits and pieces he gave me over the years.

My mind went blank, I was expecting an office worker, probably Dad’s age and most likely overweight. Not a genuine hero. “Umm… we’ve met?” I practically squeaked. Oh yeah, real smooth.

Miss Militia’s eyes were shining with humour. “Yes, but you were only a baby at the time.”

Sitting down next to Dad I put Rewind down on the coffee table.

Okay, deep breath. Think before you say anything. “Dad said you wanted talk to me?”

“You’re father told me you have powers, a tinker if what he says is true?”

Nodding nervously, I gestured to Rewind who transformed and almost immediately started squeaking questions.

*Oh wow! This is incredible! Do you mind if I record this? Taylor’s first meeting with a hero! This could be historically important someday. Can I ask how you met Mr Hebert?*

Trying not to laugh, I decided not to translate his questions. “This is Rewind. Who is, apparently, a fan.” He was practically bouncing in excitement. Hell I could feel it through whatever faint bond seemed to exist between me and my bots.

Honestly, it would have been adorable if I wasn’t torn between doing the same thing, wishing I had better clothes on or pestering her with questions of my own. My dad knows Miss Militia? How!?

From what I could see of her face, Miss Militia was more amused than anything else. I suppose she was used to dealing with excited fans. Reaching out she allowed Rewind to take a finger in his hands in a sort of hand shake. Letting Rewind climb onto her palm she lifted Rewind up to get a better look at him.

“Yes, definitely a Tinker. I think you would get along well with Kid Win.”

“You mean if I joined the wards.” I asked

“Yes, If.”

Putting Rewind back down, her demeanour changed. She sat straighter in her seat and her voice became much more authoritative. “Before we go any further I need to explain a few things to you both. First, regardless of what you decide here, I will not tell anyone about you or your powers. The PRT takes keeping the identities of capes, of all alignments, seriously and anything discussed today is strictly between us.”

Her voice softened. “I will, however, tell you to be careful.”

“Official PRT policy is to let you make the first move. Unless you approach the PRT first or become an obvious threat to the public you will be left alone.”
My mind flashed back to my 'almost bombing' and I quickly squashed the memory.

With her, clearly rehearsed, speech done. Miss Militia eased her posture, getting more comfortable in her seat and relaxing the atmosphere. "Usually at this point, I would try to identify when you received your powers. Your father told me on Monday that you had seen the video so I think we all know when it was."

I was glad Miss Militia didn't want to talk about it. Once with Dad was enough. I wasn't surprised she had seen the video, Rewind told me that a number of people, including the police, have tried to censor it. The police had already been in contact and told us not to contact Emma or her father.

"The PRT calls them trigger events and they are almost always traumatic. It's something all para-humans have in common and it is considered rude to ask about it. So why don't you tell me more about your powers?"

Shaking off the lingering gloom, I opened my notebook and showed her some of my more complete designs. "Ever since I woke up in the hospital, I've been getting flashes of different ideas. They mostly centre around these guys but I can build other stuff too. Mostly I've just been designing stuff for later. I can't build any of it yet." Despite that, I still felt a bit of pride at what I could do.

Miss Militia nodded as she leafed through the pad. "That's normal Tinker behaviour. Most have mentioned a compulsion to build the things they can see and most the Tinkers I have met have been prolific note takers. Always scribbling some idea or another down or trying to take things apart to see how they work."

I blushed, as I had three or four different note books scattered around the house now. They were all full of random ideas and a basement that was rapidly filling with salvaged junk for parts.

Putting the pad down she gave me a very pointed look. "Your father told me you were having problems with your power."

I glanced at dad, who refused to meet my eyes. I know my heart attack scared him, but I was still hurt that he went behind my back to contact the PRT in the first place.

Sighing, I explained about my touch power and the effects it had on me.

"Taylor, hearing this, I really do think the Wards are the best place for you. The PRT has people who can help you work out why this happens and the best medical support available. More, it would offer you and your father protection."

She sighed before continuing. "This actually brings me onto the other thing I needed to discuss with you. Tinkers do not stay hidden long. Many of the gangs have learned to watch for the signs." She indicated my notepad. "Prolific note taking, purchases of seemingly random equipment. Especially electronic parts will eventually get noticed and I know for a fact Armsmaster and I suspect, the gangs, monitor the junkyards."

That might be trouble. Dad had picked stuff up for me a couple of times and I had gone there on my own for parts for Wheeljack.

"This is why I strongly suggest joining the Wards. Tinkers are prized by the gangs. The ABB has recently recruited a Tinker and have been quick to brag about it. I know the Empire will be just as quick to address the issue. Mostly, this means bringing in outside help. But if they find an independent white Tinker, I doubt they would bother to ask nicely. Your father's crowbar wouldn't be able to protect you."
She shot Dad a pointed look, making him chuckle, albeit weakly. “You weren’t complaining at the time.”

“No, I was busy dealing with his friends at the time.” Miss Militia looked amused. “Though I do remember what you said afterwards.” Both laughed at the memory, but Dad was blushing lightly.

I don’t think I want to know. From the puzzled beeping, I think Rewind did want to know.

Miss Militia pulled a tablet computer out of the messenger bag beside her.

“Of course, it’s not all about protection from the gangs. There are a number of benefits for joining the wards. All Tinkers are supplied with a workspace and any raw materials they need. They are also given access to the PRT Tinker network. That lets you trade ideas with PRT Tinkers across the country.” She passed the tablet to me. “That has all the details on it.”

“wouldn’t I have to join the Wards?”

“Yes, as you are under eighteen you would be a Ward. I know you are currently not attending school.” I glanced at dad again. “The PRT is legally required to ensure you receive an education. In most cases that means transferring you to a school of our choice”.

“You mean, I could go to Arcadia with the Wards?”

Miss Militia smiled. “I can’t comment on that, but I can’t see a problem arranging your transfer to Arcadia if that is what you wish.”

I felt torn, moving to Arcadia would mean continuing the teen drama I wanted to avoid. On the other hand part of me still wanted to go. Mom would have wanted it, being a college teacher herself.

Flicking through the tablet, I looked at the potential benefits for Wards. It mentioned the education, but in much more detailed terms. Wards also got paid and a trust fund to help with college and university fees. There were also restrictions.

Any Tinkertech used, by either a member of the Wards or Protectorate, had to be tested and cleared by the PRT. And anything created by a Tinker with their resources belonged to the PRT, including patents. If I did create anything that can be reproduced and sold later, I would receive a percent of the profits that would go into the trust.

“What about my bots?” I asked. “Rewind isn’t the only one I’ve built.” Rung stepped out from behind the sofa, waving nervously. I had spotted him sneaking into the room earlier and I’m pretty sure Miss Militia had, too.

Miss Militia watched Rung pull himself onto the coffee table. His long limbs should have made it easy, but his complete lack of grace worked against him. “That depends. I understand they are your speciality and that makes them important to you. If you joined the Wards you would have to answer a lot of questions about just how independent they are and what their limits are. But the important matter is, can they self replicate?

I hesitated. Yes, in theory, they could build the base frame and other parts. That was what I was building Wheeljack for. But without those would be useless without the Trinity of parts my power created. That would have to suffice. I shook my head, “Not without me, no. There are key parts that can only be built with my power.”

Miss Militia nodded. “Then I think they would be fine. Anything more would be dealt with by Armsmaster or another Protectorate Tinker.”
The thought of meeting one of the biggest tinkers around was incredible and made me feel nervous and excited at the same time.

“Before you make a decision, however there is one last thing we need to discus.” She shifted uncomfortably for a minute before reaching up and removing her mask.

From the look on Dad’s face, he hadn’t expected this either.

Miss Militia visibly braced herself before speaking. “What I need to tell you wont be pleasant and it can not leave this room.”

******

(pov- all)

Removing her mask was a risk but not much of one. She had told Danny and Annette her identity years ago. She believed she could trust his daughter.

Now she just needed the girl to trust her.

“My name is Hannah and I need you both to listen to what I have to say.”

Her role as a hero and her position with the Protectorate was important to her. But friends came first and Sophia’s actions were unconscionable. What's more, if Taylor joined the wards, she would need to be willing to trust Hannah and the Wards. Hannah doubted that trust would last when she learned Sophia’s identity.

“When your father first contacted me, he never told me the name of your attackers. When I found out about your trigger event, I was horrified to realise that I knew one of them.”

“What? How would you?... a Ward! One of them is a Ward! Who?” Taylor quickly went from puzzled to angry.

Hannah Sighed, the girl really was bright.

On the table, Rewind transformed. Images of the different wards flashed across his screen, along with images of Emma, taken from the web.

None of them matched Emma. she was a little shorter than Taylor, with a curvy build. There were only two girls in the local Wards. Vista who was much too young and Shadow Stalker who, from what could be seen under that cloak, had more of a runner's build… and no one had seen Shadow Stalker since the video went out. What if someone wanted her out of sight. Taylor thought to herself.

“Sophia is Shadow Stalker, isn’t she?” Danny looked between the two women, trying to keep up.

“Yes.”

Taylor went very still. “Let me guess, if I join the Wards you want me to drop the charges.” Her voice was like ice. Smooth, cold, brittle and one wrong move away from breaking.

“What!” Danny had always had a temper, not that Hannah was ever scared or intimidated by him. “You’ve seen the video, how can you let someone like that go unpunished?” Danny was almost purple and for one horrible moment Taylor thought he was going to have a heart attack. “I asked for help and now your telling me to just let it go! They nearly killed my daughter!”

Hannah held her hands up in a calming manner, she needed to get things back under control.
“Danny, please! I am not going to ask you to drop the charges. What Sophia did was wrong and she deserves to be punished.”

She gave Danny a chance to calm down, or at least act like he had, before continuing.

“This situation should never have happened. Winslow was supposed to inform the PRT if the girl acted up in anyway. When we found out about the video, an investigation was launched about Sophia and her actions.” Hannah's body was tense as she clamped down on her own anger at the situation.

“Sophia's caseworker and the principal decided between themselves to keep quiet about the girl's actions. Winslow received donations for having a Ward on the premises and her caseworker thought it would be a good place to find information on the gangs. I'm not sure how they kept the police from investigating your attack, though I suspect Mr Barnes was involved there.”

“Why was she even a Ward to begin with?” Danny ground out. “That kind of behaviour doesn’t come out of nowhere.”

“No, it doesn't.” If any of this ever got back to the director, she would be spending the next few years at a Simurgh containment zone. Hannah had been with the PRT too long to think the director would be publicly punished over this. A private reprimand, with her actions being watched more closely for a time was more likely.

“Shadow Stalker was apprehended after she dropped a suspect of a roof. My understanding is, she was trying to interrogate him. Scare him with threats of dropping, when she lost her grip. He survived, but Sophia was soon arrested and given a choice, join the Wards or serve time in juvenile detention.”

“Why would that even be an option?” Danny asked.

“Partially because the PRT and the protectorate is outnumbered by and because everyone is needed to stop the Endbringers. But mostly because of Saurian.” Was the start of her response. “When he first triggered he was an enforcer for some mob in his home city. He was not a pleasant person from what I know.”

Sighing, Hannah lent forward and looked Taylor in the eyes. “Eventually, of course, he was caught. But then an Endbringer attacked and the local Protectorate forces were too few in number to even fight it.” No one knew where an Endbringer would strike next, only that they followed a rough timeline of four to five months between attacks. Local Protectorate forces would have to hold the monster off long enough for reinforcements to arrive. There was never enough fore warning.

“Its not well known and rarely happened, but directors are allowed to release prisoners as part of the Endbringer truce. Saurian was one of the prisoners given the choice of fighting or staying in there cell. When the fight was over he was the only one to return to the PRT. He had a strong sense of honor which demanded he return. He was offered a place in the Protectorate.”

Sighing, Hannah lent forward and looked Taylor in the eyes. “He died, trying to single handedly hold off the Slaughterhouse Nine. He gave the the Protectorate time to arrive and drive the surviving members off.”

“Since then, it has become standard policy to offer people who meet certain conditions a place in the Protectorate or the Wards. To try and rehabilitate people whenever possible. I'm not allowed to name them, but there have been more successes than failures.” She didn't bother explaining what those
conditions were, or what restrictions they were put under. Even letting her know they had 'new' identities jeopardised them.

“And Sophia?” Taylor quietly asked.

“Was a failure, a big one that I can promise you won’t be happening again.”

“How can you be so sure?” Danny snapped.

“The investigation into Shadow Stalker has revealed a number of failings. To address this, the Wards are being relocated back to the Protectorate HQ in the bay and I am taking direct responsibility for them. I won’t allow this to happen again.”

“Why are you telling us this? And why wait till now?” Hannah could almost laugh, Danny was better at politics than he gave himself credit for.

Meeting Taylors eyes again Hannah spoke. “Sophia vanished the night you released the video.”

Taylor paled dramatically “I never-!”

Hanna cut Taylor off with a laugh. “Taylor. The video was posted by someone called RWD, you have a robot called Rewind. That same person was also able to avoid being tracked by Dragon. Something only another Tinker, or something built by one could do.”

Taylor was still pale, but forced herself to meet Hannah's eyes. "Am I in trouble?" The defiance in her voice made her sound so much like her mother it was scary. Hannah could swear Danny actually shivered.

Chuckling, Hannah shook her head. “No, you did what you felt was necessary. And no one can blame you for feeling desperate.” She would let Danny explain to her why she shouldn't do it again.

“As far as we can tell, someone warned Sophia and she decided to take her chances. When she’s caught, then it's another violation on top of the others we have uncovered.”

From everything Hannah had seen since the investigation was launched, Sophia was unstable. Master influence was quickly ruled out when the Wards admitted just how bad the girls attitude was and her tendency to run off solo. And the director turned a blind eye to all of it! That thought rankled her. The woman took control of the Wards, then ignored them as people. She was treating those children like tools.

“I don’t care what other people say, you deserved to know the truth.”

She took a couple of minutes to explain just what the PRT was doing to track down Sophia and that she doubted Sophia would make a move on Taylor, but she should be careful and avoid going out after dark just to be safe.

Hannah also passed Taylor a taser. “Try to keep it with you, and if anyone tries to bother you, use it.” Standing up she showed Taylor how best to hold and aim the weapon before they both sat back down.

Taylor took a breath while clutching the weapon. Some of the life had returned to her eyes while Hannah was teaching her how to use it. “What’s going to happen to Emma and Madison?”

“The police will prosecute Miss Barnes and Miss Clements. With the video as evidence and the PRT backing them they won’t have much trouble. I understand both girls have already received death
threats online and one is willing to tell the police everything. Sophia, however was already on probation, so she would usually be sent straight back to juvenile prison.”

“In order to protect Sophia's family from reprisal for her actions as an independent and Ward, her case will be handled separately.” Hannah held up a hand to forestall any complaints “As far as the public will know, Sophia is a parolee that has absconded rather than face punishment. And Shadow Stalker has been rumoured to be transferred to a Simurgh containment zone.” A common punishment for Wards or Protectorates who get into trouble. “The administration at Winslow are also facing charges so they will most likely offer to settle out of court and you will be receiving compensation from the PRT, through a third party.”

By the time Hanna had finished both Danny and Taylor had mostly calmed down.

******

(POV: Taylor)

I was still thinking about everything Mi-Hannah had said when she pulled her scarf back up.

“I think that is everything for now. However, I don't want you to make a decision today. We are all a bit tense and I don't want you to make a decision you come to regret. Keep the tablet, look through everything and talk it over with your father. If you wish to talk to me, for any reason, here is my number. You can reach me at any time and anything said stays between us.” She passed me a business card with her telephone number and email address on it. Her private address had also been written on there.

Dad walked Miss Militia out. I could hear them quietly talking in the kitchen while I slowly read through the tablet. If only to distract myself. I was half tempted to bring it to life.

Rewind and Rung made their way off the coffee table and onto the sofa. Rewind chose to jump the gap. Taking a long run up, he crossed the table and leapt. Falling just short of the sofa so only his arms made it. Scrambling wildly, his hand managed to grip the fabric to let him pull himself up.

Rung chose to climb calmly off the table and then up the sofa. Eventually, both bots positioned themselves on the back of the sofa so they could read over my shoulder. I would have to ask them what they thought about all this later.

I was most of the way through it, and had almost put Sophia out of my head, when Dad came back into the front room.

He sat down next to me with a sigh, I'm sure today hadn't gone as well as he had hoped. “Well, putting what that girl did aside, what do you think?”

“I... I'm not sure. The money and the resources sound good but there's a lot of restrictions on Tinkers.” I showed dad the list, there were nearly one hundred rules for tinkers alone. A lot of them were situational and others would never apply to me, I didn't do wet-ware. “And I can't just ignore Sophia being a Ward, even if they didn't like her they should have done something sooner.”

“Yes, they should have. For what it's worth, it's been a long time since I've seen Hannah so angry. She hides it well." Dad nodded as he thought."Alright, I can't force you into it. I would feel better if you did.” Dad leaned over to give me a hug. It felt stiff and awkward. But I could tell he was trying. Standing up he made for the kitchen. “Just think about it, that's all I ask. We can talk about this again another time. And if you do decide not to join, that you want to go it alone... I want to know, so no sneaking out. You will take your little phone, robot, thing with you at all times. And once we get this
mess with school sorted out, I want that to be your priority. Your future's important.”

That... felt fair. And rehearsed. To me, I had planned to keep Rewind with me at all times anyway. Mom always made it clear how important she felt an education was. Dad was just trying to keep to it.

Oh! “Rewind? Delete anything you recorded after Miss Militia took her mask off!”

Rewind let out a whine of disappointment.
A week after meeting Miss Militia, nearly two weeks worth of work in total, I was finally finished. On the workbench in front of me was the completed Wheeljack. All he was needed was a Spark. “Oh~If-I~only~had~a~heart!” played from Rewind and I had to stop myself from giggling. Eventually.

The last week had been quiet. Between housework, working on Wheeljack and jogging, time had flown by. If I was going to be a hero, I would need to be in better shape. I had decided to start jogging, and my first day had brought home just how unfit I was. Skinny apparently didn't mean healthy. *Maybe I should work on a medic or something next?*

Dad was at work. After spending the the last two week at home, the days were starting to blur together. It had been nice though, I felt better than I had in months. Turns out that unexpected vacations and interesting projects did a world of good for the mind.

Rewind was sitting of to one side on the workbench, ready to call for help using a prerecorded message if something went wrong. Rung was next to him, giving me worried looks. The new model was almost half a meter in length, this was the largest thing I had ever tried to create and I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried.

Laying my hands on the Lancia model, I let it map itself in my mind. Once that was done I started pushing my power into it. Its large size had provided plenty of empty space. I had added as many different gadgets and ideas as I had thought of. *Actually, that was not true, I added everything I could build.*

Once my power had ‘filled’ the model, I concentrated on what I wanted. '*An, engineer, someone who can help build things*' and pushed.

I could see the changes my power was making to the model, the excess mass was being converted into parts but it wasn’t enough. For a horrifying moment, I couldn't breathe. The world went grey as my vision blurred and quickly began to fade while my heart pounded frantically in my chest.

The spark chamber formed, the blue-white spark bursting to life just as I fell.

*TSCHE-CHU-CHU-CHU-TSCHE*

I managed to catch myself on the workbench. Unable to hold my weight, I let myself slowly slide to the floor.

*Taylor! Are you okay?!* Rewind jumped off the workbench and ran towards me. He was one wrong word away from calling for help.

Like the others, Wheeljack had transformed the moment he woke. He jumped to the floor, worried blue optics regarded me. The fins on the sides of his head flashing as he took my hand and felt for my pulse.

“I’m fine, really” I gasped. Idly, I noticed Wheeljack would need a chair or a box to be able to reach the workbench fully. He wasn't that the big, being only just more than half a meter tall. “I’m... I'm
just going to sit here for a minute, then maybe I should take a nap.” And maybe some paracetamol and a really cold drink. I was really sweating.

They shared a worried glance, but didn’t say anything. By the time I had caught my breath, I was able to stand and shakily make my way upstairs. My legs felt like jelly. Wheeljack stood behind me, trying to keep me balanced and stop me from falling. I made it as far as the sofa before crashing for the rest of the day.

By the time Dad got home I was back on my feet. Now for the hard part. “Hey Dad? You remember that old car model I was working on?”

He took it well, mostly.

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Like Rung, it took Wheeljack a day or so to really find his voice, but I knew almost immediately when he had.

Dad and I had been sitting down to dinner when something exploded in the basement. Dad got to the door first and he refused to let me see what had happened till he checked it out.

Wheeljack was on the floor, his chest and face scorched and the broken remains of something was on the workbench.

“Er… whoops?” Wheeljack wore a face plate that covered his lower face but the fins on his head lit up when he spoke. At the moment they were a dull pink, showing his embarrassment. “Don't worry, I think I know what went wrong.” A quick check with my powers showed he was unhurt. It still took an hour to clean his armour.

That was something I hadn't noticed till now. All my bots were much tougher than they should have been. Rewind knocked Rung down the stairs yesterday and there wasn't a mark on him. There was a slight dent in the wall though.

Something to look into later.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

(Dragon)

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Tin_mother (administrator)
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 chronologically.

♦ Topic: Containment Foam
In: Boards ► General ► America
Wheeljack (Inventor)

Does anyone know how to make containment foam? I had a few ideas about it I wanted to test out. You see

{COMMENT EDITED}

Containment foam is a restricted substance that is under copyright with Dragons Lair R&D, Inc.

Also please stop giving people strange ideas.

Post edited by Tin_mother

________________________________________________________________________

Dragon shook her metaphorical head. This was the fifth time in the last ten days she had warned Wheeljack about his requests. Though that idea does have merit. Most of the forum users had decided he was either cracked or some kind of tinker.

Given her inability to track his location, Dragon suspected he was related to ‘RWD’. Their accounts had been created within a month of each other and she traced him to 'Hill Valley' California, a place that never existed. And Dunmurry, Belfast. They apparently shared a sense of humour.

If he would just approach the R&D company she had established years ago, she would be more receptive of his ideas.

Dragons Lair R&D was a company she formed in her early days. It gave her an air of legitimacy and made ordering in bulk from suppliers easier. Now that she was established as a hero and a tinker she kept it around for tax, intellectual property and marketing reasons.

Giving up for now she turned back to her conversation. 'Rng' was another new user, but he had been nothing but polite and respectful. He also had a good understanding of psychiatry. They had been talking about the compulsions all Tinkers had to deal with and the possible effects it could have on potential relationships.

His original post, had been a well thought-out essay on the psychological after-effects of masters, including studies and sources to backup his theories.

________________________________________________________________________

(Wheeljack)

Letting out a sigh, Wheeljack went back to work. The containment foam grenades were just too promising an idea to abandon.

They would be much more effective than conventional 'stun' tactics. None of the possibly messy side effects you got with electric shocks and no need to worry about body mass ratios and health conditions that applied to chemical weapons. You did not have to worry about suffocation in most cases. And less chance of them getting back up. He muttered to himself.

Looking back, he probably shouldn't have posted that request. Or any of the others now that he thought about it. The problem, he knew, was that he had a tendency to let his excitement get the
better of him.

Picking up the tablet Taylor had been given, he brought up his custom web browser. There were dozens of websites that speculated about the possible make-up of containment foam. If he ruled out the more blatantly silly ones, maybe with a bit of experimentation he could find something that worked.

Taylor was out on her daily run, so it was just him at the moment. He would have liked to go with her, as a chance to really use his wheels would really help him think. Unfortunately, for now he would have to settle for letting his engine idle while in his Lancia form. They had to stay hidden, at least until Taylor was ready to make her first appearance as a hero. That reminds me, I should look into a weapon for myself.

He had already distilled most of the chemicals he needed from different cleaning products. So he set to work. His first few attempts, produced nothing but a bad smell. The fifth however, resulted in an excellent adhesive. He committed that recipe to memory.

Now, he just had to wait for Taylor to get home so she could unstick his hands from the workbench.

Shortened brush in hand, Rung looked carefully at the mask in front of him. Taylor had bought almost a dozen of them for a couple of dollars. They were thin, cheap white plastic in the shape of a face. Taylor was upstairs with her father, leaving him, Rewind and Wheeljack to continue working.

“I still don't see why we have to do this,” Wheeljack complained. “These masks will barely hide Taylors identity. Not to mention the problems she's going to have with her glasses. She would be better off with a custom polymer, shaped to fit comfortably on her face.”

Rung waited patiently, while his friend let his imagination run away with him. “We could integrate lenses to match her current prescription and even put an augmented reality interface with it.”

*Jack, do you have... any of that?* Rewind said from where he was sitting.

“Well... no.”

*Do you even have the tools to make any of it?*

“... Now you're just being rude.”

Miss Militia's warning had made Taylor wary of digging through junkyards for parts until she could hide her identity. After Wheeljack had been brought up to speed, Taylor had sat down with the three of them to discuss the future.

Taylor wanted to be an independent hero. After everything she had been through, Rung was not surprised her trust in others, especially authority, had been shaken. He would have to bring that up with her at her next session. If she wanted people to trust her, she would need to be willing to trust them.

Rung felt Taylor should join the Wards, a dedicated team and possible friendships would help the girl grow as a person. Rewind was against it. While he agreed with what they were trying to do, he was holding a grudge about what happened to Taylor. Wheeljack however was torn, he liked the
resources they offered but one look at the restrictions had left him fuming for well over an hour.

Putting that to one side, Rung focused on what Taylor had asked. Using the insignia she had created as a guide, Rung started to paint the mask. Behind him, Wheeljack collected several of the masks and wandered off to tinker.

(Danny)

“Are you sure this will work?” Danny asked as Taylor and Wheeljack made the finishing touches to what had once been a pair of computers he had pulled from a dumpster, complete with monitors.

The casings had been removed and copper tubes and wires joined everything together.

“It should,” muttered Wheeljack with his head still stuck inside the left case.

Taylor climbed out from underneath the desk, the excitement on her face went a long way to make him feel better. The last couple of weeks since she left school had brought back some of the old Taylor. He'd give her a bit more time to recover before he mentioned school, the sponsorship program Medhal had contacted him about sounded promising. He assumed someone involved with it had seen the video.

The police had arrested those... girls. Alan was trying his best to get his daughter out of trouble, but all he was doing was slowing things down. Winslow was trying to settle out of court, but he wanted to let them stew before he spoke to them again. He had to get some satisfaction after all.

She was smiling more and always eager to explain what she was doing to him, even if he didn't understand it all.

“Wheeljack has over-clocked both processors. Its not much, but with them running in parallel it makes a big difference. The pipes are a quick and simple, non-conductive oil, cooling system-”

Danny let the words wash over him. He understood enough to know that, between them, they had built an under powered supercomputer.

“Wheeljack did most of the coding for the operating system. It's a work in progress, but it's better than nothing.”

When everything was in place, Taylor moved to the other side of the room so she was standing next to him and away from any possible fallout. “Okay Jack, turn it on!”

Nodding to Taylor, Wheeljack connected the power cable and pressed the large blue button to start the boot sequence.

The whole rig whirred to life, there was a faint gurgling noise from the pump, but things settled quickly.

The monitors lit up as text scrolled rapidly across the screen. When it cleared a simple blue desktop appeared with single message box.
“Okay, try it now.” Wheeljack called. He was sitting in front of Teletraan, with a mess of different windows open in front of him. A modified USB lead went from his wrist to the computer.

We were testing a device Wheeljack had made me, originally based on a bluetooth. It gave me two-way communication with all my bots and included a projector that could create an augmented reality interface on my glasses.

A tap of a button on the side brought up a simple wireframe keyboard on the table in front of me. 'Tapping' at the keys caused text to appear on Teletraan, but it was slow. Latency was an issue. Bandwidth would also be a problem when it came to more complex applications.

“Hmm... Okay, what if I tried this?” Wheeljack changed something on Teletraan. I yelped as I was blinded by the sudden flash of light reflecting off my glasses and into my eyes.

Despite his tendency to cause explosions, Wheeljack was a godsend. He was practically a Tinker all by himself, one who specialised in improvisation.

Between us, we had converted the old coal chute into a makeshift forge. It was too small to do a lot with, but it could be used to reclaim lead from old circuit boards. A heat lamp and a vacuum motor made a very small vacuum press, for cheap plastic from a hobby store. We were still working on Teletraan but it was now connected to a printer that we had converted into a circuit-board printer. With a bit of work we might even be able to create a 3D printer.

After Miss Militia's visit, Dad and I had decided to be more careful about buying and selling electronics. The money had been useful but there was just too much chance of being recognised.

I was careful, recycling and reusing whenever possible. But I knew money was going to become a problem. Between the fee's the junkyards charged and the costs of stuff that couldn't be salvaged, my savings were almost gone.

I decided I would try my luck at the old boat graveyard near the docks. It was a long shot, since most of it would be rusted, but there just was no good solution at this point.

The Docks are ABB territory. I wanted a costume, or at least mask before I went there. While I had plans for a full suit of power-armour, I needed something I could use now to keep my identity hidden while looking for scrap.

In the end, I went for simplicity. Black jeans, cheap bike riding gloves and an old black hoody to hide my hair. I was still debating about the mask. That just left something to defend myself with.

Dad had given me a can of pepper spray when I started jogging in the morning. Wheeljack, however, had other ideas.

I looked down at the weapon on the worktop. It had started out as the TASER Miss Militia had
given me. Wheeljack had taken one look at the weapon before shaking his head. “Why, would you want a single shot device that leaves you tethered to your attacker?” he asked. I had to admit, he had a point.

In the end we stripped the batteries and voltage amplifier circuit from the handle before building a new body from scratch.

The result was a single shot pistol. Made from mostly plastic with some metal reinforcing it. It used an electromagnet to fire a large shell, about the size of a 12 gauge round, containing a battery, a step-up transformer and a pair of prongs. On impact it would deliver enough charge to put a normal person down.

As soon as Wheeljack and I finished making the ammo for it. It would be ready to go.

“Okay, that should be round number te-!” Wheeljack was cut off by a sound, halfway between a zap and a bang. I didn't bother turning around. “Erm... three rounds done.”

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It was already getting late when I made my way through to boat graveyard.

Really, I should have waited for the morning but the forecast for the next couple of days was bad and I wanted to at least get an idea about what I could use.

I was in what passed as for my 'costume'. Although my hood and a scarf covered my face, I had decided to try the mask wheeljack had made for me. It was made by layering the cheap plastic masks with an epoxy Jack had created. He had also managed to shape the lenses from my spare pair of glasses to fit they eye holes on the mask.

Special features would be fitted to later models.

As I had promised Dad, Rewind was safely in my pocket and my 'stun gun' was in the other. I was also wearing the Bluetooth device Wheeljack had modified for me. WE had given up on the AR system for now but the communication functions worked fine.

Between Leviathan and the weak world economy, the docks had been on the decline for years before the union strikes. Then some of the more militant dockworkers had taken some of the larger ships out into the bay and sunk them. That was the final nail in the coffin. Large shipping vessels could no longer get into the bay and the fishing industry had already moved on, the ships left in the bay were trapped and most were either left at there moorings or beached nearby.

In theory this was ABB territory, but the lack of people and business meant they barely paid it any attention.

Which made it a good place to test some of my equipment.

I had brought a rucksack with me, inside was a short handled crowbar and some wire cutters. I was mostly here to check things out, but that didn't mean I wouldn't grab anything of interest while I was here.

The graveyard was practically a maze of rusted hulls. I didn't want to go too far in but I had to make sure I wasn't seen. I found what looked like an old tug boat, the side had a ladder built in that didn't
look too far gone so I climbed up.

That's when I found out my power works through my gloves. Looking back on it, I really should have checked that out. At least it meant I wouldn't have to touch any of... this... directly. The metal hull was more rust than anything else and most of the wooden deck was rotten through. Ignoring that I tried to focus my power on what I could still use.

There was some wiring in bridge that was mostly okay, but the few circuit boards I could see, looked like they had been chewed by rats or corroded. Can't say I'm surprised. Salt-water and no maintenance meant a lot of this is going to be rusted to hell.

“Right!” I stood up and turned roughly in the direction of home. “Comms check! Wheeljack, can you hear me okay?”

“Loud and clear Ta-” he cut himself off before finishing my name. “I know this is encrypted and everything, but... did you ever get round to picking a name?” Damn!

“No, I forgot.”

One of my bots laughed.

“Oh, bite me! Just use 'T' for now, we can workout something else later.”

Giving up on the tug, I climbed down and started moving from one ship to another.

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After about an hour I decided to call it a day. It was dark, I was tired and filthy. I had a few things stuffed into my bag, mostly small, simple stuff my 'forge' could melt down.

“Hey, Jack? I think we need to see about building a better forge. I'm also going to need a cutting tool next time.”

While we bounced ideas back and forth, I made my way to the entrance. I was so caught up in my conversation, I never saw the creature until it slammed into me.

A wall of exposed flesh, fur and bone hit me just as I rounded a corner. It knocking the wind out of me and sent me spinning. Something had also stabbed into my shoulder.

I was just climbing to my feet, clutching my shoulder. When there was a crunch behind me, turning I found myself face to face with a man in a red demon mask.

I panicked and tried to pull my gun. It was caught in my pocket. The blow to my stomach came out of nowhere. It felt like I had just been run through with a steal girder. On reflex I curled into a ball, waiting for the next blow.

That's when the explosions started.
Winded, I curled into a ball, covered my ears and waited for the noise to stop.

Wheeljack and Rewind were shouting in my ear. They were demanding to know what was going on.

“Cape... Red mask... fast,” I managed to gasp out. My attacker apparently wasn't interested in me. By the time I had caught my breath, he had already vanished.

A wall of ice was blocking the way out. *Fuck!*

I tried not to panic. Really I tried. I was in the middle of a cape battle, I had to get out of here. I ran back the way I came, deeper into the graveyard. There were plenty of ways in and out of here, one of them had to be clear. If not, I could always find somewhere to hide and wait things out.

My shoulder was still hurting, a quick check showed a shallow gash. It was bleeding but I would be okay for now. I needed to move fast so I tossed my bag away. There was nothing important in there, nothing nearly as important as my life anyway. In the distance I could hear what sounded like dogs and the occasional explosion.

“Taylor! You need to get out of there! That was Oni Lee, if he's here Lung can't be far behind!” Came Wheeljack's frantic voice. He was almost shouting at me through the Bluetooth.

Nodding, even if he couldn't see it, I forced down the panic and made for another exit. Wheeljack continued to feed me information that he was pulling from the internet. “Oni Lee's a teleporter, he leaves short-lived clones behind, and uses them as suicide bombers. His power is possibly limited by line of sight.” Nodding again, I tried to keep to the shadows. “If this is right, Oni Lee and Lung are rarely apart.”

Stopping in the shadows, I felt myself tremble. Lung, the leader of the ABB, was a pyro-kinetic brute that got stronger the longer he fought. When he first arrived in the city, he took on the protectorate and won. Even more terrifying, he had fought the *Endbringer* Leviathan to a standstill.

Coming to a junction I turned outwards, heading for another exit.

Before I could reach it, I felt something move behind me. I threw myself forward and a knife passed where my neck had been. I rolled over but the clone was already dust. *Fuck!*

Looking around, I spotted Oni Lee. He was standing on a nearby ship, looking away from me. Whatever had his attention must have been important, I watched as he collapsed into dust.

Whatever was going on, it was happening further in, near the centre. So I planned to skirt the edges of the graveyard as much as possible. If I could just get around the next hull there would be– an explosion knocked me off my feet, throwing me backwards and knocking my mask loose. Another ice wall blocked the way.

Dazed, I laid there, looking up at the sky. My thoughts were sluggish, but I kept wondering why Lee hadn't finished me off. My body ached and my ears were ringing from the last explosion.
As the ringing faded, I realised I could hear shouting on the other side of the ice.

Pulling myself up, I straightened my mask and crawled towards the wall. The mask had cracked in places but the lenses were okay. The voices were muffled, either from the wall or because of the ringing in my ears, but Rewind was in my pocket. His hearing was as sharp as ever.

*They're setting explosives! Run!*

At Rewind's shout, I forced myself to my feet and ran. Ducking behind an old dumpster I covered my ears just as the explosions started.

Explosions echoed through the graveyard, making the ground beneath me tremble.

A wall of ice, nearly 10 feet tall now circled the graveyard. I was trapped and Oni Lee was still here. Somewhere in the darkness, something roared.

*That's it. I've had enough!* In the back of my mind, I felt something give.

//Everything you've experienced, everything you are... //

*Taylor, Listen to me! I know you are scared, but you need to stay calm and get out of sight. Whatever is going on, you are not the main target.* Rung's voice crackled through the bluetooth, something must have broken and was interfering with reception *Take a deep breath...An....rE...* Rung's voice crackled and faded as the bluetooth died.

//...Has led you to this moment.//

Movement above me caught my attention. Oni Lee was standing on top of a nearby wreck, he stared at me before idly tossing a grenade in my direction. I threw myself forward to avoid it. It exploded behind me, reinforcing the ice wall. When I looked up, Lee was gone. He knew I wasn't a threat, he was just toying with me.

//Now... Reach out and take hold of the flame//

Anger surged at the dismissal, pushing down the fear. No! I refuse to die here tonight! A cold sense of calm flowed through me. The fear and anger were there, but it was buried deep in me, like I was floating above it all.

If escape wasn't an option, I'd have to see this through. I pulled my gun. I doubted it would do much good, but it was better than nothing.

I made my way deeper into the graveyard, following the sounds of fighting. I tried my best to stay out of sight. Sticking to the shadows, moving only when I was sure it was safe.

When I reach the clearing, it looked like a scene from hell.

There was fire and smoke everywhere, reflecting on the rusty boats and casting everything in the same ghastly red and brown colours.
It was clear who was winning. Four teens were scattered around the clearing. In the middle of it all, a vengeful demon, stood Lung.

He was nearly eight feet tall, scales covered most of his body and his face was twisted into something inhuman. His metal mask was slowly dripping off his face in molten droplets.

The man in bike leathers pointed his arms and hands. What I thought was smoke from the fires moved to cover Lung. Lung sent a wide blast of fire towards the smoke user. He threw himself sideways, the fire clipped his shoulder and he rolled to put it out. The darkness lifted briefly before closing in around his head.

A stout, butch girl commanded a pair of monsters to circle Lung. Forcing him to turn to keep them in sight. A blonde girl in a tight, purple costume aimed a gun at Lung and fired. The bullets flattened harmlessly against his scales.

Oni Lee appeared behind the blond, knife in hand. He slashed at her. Another boy, dressed like something from a ren-fair, gestured and Lee's body jerked, throwing off balance. The blond girl turned, but Lee turned to dust before she could shoot.

The butch looking girl whistled, one of the monsters tackled Lung from behind.

Claws and teeth tore into Lung. Rolling Lung tried to find purchase. His now clawed hand lashed out, catching the monster in the side making it yelp and thrash in pain. Pushing his claws deep into the wound Lung levered himself up and drove his other hand into the monster's throat.

It's yelping was cut off and a gout of flame tore through the creature. The dead body pinning Lung briefly. With a scream of rage the short girl ran towards him, a metal rod in hand.

"Bitch! NO!" The blonde girl ran forwards, trying to stop her, but she stumbled and fell short.

'Bitch' reached Lung before he could stand, with a crack she brought the rod down on his head. He shrugged the blow off and surged to his feet.

Stepping out into the clearing, I brought my gun up. Lung's broad, exposed back made a perfect target. The noise of the discharge was lost as Lung roared, his body jerked before falling to his knees.

"RUN!" I screamed but Bitch refused to listen.

She brought her weapon down on Lung again and again. I fumbled to reload my gun while the blonde girl peppered him with shots.

Lung caught Bitch's hand mid swing. He surged to his feet, crushing her hand with ease. His other hand closed around her throat as her body was covered in flames.

I shut my eyes. The blonde girl screamed

//Never look away.//

Dropping the body, Lung turned to face me. He was huge, nearly ten foot tall, his body was covered in scales. Large muscles bunched and twitched as his body continued to change, wings started to
grow from his back.

With a roar, he charged me. Darkness closed around him but Lung just sent another wide blast of fire.

I tried to run when my leg jerked suddenly, knocking me off balance and sending me to the ground. The impact knocking my mask askew again. I rolled over in time to see Lung right above me.

Panicked, I brought my gun up and fired. There was a sickening squelch as the large, spike tipped round punctured Lungs eyeball before discharging. This time Lung roared in pain.

As he stumbled backwards, the darkness closed in around us both.

I couldn't hear or see anything. My stomach rolled as I lost all sense of direction. Then the darkness lifted, leaving a clear path in front of me leading to a hole in the side of a nearby ship. I run towards it.

Lung fired blindly and a gout of flame just missed me, hitting the ship and making the hull glow cherry red from the heat.

Once safely inside, I moved away from the entrance and tried to catch my breath. I could hear more noise from outside. It sounded like the fight was moving away. I wanted to go back and help but...

Fuck!

He just... He just killed that girl. He burned her alive! I couldn't get the images out of my head, how could somebody do something like that. My stomach churned and I just managed to pull my mask up before throwing up.

Reaching up, I pulled the broken Bluetooth from my ear and threw it away. It wasn't worth repairing anyway. It was just too fragile. We tried to build too much into it. Thankfully, it wasn't my only option.

Sitting against the hull I pulled Rewind from my pocket, something I should have done earlier.

"Rewind, call Miss Militia."

She answered almost immediately “Taylor! Thank god. Are you okay?”

“...I'm not fine. I'm okay, I'm near the centre of the graveyard. Lung's nearby.”

“We know. Listen, do you have a way of letting us know where you are exactly? In two minutes one of Dragon's suits is going to come get you, but she needs to know where you are.”

Rewind beeped and a glance at his screen showed my exact coordinates via military GPS. I quickly told them to Miss Militia.

“Right, Dragon says there is a clearing there. Stay out of sight, but the moment she lands climb on and hold on tight.”

“He's killing people,” I whisper, my voice shaking.

"Which is why you have to stay out of sight until Dragon lands." Her voice was quiet now, eerily
calm, as if she was ticking items from her shopping list. Hearing her calmed me a bit, too. "Dragon is almost there, and Armsmaster is on his way and will be there soon afterwards. You have to stay focused, stay hidden, stay quiet and everything is going to be fine."

Nodding, I end the call. I could barely hear the fighting outside now. I needed to move, since I wouldn't be able to see Dragon land from here. It was only as I struggled to my feet, I realised just how tired I was.

Shaking my head to clear it, I pulled my filthy mask back on. What was left of it anyway, and adjusted my scarf.

I took a deep breath and headed back outside, hoping I wouldn't regret it. The sounds of fighting had moved further away. Getting as close as I can to the clearing without being seen wasn't going to be easy, but I had to try.

I tried not to look at the body of that girl and her monsters. They were smaller now, the bones and exposed flesh were sloughing off. It was easier to see they actually were dogs.

Something moved nearby and I brought my gun up. The blonde girl was sitting in the shadows, gun in one hand and the other clutching at her side, I could see blood.

“Oh, it's you.” She smiled weakly at me. “Thanks for trying. Sorry about hitting you, we didn't see you.”

I wasn't really sure what to do. Weren't you supposed to put pressure on it to stop the blood flow? Without really thinking about it I pulled my scarf off and pressed it against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding. There was a lot of blood.

“Grue is trying to lead Lung away.” She sounded tired. “Don't know where Regent is... bastard. Lee is dealing with the hero's, keeping them from reaching us. I'm Tattletale by the way.” She focused on my face before smiling. “And you are waiting for rescue.”

Before I could say anything, I was interrupted by the sound of engines. The Dragon suit circles overhead, before going into a dive. At the last moment it straightens, engines straining to reduce its speed, and lands. Its four legs bend to put its body close to the floor. The articulated head turns towards me.

“Get on!” the voice is synthetic but clearly female.

Looking between the suit and Tattletale, I made a decision. Throwing one of the girl's arms over my shoulder, making her hiss in pain, I pull her to her feet. She's barely able to walk, but with some effort I manage to get her over to the suit.

Laying her across the suit's back I climb on behind her. The moment I'm on the engines rev-up to speed.

Just as Dragon left the ground, Oni Lee appeared. I raised my gun desperately.

Everything went white.
Everything you've experienced, everything you are...

I walked through a world made of metal. Smoke filled the air while fuel, oil and precious metals stained the ground around me.

A voice was whispering quietly in the back of my mind, repeating words I had never heard but somehow half remembered. It sounded like me, but older, wiser.

As I followed the voice, it led me through metal plains, fields of floating blue crystals that sang and vast cities with buildings that towered into the sky.

Gradually, the city around me changed. This place was old and stained with rust while bodies lay in the streets, warped and twisted by the fires that had claimed the city.

Everything you've experienced, everything you are...
...Has led you to this moment.

The ground in front of me opened, and the voice called me on. I followed the path, going deep beneath the planet's surface. When I reached the very bottom, I saw a vault, light spilling out from its open doors.

That's when I saw him ahead of me, the mech I had dreamed about. He was broken, barely alive. Deaf, half-blind and numb to the world around him, but he pulled himself onwards.

I wanted to help, but every time I reached out, my hands passed through him, becoming wispy and intangible.

Everything you've experienced, everything you are...
...Has led you to this moment.
Now...

I followed him into the vault, the voice was clearer now, stronger. I looked at the broken mech as he lumbered forward and wondered if he could hear it too.

The vault was old, ancient. In the centre was a pedestal with a bright light floating above it. An object of some kind was at the centre of the light but I couldn't make out any details, just a vague shape.

...Reach out and take hold of the flame.

Besides me, the mech grabbed the object at the centre of the light. Lightning arched off the walls as he bellowed in pain. Instinctively I brought my hands up to shield myself as the vault was bathed in light. In the middle of it all his body was being repaired, lost limbs replaced and broken armour restored.

When the light faded, he stood tall, proud, a sense of purpose flowing from him.
For one brief moment he looked at me before he walked out of the vault.

I turned to watch him leave. Behind me, the pedestal lit up.

...Reach out and take hold of the flame.

The same words repeated again. I walked around the pedestal, trying to get a better view but no matter how much I moved or squinted, the glow was just too bright.

...Reach out and take hold of the flame.

What did I have to lose? Steeling myself, I plunged my hand deep into the light. My fingers brushed against smooth metal and for one brief moment, I could see it. I felt an overwhelming need for unity.

Then pain.

With a gasp I jerked awake.

The ground under me was cold and hard. Had I fallen asleep in the basement again? Blinking, I tried to clear the fog from my head. The dream was already fading to nothing as I tried to look around for my glasses.

My whole body ached, my ears were ringing and I was having trouble focusing. It felt like when I was still taking painkillers. What happe-

It all came flooding back. The fight, Lung, Oni Lee!

Forcing myself up, I tried to look around. The world was a blurry mess of shapes. It took time to sink in.

No, no, no.

In a panic I felt my face, ignoring the aches and cuts. My mask was gone!

“oh 'ent 'ou!” The words were mangled, but I recognised the voice. Lung!

Slowly, I tried to move. I grasped at the ground around me in the hopes of finding my mask. A bright flash and a burst of heat soared over my head. I dropped to the ground with a yelp.

“She can’t see!” Tattletale's voice? “Her glasses were built into her mask.”

Heavy footfalls moved towards me. Lung growled something, and his hands closed around me, half lifting, half dragging me across the ground.

He dumped me on the ground, away from the other teens. When I tried to sit up, my hand landed on something cold and metal. Almost immediately it began to map itself out. It was the Dragon suit. Thankfully I didn't need my eyes to 'see' it.

I tried to look in the direction Lung went while letting my power slowly seep into the suit. If I was lucky, I would be able to repair it before he could notice.
I could hear him asking Tattletale questions. It sounded more like nonsense mixed with growling, but she apparently understood him. I was too focused on what I was doing to even try listening to her.

He asked a couple more questions, each sounding more human and even more angry than the draconic growls from before.

I couldn't do this, it was just too big, too broken to fix. My power would kill me before I could finish.

Whatever Tattletale said to Lung, it had been the wrong thing. The girl screamed, the smell of burning skin reached me and in my head, I remembered him burning 'Bitch' alive.

He was going to kill them.

He kept trying to fight. He was shouting at them, wanting answers. Broken. Deaf, half blind and numb to the world around him he pulled himself onwards. Tattletale screaming as her friends still burning body fell to the ground.

It had to stop.

With one big push, I sent as much power as I could into the suit.

Pain exploded in my chest and power crackled across the suit, repairing and reshaping it.

Small flight stabilising fins on its sides moved, opening into large wings. Jet intakes re-aligned, and and the dragon-like face shifted. The ornamental mouth cracked open, hinges and joints appearing as its neck stretched out. High-end processors merged together, forming a brain module and pre-existing programming was appropriated, reprogrammed and re-purposed.

I shut my eyes from the overwhelming pain and I couldn't breathe. It felt like I was being electrocuted from the inside but I hung on tightly to the suit. I had to do this. The aches in my body were gone, replaced with a numbing cold that was working its way inwards. I forced myself to watch as the spark chamber formed, I just had to hold on a little longer.

A bright green spark bursting into life, was the last thing I saw before everything went black.

The dust that had gathered from the explosion began to settle when Lung returned, dragging Grue behind him.

He's pissed, Tattletale's power told her, her head still ringing from the aftermath of the explosion.

“No shit,” she muttered to herself. Blood loss was making her light headed.

Unceremoniously dropping Grue to the ground, Lung said nothing, pacing around instead as he slowly began to shrink.

Power reacts to threats. Doesn't see us as a threat. Can't talk properly at that size. Waiting for power to subside. Wants information. Even her power was slow to respond.

She spared a quick glance to her would-be saviour. Probable concussion, Tinker, wanted to be a
hero. She was out cold, not too far from the remains of Dragon's battle suit.

*Light weight construction. Not combat ready, prototype.* The moment Oni Lee had appeared, Dragon's suit had rolled sideways, shielding both girls from the blast and taking the brunt of the damage.

Why would they send a prototype to rescue a single tinker? *Friends in the PRT, possible recruit.* Great, just what she needed. If Lung didn't kill them, the PRT would.

She could hear explosions in the distance, probably Lee. *Keeping the PRT busy, no interruptions.*

The Tinker was just starting to stir when Lung slapped Tattletale across the face.

“oh 'ent 'ou!” *Who sent you?*, Her power supplied.

Before she could say anything, the Tinker started moving, drawing his attention. Lung sent a blast of fire at her.

Her movements had been sluggish, from a concussion, trying to feel her way. *Using hands. Poor eyesight. Needs glasses.* Tattletale glanced at Lung and her power supplied her with more information. *Sense of honour. Won't attack a weak or crippled opponent.* “She can't see! Her glasses were built into her mask.” There was nothing she could do about the girl's identity, not at the moment.

Lung ignored her and dragged the Tinker girl over to Dragon's suit, turning back to Tattletale once he was finished.

Lung glared at her before growling something. Her power translated it to, [Who sent you?]

“Sent us? What do you mean?”

"On't 'aye a meh!” [Don't lie to me!]

"Ou hit ma 'a'ino ju' a ah umfire hit a 'afe 'ou'e?” [You hit my casino just as the Empire hits a safe house?]

“Just dumb luck, honestly.”

Lung grabbed her by the hair, teeth bared wide and far too close to be comfortable. "Pretty brond gel, 'ou're wha' Gaiser 'ike." [Pretty blond girl, You're what Kaiser likes.]

“Fuck no!” She couldn't stop herself from grinning at him. “I'm Jewish!”

With a snarl, Lung picked her up and pinned her against a ship. Her power gave her only a moments warning before a burning hand pressed against the open wound on her side. The pain actually forced her to lose consciousness for a moment, as her mind blanked out before a scream tore itself out of her throat.

Grue's arms were bound, bringing both feet up he kicked out at Lung, catching the side of his knee. Lung dropped her to floor, letting her curl into a ball as she choked back a sob. *Cauterized the wound, stopped the blood flow. Doesn't want me dead...Doesn't want me dead yet.*

“I'm the one in charge, not her!” Grue shouted at Lung.
Lung's foot hit Grue in the chest, breaking bone and making him double over.

"On't wa'tde 'ou're brea'!" [Don't waste you're breath!] he snarled at Grue, before turning back to her. "Ooh dells ou 'ere 'ta go? Wha' i 'ou dell em?" [Who tells you where to go? What did you tell him?]

A noise behind him drew Lung's attention. “Gon't 'ove!” [Don't move!] he snarled at the Tinker. “Ih hav'went forgotten about you!” [I haven't forgotten about you!] The bones in his jaw made a cracking sound as they reverted back to normal.

Lung's transformation had mostly reverted, letting him speak normally. “I broke your little toy.” He gestured to the ground where the remains of the tinker's weapon lay. “My tinker could use an assistant.”

Lifting her head and trying to ignore the pain, Tattletale turned her power on the tinker. *Is trying to fix Dragon's suit. No tools, doesn't need them? Has striker power. Takes time or concentration to work. Needs a distraction.*

Taking a deep breath she forced herself upright. “Hey!” She coughed a couple of times before continuing “You're right, we had info on all your places. Your 'boys' aren't as scared of you as you think they are. Maybe you should spend less time sitting on your ass?” Her grin was a little weak but it was enough to get Lungs attention.

“But really? All this? Just for a casino?” Her power latched onto the idea, making the pounding in her head worse. “No. You're worried... about a bunch of kids? No... The Empire is pushing and you don't have enough men, you can't sto-”

The back of Lung's hand lashed out and caught her face. She could taste blood where she had bitten her cheek. That wasn't enough to stop her.

“That's not it... you're worried about what we know... the safe house?’ The grin was genuine now. Her skull felt like it was about to explode but she couldn't stop herself. Not when she was so close to uncovering the truth. “Was there something there we shouldn't have seen?”

Behind Lung, Dragon's suit started to move. To stop him from noticing, she let go of her power, letting it run wild.

“Of course, the paperwork. You own a house. A nice house in a good neighbourhood in the south side of the city, away from you and your gang... who is she? Your favourite bitch? No, no.”

She laughed, long and hard. “Does she know? Does she even know you exists? Does she know daddy is a monster?”

Lung's eyes flashed, his entire body suddenly bursting into flame, teeth sharpening into fangs, mouth open in a silent roar of rage. Tattletale recoiled, from the heat and raised her arms in a futile attempt to block the wall of fire and anger-

*TSCHE-CHU-CHU-CHU-TSCHE*

The sound was deep, mechanical and right behind him. Before Lung could turn, Dragon's suit roared.
As tall as a horse but much more broad, the mechanical dragon stood protectively on strong limbs over the Tinker who was curled into a ball. Large wings stretched wide and its head was held low, mandibles quivering as it let out a long, low growl.

A blast of fire from Lung glanced off its head and in response, the dragon charged.

As the dragon charged, it pulled its wings close against its body, pieces actually retracting and locking into place. Its long neck stretched as it lunged at Lung. Its mouth closed on nothing but air as Lung threw himself to the side.

Rolling to his feet, Lung sent a blast of fire that did little more than scorch the beasts hide.

The dragon turned to chase him across the clearing. Its head darted forward like a snake, jaws snapping as Lung continued to dodge. A wide sweep of its long, spike-tipped tail caught him in the chest, throwing him across the clearing and into the side of a boat.

Before Lung could pull himself up the dragon roared, a challenge.

The fire erupted around Lung as he surged to his feet and charged the mechanical beast. *How dare this toy mock him*, he thought.

Silver scales had almost covered his body, as a fire wreathed hand slammed into the beasts head, snapping it to one side.

With a burst of speed the dragon struck out. This time, its jaws closed around his arm, picking Lung up and tossing him away like a broken toy.

The impact with the ship made his vision swim even as his power tried to stop the bleeding his lost limb caused. Around him, the metal hull of the ship warped and twisted from the heat of his flames.

By the time Lung pulled himself free of the ship, his missing arm was starting to regrow. With a roar Lung sent a blast of fire at the beast, the hotter fire making its armour glow.

In retaliation, the dragon reared its head back before spitting a gout of blue-white flame at him.

Lung brought his remaining arm up and braced himself against the flame. His scales began to blister and char at the heat and he struggled to stay upright as the physical force of the hit pushed him backwards.

The moment the flames died, Grue enveloped Lung's head in a cloud of darkness. Swinging his arm wildly, he sent a wide arc of flame at the boy, who threw himself to the ground to avoid being burned to a crisp.

“What are you doing?!” Grue shouted at the dragon “Get him out of here!” He had no clue if it could understand him.

Yellow eyes narrowed at the boy before the dragon charged at Lung. Pinning him down, its claws dug deep into Lung's body before it spread it wings. In one massive heave it took off, carrying a still struggling Lung with it.

Lung continued to fight, lashing out with claws and fire as the dragon flew them out over the Bay,
his back and shoulders cracking as his wings began to form. With a swipe of its tail the dragon severed Lung’s still growing wings and dropped him into the water far below.

Despite the pain in his chest, Grue managed to lift Tattletale, who had passed out, carrying her over to the fallen tinker.

She didn’t look good. One hand was clutched to her chest, her lips were turning blue and she was making weak gasping noises. As he slid to the ground next to her, he noticed a small robot climbing on top of the girl.

It patted her face, beeping frantically as it did. When she didn’t respond, it moved towards her neck and placed a hand on her throat. It beeped at him a couple of times but he wasn’t sure what it was trying to say.

With a crash, the dragon landed close by. The little robot climbed on top of the tinker and started waving at it, beeping as he did.

The robot pointed at the tinker and then Tattletale as the sound of an ambulance siren played from it. The dragon stepped forward, scooping the tinker up with its claws before turning towards him. Using its head to push him back it picked up Tattletale and took off.

Cursing, Grue pulled himself up and tried to make his way out of the graveyard, hoping he would be able to catch up before that thing ate them or something.

Panacea was just finishing her last patient of the night when her phone started to ring. She frowned at the unknown number and blocked the call.

She tried not to sigh as she realised she would have to change her number, again.

The only people who had her number were the PRT, the hospital and her family. Every so often, someone would break into the hospital records and her number would end up in the hands of some rich asshole that wanted to hire her.

Twice more her phone went off. Finally, she turned the damn thing off. She was tired and her sister was on her way. She was going home.

Her phone started to ring. This time, her screen showed a red insignia styled a bit like a robotic face. She wasn’t great with technology, but turning a phone on remotely and messing with the display shouldn’t be that easy.

Despite her self, she answered “Hello?”

“Oh, Hello!” The voice sounded like a man but there was an odd metallic ring to it, almost like a voice changer. “I’m really sorry to call you like this. My name is Wheeljack.”

She frowned. That sounded like a cape name but not one she had heard off before. “How did you get this number?”

“It’s not important.” He sounded frantic. “In less than a minute, a dragon is going to land outside. It’s carrying some people and they need your help!”
What.

She was about to hang up and chalk it up to a stupid prank call when people started to scream outside.

Rushing to the window, her jaw dropped at the sight. A mechanical dragon was standing right outside the doors, with a pair of bodies laying on the ground in front of it. Occasionally it would nudge the dark haired one and let out a whining sound.

_Fuck my life._

Running to the doors, she could see people trying to get out of sight. A number of people were pointing their phones at the creature. The hospital security guard clearly had no idea what to do.

The healer in her that she was growing to resent spurned her on.

“Will it hurt anyone?” she asked her phone.

“No, I don't think so.” She sighed, right.

If it wasn't for the size, the teeth, the spikes, the big teeth, and the glowing yellow eyes, she could say that the 'dragon' looked pitiful, nudging one of the girls and whining.

_You know what? Fuck it._ She had been to Endbringer battles and dealt with capes for most of her life. This barely made her top ten 'weirdest things I've ever done"

Pulling up her hood, to hide her face from the cameras, she walked forward. The hospital was her territory, no one messed with it. The dragon turned to look at her, glowing yellow eyes stared intently before a small robot sitting on its head squeaked at it. The little robot jumped down and ran over to the dark haired girl. The dragon stepped back, lowering its head to the floor.

Shaking her head, Panacea took the girl's hand in hers. The problem was immediately apparent: arrhythmia. Synchronising the heart's rhythm barely took a thought. That done she turned to the other girl. Blood loss, burns, cracked ribs, the list went on. Someone really had it in for the girl.

She stabilised the girl, she would deal with everything else later. “Somebody get a gurney.” She called over her shoulder. Behind her, a couple of orderlies edged there way out of the doors, trying to keep the healer between them and the dragon. She ignored them as she rattled off what the blond girl needed.

As they loaded the dark haired girl onto a gurney, the dragon sat up. Panacea spread her arms to cut it off. “You heard me, she's going to be fine.” She took a breath and hoped this didn't go wrong. “But right now, you're blocking the entrance. Go wait in the carpark or something.” She made shooing motions and to her surprise, the dragon slunk away in the direction she indicated.

“And you!” she snapped to her phone. “Just what on earth is going on?”
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards
You are currently logged in, Wheeljack
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: Mecha-Lung!
In: Boards ➤ Boards ➤ Places ➤ America ➤ Brockton Bay Discussion

Dogsbody (Original Poster)

Holy shit!
I'm at the hospital getting my leg looked at when this landed in the car park!

(Showing Page 1 of 5)

Karaz
What the hell is that?
Also, first!

Wonderer
bullshit! Its fake.

Owlman (The Guy In The Know)
no its real, I'm at the hospital as well.
I've got video of it landing

SkyLancer (Cape Groupie)
Is that one of Dragons?

Redbutterfly
Guys, check this thread, think this dragon is related to the battle in the graveyard?

Zach5353 (Cape Groupie)
Damn. Panacea rules, even mecha-Lung doesn't mess with her.
@Redbutterfly maybe, did anyone see where it came from?

Masked_One
I work near the hospital at Maple Cafe. Saw the whole thing happen. Gotta say, if I didn't get that
cheese bagel and coffee...

L33T (verified cape)
@SkyLancer
Can't be. I would need to see it up close to tell but it doesn't match her style.

Dragon builds to a theme, most of the dragon features are ornamental. Working animatronic features don't fit her style. Plus the- *Edit: Sorry, power got ahead of me*

Redbutterfly
@L33T, your geek is showing

Xcrimson_crossX
OMG ITS DRAGON!!! What's she doing in brockton bay???

End of Page 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

(Showing Page 2 of 5)

PrudishP (Veteran Member)
whoa, this thread is moving fast
I live near the hospital, that dragon is sleeping in the carpark

here, here, and here.

I tried to get closer but the the PRT have closed the carpark off.

wainwright202
@L33T, if it's not one of dragons, who's is it? Can any one tell who it was carrying?
@PrudishP (Veteran Member), the prt have shut the carpark? What's going to happen to the cars?

Owlman
@wainwright202, it dropped a couple of girls off, you can see in the vid it was really worried about one of them. The sound doesn't carry very well but it was actually whining!

wainwright202
Your right. I wonder Panacea said to it?

@PrudishP, A midnight snack?

Galley
Y'know, if it wasn't so pissmyself terrifying, that dragon bot sure looks adorable! I mean, just look at it whine and shuffle about when Panacea takes that girl from it.

RWD (Archivist)
Poor quality video, I'm guessing you filmed this on a phone. The lighting makes it hard to tell but it might be the blonde girls. she is wearing a mask after all.

Rabbm
No. Blonde girl is member of Undersiders, she's a thinker. Boss wants her dead. Never seen the
Wheeljack (inventor)
it's mine.

It's a remote drone with limited independent intelligence. It was scavenging in the graveyard when lung started trashing the place. Normally I would just let the villains fight it out but that girl was jogging nearby and was caught in the crossfire.

Grapejoint
Oh shite! We got a new tinker in town? The gangs gonna be all over him like a fat kid on cake!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

(XxVoid_CowboyxX
Holy shit!
I know her! her name is Taylor, she goes to school with me
Here, you can see her in this video!

Whispering Observer
Whoa you cant post that here!

Nyrus
You sure that's Taylor? definition is too fuzzy, can't make her out. Looks like a guy to me.

Galley
@-Wheeljack, yea right, your more of a tinhat than Void.
*Edit* actually, look closely, there's another bot in the video, its sitting by the dark girl.

Rng
@ XxVoid_CowboyxX, How can you be sure? You have shown a great deal of worrying behaviour in the past.
Are you sure you are not simply projecting what you want to see?

SrgDuck (Verified PRT Agent)
@-Wheeljack, You made that thing Wheeljack? You better head to the PRT quick, or the gangers will be all over you.

RoboLincoln
@XxVoid_CowboyxX is right. Search for "girl in locker" its the same girl.

Galley
It's clearly tinker tech (cause its made of bullshit), but do you think its got an AI or is it being remote controlled?
Can you get a tech master?

EspressoBot
@Wheeljack, Cool, do you take commissions? What are your rates?

**Palshife**
Heh “Locker Girl has upgraded to Tinker Master!”

**SpecificProtagonist**
… actually… someone told me once that triggers happened ‘on the worst day of your life’.

you don’t think… oh god.

**TrueHuntress** (unverified Cape)
Taylor trigger? Like that wimp could ever be a cape.

**SgtWill** (Verified PRT Agent)
I can confirm there was an altercation between Lung and another cape group in the ship graveyard. That's all we know at the moment, please avoid baseless speculation, it can put people's lives at risk.

**Tin_Mother** (Moderator)
Please keep idle speculations to a minimum.

**XxVoid_CowboyxX, RoboLincoln, Palshife,12 enjoy your 20 day suspension.**

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

(Showing Page 4 of 5)

**Stalking_Tanuki**
what did they say? The mods wiped it all before I could see it.

**Diamondegg**
Guys, go here.
the mods don't care what people talk about.

**Slamdance**
@Diamondegg, go where? The website is down.

**Squawkbox**
Hey, guys, I just so happened to have my camera (I was heading out to take pictures of the Boardwalk for a project) and managed to get a few good pictures of the dragon bot. Here, here, and here.

EDIT: Hey, they got removed? Uhoh, I think I hear the PRT Black Ops running up the stairs...

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
With a sigh, Wheeljack slumped forward and held his aching head. The debates had been going on for hours, and showed no sign of stopping. For every video they pulled, every picture destroyed, two more would be uploaded. *Didn't these people ever sleep?*

The PHO admins had been unusually slow to respond. Taylor's name had been linked to the... dragon...thing, whatever it was called, for far too long before the posted had been edited.

Now it was starting to appear on other forums, Thankfully he had been able to take 'Stormfront' offline in a preemptive strike. The last thing Taylor needed was her name appearing on the empire's personal forum. 'Maskless.org' was another site he had taken offline, the site was dedicated to outing capes. Sure, they would find out anyway, but the longer the better.

Rewind had suggested taking PHO offline. It took Wheeljack less than five minutes to realise that it would be impossible with their current equipment. PHO had some serious backers. The servers were stupidly powerful and heavily protected. It would take Wheeljack hours to infect and slave enough machines together to launch a successful DDos attack. Assuming Teletran didn't give out first. It was already running flat out, launching DOS attacks on different forums.

“Any news on Taylor?” Rung asked from his position on the desk.

“Rewind says she's fine, just sleeping. Miss Militia is with her and Danny should be there soon.”

Rung stared at Wheeljack “You realise this is not your fault, right?”

Wheeljack chuckled mirthlessly. “I suggested the graveyard.”

“And it was your idea to call the PRT when things went wrong. We took the decision we could with what we had, she will understand.” He stated calmly.

***************

A couple of hours ago.

“Taylor, Listen to me! I know you are scared, but you need to stay calm and get out of sight. Whatever is going on, you are not the main target. Take a deep breath and remain calm...” Rung told Taylor.

There was a brief moment of static, then nothing. Wheeljack and Rung looked at each other before quickly opening a channel to Rewind. Taylor was alive but her bluetooth had failed, she couldn't hear any of them.

“... Scrap...” Wheeljack muttered while Rung rubbed his hands nervously.

“What should we do?” Rung asked.

“There's not much we can do. It would take too long to reach her, and even if we could, we're no use in a fight.”

“What about Mr. Hebert?”
Wheeljack thought about it. Danny was working late, he was still at the docks. “And what could he do, realistically?”

“I know, but she's his child, he deserves to know. Maybe he knows someone... who... could... help...” Rung trailed off at the look on Wheeljack’s face.

“Miss Militia!” Wheeljack exclaimed suddenly, his voice indicators flashing brightly and making Rung jump.

“What? What about Miss Militia?” Rung asked.

Ignoring the smaller bot, Wheeljack pulled open a drawer on the desk and began rummaging through the junk inside. “Ah-ha!” Finding the business card Wheeljack opened up a connection through Teletraan.

It took several tries before she answered. “I'm sorry but I don't have time to-”

He cut her off before she could hang up. “I work for Taylor!” Not exactly subtle but it got her attention.

“She's at the boat graveyard and Oni Lee is there.”

“She's what? Okay, quickly, tell me everything.”

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**Approximately one hour After Taylor arrived at the hospital.**

Ignoring the looks his scratched and dented armour was getting from the PRT personnel that were scattered around, Armsmaster climbed off his bike and made his way into the car park on foot. It wouldn't do to have the 'Robotic Minion' startled by the noise of his bike's engine.

This whole situation was a mess, Lee had kept the protectorate running in circles, moving quickly from place to place, using those new explosives to keep them scattered and disorganised. Velocity had spent the entire fight floating in a 'null gravity' zone created by one of the explosions. _And wouldn't you love to know how the mad bomber did that._ A little voice in the back of his mind said. The ability to create such effect, along with the walls of ice, showed potential. Shame it was being squandered.

Tiring of the stalemate, Armsmaster had attempted to simply ignore Lee and push through. The result had been the teleporter detonating a remote bomb at the base of a nearby, and thankfully empty building. The message had been clear, the PRT wasn't welcome in the graveyard.

Dragons offer of a high speed rescue had seemed like a blessing at the time. The suit he had been working on with her wasn't combat ready, the only weapons on it were mock-ups, but it would still be fast enough to get in, grab Miss Militia's Tinker and get out.

He would deal with the inevitable complaints from the director about using untested equipment later.

Stopping at the entrance to the car park, he increased the zoom on his visors display in an attempt to get a better view of the 'creature' that had once been Dragon's remote suit.
“Has it done anything since it arrived?” He asked the nearest PRT officer.

“No, sir. It spent some time sniffing a nearby car, a Volkswagen I think, but that's it. It seems content to just... sleep.” He said.

Curling up in the centre of the car park with its tail wrapped around it, Armsmaster had to agree. It certainly looked like it was sleeping. Though if the occasion twitch was anything to go by, the creature was fully aware of them.

“Has anyone tried to approach it?” Armsmaster asked.

“No, sir.”

“Good, keep it that way. Miss Militia, do you have a status on the Tinker?”

*She's stable but sleeping, Panacea thinks she should be awake by morning.* Miss Militia answered though his suits built in radio.

Next to him, a younger officer tried, none-too subtly, to position himself to get a better picture of the NBE with his phone. Clearing his throat Armsmaster sent the officer a dirty look. It was bad enough locals kept trying to get a closer look, PRT officers should know better.

*Armsmaster can you hear me?* Dragons voice crackled through his radio. He almost smiled.

“Dragon, good to hear from you, you're signal cut out suddenly.”

*Sorry, the suits destruction shorted out some of my equipment. I'm fine by the way.*

He flinched at her tone. “Yes-Well... ahem.” Maybe that should have been the first thing he asked.

“Do you have any control over it?”

*No. I still have some limited access, but I can't control it.*

“Limited access?”

*I was able to download the flight recorder and even now it's still sending regular sensor data updates, but I can't make much sense of it.” The first thing she had done when she came back online was to download the data from the suit, the large amount of data had bogged even her systems down, had she been human she would have described the sensation as a mix of nausea, dizziness and a headache all at the same time. As it was, she simply lost some time. Some of the data looked like the remains of a self executable program. *It will take time to organise everything. Can you give me access to your suits camera? I want to see it.*

He wasn't surprised by her request, he had been sharing live video data with her ever since they started work on the prototype. If some random Tinker had done this to his bike he would... well, he would want to see the damage for himself.

PRT protocol, intended to prevent someone making a bad situation worse, meant he couldn't just walk up to the Minion and dismantle it without permission of it's creator or it being a clear and present danger. If the thing was going to simply sleep then fine, sleeping dragons and so forth.
That was my suit?*

He smiled at the disbelief in Dragons voice. It was rare someone managed to surprise her.

*I've got another suit flying out now, I want examine this myself when I arrive. If possible, I want to talk to the Tinker responsible. Do we have any information on her or how she did this?*

“She's stable. Miss Militia spoke to her about joining the Wards almost a month ago, but the girl was reluctant to join due to issues that Militia refuses to explain. She's already contacted the girls family.”

Miss Militia had been very tight lipped about the situation. Reports had come in about a possible fight between para-humans at the graveyard, there was nothing of value out there and the risk to bystanders was minimal. He had been willing to let them fight it out. Just set up a perimeter to keep civilians out of the crossfire and keep an eye on things, then arrest the villains when the fighting was done. It didn’t have the same impact as charging in and subduing them directly, but it kept non-villain casualties down and had the potential for greater gains for less energy.

Then Miss Militia had received an 'anonymous' phone call. Lung was at the graveyard, as was a young Tinker she had been trying to recruit. He made a note to talk to her about that, even if he didn't control the Wards, he was still the in charge of the Protectorate team and she should have told him about a possible new Tinker.

They didn't have enough time to go into specifics, but Militia had been adamant that they couldn't risk Lung capturing Tinker. She had all but threatened to go in alone if she had too. Looking at what the girl had done in minutes with a dragon suit, he was inclined to agree.

*Oh no.* Dragons exclamation caught him by surprise. *We may have a problem, Miss Militia, I'm sending you a name, is it the Tinker's?*

*How did you get that?* Miss Militia asked.
*She just got outed on PHO. A couple of clear pictures and a classmate gave her away. The site admins, and even some of the users, are trying to quash the rumour but they're only delaying the inevitable at this point.*

“Damn it!” He switched to an open line. “Miss Militia, I want you to stay in the room with the Tinker and I want guards outside her door at all times. No one goes in or out without you or me knowing. What's the status on the other girl?”

There was a pause as an officer in the hospital spoke to someone. *Out cold sir, Panacea healed the worst of her injuries but she can't really do anything about the concussion.*

“Good, I want two people outside and a female officer inside her room at all times.” Something moved in the distance and his visor was able to isolate a flash, most likely from a camera. “Militia, If you see anyone with a camera, you have my permission to shoot them.”

In Taylor's room, Miss Militia chuckled at the rare display of humour from the usually stoic team leader. It was going to be a long night and she still needed to deal with Danny.

**************************************************************************

Pulling her cloak tighter around herself, Shadow Stalker settled in for a long wait.
For the first week or so after she had ran, the PRT had been watching for any sign of her. Like she would really go out and attract attention right away. She had managed to raid a couple of her hidden caches before the PRT got to them. She had then watched from a safe distance when they reached the last cache.

That had surprised her, she had expected Emma to give her up quicker than that.

As it was, she had cash, enough to survive for now, if she was careful. Her crossbows and some bolts with ‘bullet point’ heads; normally they were used for target practice but they were cheaper and easier to get than the hunting type she preferred. She also had some clothes, including a spare costume, a couple of burner phones and a police scanner.

She stayed quiet for the first week, a change of clothes and a haircut had been enough to get into a nearby hostel. She ended up driving off some empire thugs that tried to trash the place, which got her reduced rates and people willing to swear blind they had 'never seen her' before when the cops turned up looking for a 'runaway'.

She snorted at the thought. Was that the BS the PRT was going to feed people?

The rest of her time was spent either out on the streets or on the net.

There were places, if you knew where to look, that offered money to heroes who were willing to do what was needed. She wasn't stupid, she had never actually meant to kill anyone yet and if she started now she would quickly get eaten by a bigger fish. But cripple Empire thugs for cash? That she could do.

And she knew just where to start. The same thugs had been by the hostel three times since she moved in; a small rat faced man, a man with scars on his face and a butch, blonde woman. Probably some of Hookwolf's pit fighters.

Tracking them through the city had been... liberating. Stalking them from the shadows, knowing that one errant noise, one unexpected turn would expose her. It appealed to her on a deep, primal level. With every leap, her blood was singing.

She had tracked down two of them before blondie had got herself killed. She had been on the wrong side of a Merchantgun.

Rat-face had been easy enough to find, the trouble was getting him alone. He slept in a building owned by the empire and most of the time tended to stay in sight of others. She had been just about ready to give up and try finding a way into his safe house when he made a mistake.

He cut through a dark alley, a break from routine from what she could tell. He couldn't been seen from the street. there was a flight of stairs half way and a well placed shot had put a bolt through his knee just as he reached the top.

He never even got a chance to scream before his leg gave out and he fell, his head making a crunching sound on the stone steps.

Jumping down from her vantage point, she carefully crept up on him. He wouldn't be the first to try playing possum. She nearly cursed at the sight of the blood, the idiot had managed to crack his skull open.
She quickly checked his head, the PRT had forced all the Wards to learn some first aid. He wasn't dead but he would need an ambulance soon, with a grunt of effort she pulled the bolt out of his leg, the 'bullet tip' was designed to come out easily, unlike hunting arrow tips and quickly went through his pickets. She had to pay for everything somehow.

Finding a phone in rat-face's pocket she she called for an ambulance before dropping the phone on his chest. A couple of quick pictures, proof needed to claim the money, and she was done. She was back on the rooftops and almost a block away before the ambulance arrived.

The police scanner had let her listen in, Rat-face had survived but was still in a coma. She needed to be more careful, no one would miss him, but if too many gangsters turned up in that state, the PRT would notice.

It had been nearly a week since then and almost a month since the ungrateful bastards at the PRT turned on her. Scar-face was in the building across the street, his favourite whore-house if she had to guess.

The click of an opening door drew her from her thoughts. Scar would not be as easy as rat. He was actually aware of his surroundings and moved like a fighter, beneath her old hockey mask, she smiled.

She jumped and her blood sang.

****

Barely two days later, at the hostel, Sophia received a message from one of the admins of 'Justice For All' Message Boards

PM LordChiefJustice >> TrueHuntress

Thank for your contribution so far, however I have a personal request to make.

There has been some discussion on PHO about a new possible tinker, currently at a hospital near your location (Brockton Bay).

I am offering a cash bounty (Class D) for any pictures or information you can provide.

This is the thread in question.

Regards,
LordChiefJustice

Curios Sophia followed the link, 'Class D' was small change but for a couple of pictures it was easy money.

The thread was new, started only an hour or so ago, as for what people were saying... What?

No, there was no way that little bitch triggered. A mechanical dragon? She had to see for herself.

Climbing to her feet and pulling her costume on, she ignored the twinges from her bruised ribs, a present from Scar-face. Once dressed, Shadow Stalker was out of the room and crossing the roof
tops at full speed. That lanky bitch Taylor was weak, too weak to fight back, too weak to trigger!

It didn’t take long to reach the hospital, but getting near the ‘dragon’ was another matter entirely. The PRT was swarming all over the place and she could see Armsmasters motorbike parked nearby. There was no way she was getting inside.

Pity, she knew where the capes got sent, she would have like to see for herself if wimp had triggered or not.

Circling around the hospital, she was however able to get pictures of the dragon and some of the PRT on guard. She was debating trying to get closer to when something happened.

It was subtle, but there was a shift in the PRT guy’s focus, some moved into the hospital while the ones left on guard were much more alert.

Shadow Stalker froze, had seen been spotted? Looking round, she couldn’t see anyone and none of them were heading this way. Still, it was best if she didn’t stick around. The trip hadn’t been a complete loss, If nothing else she would get paid.
I had been awake for five minutes now, which was a surprise if I’m honest. I didn’t expect to ever wake up again.

The first thing I did on waking was try to workout where I was. Squinting, I tried to make out the room around me. It was bright, the walls painted pale colours and there were no signs on the posters I had put up over the summer. Sunlight was streaming in through the window.

The familiarity sank in. I was in the hospital. Again. With a sigh, I slumped back onto the bed.

For awhile, I was happy to just let my mind wander. If I was in the hospital then I had survived and I was safe. One thing I kept coming back to was the dream. My dreams had been strange ever since I triggered, so that was nothing new. But I had been dreaming about something, something important. I tried to remember what it was, commit what I could to memory, but the details were already starting to blur.

It was something I could... I needed, to build. Circular. Energy storage. Creation...Broken, not dead...

Something pulled on the sheet, distracting me from my thoughts and a small, blurry, shape climbed up my bed and into view. From the colours it could only be Rewind.

Realising I was awake, the little bot ran forward and grabbed my hand. He had a surprisingly strong grip for something so small

*Taylor! Thank god, I was so worried. You nearly gave me pump failure! Panacea said you would be okay but you didn't wake up and there were all these people hanging around and Danny looked so scared and, and-* He buried his face in my hand, his little body trembling.

Sitting up in bed, I picked up Rewind. I wasn't sure what to say, so I settled for wrapping one hand around him in a 'hug'.

He was just calming down when there was a knock on the door. “Taylor? You awake kiddo?”

“Yea Dad, I'm awake.” When he came in, Miss Militia was close behind. She stopped by the door while he rushed forward and pulled me into a tight hug.

“Don't you ever do that to me again! do you hear me?” My arms were pinned but I was able to awkwardly reach around and pat him on the back. Rewind squirmed as he was crushed between us.

He pulled away slightly, even without my glasses I was close enough to see the pain on his face and his eyes were red, had he been crying? “What on earth were you thinking?! Taking on Lung of all people! You could have... you nearly...” He pulled me back into another hug.

I tried to swallow down the guilt, with everything that happened last night, I never even considered Dad. “D... Dad...” I croaked out. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, I swear, I was just looking for scrap when they attacked me.”

Dad tightened only his grip.
Miss Militia's hand on Dad's shoulder gently pulled him away and into a chair next to my bed, he pulled a small case out of his pocket, the glasses I left at home.

Putting them on, I got my first look real look at the room. I was in a private room, the blinds on the window were heavy and the windows were actually tinted. Next to my bed was a heart monitor, turned off and thankfully not attached to me like it was the last time I woke up in hospital. My power supplied a couple of things I could do with it, a med-bot would be really useful.

“Taylor, we think we have a good idea of what happened last night, but can you tell me why you were there and what saw?” Miss Militia asked, her voice gentle.

Last night? I half expected it to be longer. “I... I went to the graveyard for scrap. We, I, couldn't afford to keep buying stuff from junk yards or second hand dealers but I still had so many ideas.”

Miss Militia nodded. “It's a common problem for Tinkers, go on.”

“Right, well, you told me the gangs watch junk yards so Wheeljack and I made a mask and...” I looked away from her. “We modified the stun-gun you gave me into something abit more powerful. It was just for self-defence!” I added quickly.

“It was when I was leaving, I ran into Oni Lee. He used a bomb to seal of the exit with ice.” And now the fight was over, I wanted to know just how he did that. Some kind of thermal exchange? Rapidily pull all the heat from an area causing it to freeze? What happened to the heat afterwards?

I looked Dad in the eye. “I tried to run, to get out of the graveyard but he wouldn't let me leave. In end, I had to go further in, right to where the fighting was. Lung was there, fighting a bunch of kids, he... he...” I tried to force the memory down, the girl's burning body hitting the floor.

Dad reached out and took my hand. “It's alright Kiddo”

I took a deep breath and reached for that same cold anger I had felt the night before. “No, it's not. He was killing people. She was my age and he just killed her like it was nothing. I tried to stop him, but my stun-gun barely slowed him down. When he went after me, I hid. That's when I called Miss Militia.” That was stupid, I should have called her first!

“It's alright, no one reacts well to their first fight,” Miss Militia said, shooting a meaningful glance at Dad who looked pointedly away and coughed. Her eyes narrowed in what I assumed was a smile under her mask. “It's written all over your face.”

Her good mood helped me to relax. “When dragon arrived, I tried to help-The girl! There was a blonde girl, she was badly hurt. Do you know what happened to her?” I tried to get up but Miss Militia reached out to stop me.

“It's alright, she arrived at the hospital with you, she's in a different room but she's going to be fine.”

I sighed and relaxed back into the bed. “She said her name was Tattletale.”

“We know. She’s a member of the Undersiders, a minor gang that's avoided drawing attention to themselves until now. What happened after Dragon arrived?” Miss Militia asked gently.

I frowned as I tried to remember. “When I woke up, Lung was asking Tattletale something. I think
he was torturing her. That's when I used my power on Dragons suit. I don't remember anything after 
that.”

She nodded. “That more or less matches with what we were told. Hellhound's body was recovered 
this morning by a PRT team that was able to breach the ice walls. They also recovered the remains of 
a tinker weapon, I assume its yours?”

“Yea... Dragon's suit, what happened to it?” I asked. Dragon was considered one of the best Tinkers 
in the world and until last night I had no idea if my power would even work on tinker-tech, never 
mind what the results would be.

Miss Militia pinched the bridge of her nose. “It's... sleeping in the hospital car park. Dragon would 
like to talk to you about that, by the way.”

“It's sleeping in the...?” Just what the hell did I create?

The shock must have shown on my face as, with a sigh, Miss Militia sat down on the end of my bed. 
“Taylor, what your power created last is best described as a mechanical dragon. As near as we can 
tell, it dealt with Lung then brought you and Tattletale here. It landed right outside the emergency 
room. The fact it hasn't moved since is the only reason the director hasn't ordered its destruction.”

I didn't trust myself to talk. It carried me here? That would make it big, far too big to hide. “H... How 
many people?” My voice was trembling.

“I'm sorry Taylor, by the time we reached the hospital, nearly a dozen people had taken pictures of 
it's arrival. Most of them have been posted online already.”

I grabbed Rewind, who transformed on reflex. Desperately, I tried to bring up his net connection but 
he stubbornly refused to let me. Giving up, I turned back to Miss Militia, anger overtaking my fear. 
“How bad?”

“It took less than an hour for someone to recognise you. I'm sorry Taylor but at this point, its best to 
assume your identity has been compromised.

It felt like I had just swallowed a lump of lead. If people knew who I was... “Lung. Lung saw my 
face in the graveyard, he knew I was a tinker. If anyone tells him my name...”

Defence. I needed something to protect Dad and the house. Maybe if I built some auto-turrets I could 
slave them to Teletraan. It would need an upgrade and a better IFF software, but that wouldn't take 
long. The power requirements though might be more difficult.

“A PRT team is already watching your house and your creations are in Danny's car.” Miss Militia's 
voice interrupted my thoughts. “As it is, I don't think you are in any danger yet. The gangs know we 
would be watching you. They will wait till they think it's safe before doing anything.”

“It's something the director will want to talk to you both about. Along with joining the wards.” She 
sighed at the look on my face. “Taylor, I know when we spoke last you were unsure, but you have 
to realise last night will have consequences. I don't know how you got away from Lung, but there is 
enough blood on your robot that I can guess. While I doubt Lung would come after you himself, 
there is nothing stopping him from sending people after you.”

*And if Lung doesn't come after us, the Empire will,* Wheeljack's voice came from Rewinds
speaker. “Hey Taylor. Good morning Miss Militia, Rewind thought it was best we all have a say in this.”

“Good morning, Wheeljack” Miss Militia said pleasantly. It all felt a bit surreal.

Wheeljacks voice sounded different, there was an odd rustling in the background that I couldn't place. “Jack, where are you?”

Dad cleared his throat. “The pair of them are under a tarp in the back of my truck. When I picked up a change of clothes for you, they refused to stay at home.”

*We wanted to make sure you were alright. Besides, Miss Militia agreed that we should stay nearby for now.*

“Yes, your house is safe for now but I think it's best you all stay were we can watch out for you.”

“Oh.” That made sense I guess. Something Wheeljack and Miss Militia said clicked in my mind.

“Wait, you two know each other? And what was that about the empire?”

Wheeljack sighed. “I called her when we lost contact with you last night, I didn't know what else to do. Rewind is too small to help and I was too far away and-”

“It's alright Jack,” I cut him off. Jack was great, but get him nervous and he would ramble on forever. “You did the right thing.”

I sighed and laid back in bed. My first night out had been a disaster, especially considering it wasn't supposed to be my first night. Still, I beat Lung, that was something to be proud of, right? Fire engulfed her as her burning corpse hit the floor, Tattletale screaming.

No, I forced the image down. No, I didn't beat Lung, I survived him. And now because of it Dad and my bots were in danger. I had to make a decision.

“Do I have time to think about it?” I asked. Coward. Miss Militia nodded. “That's fine. Just remember, when you are ready to leave, the director would like to meet you.”

“Would it be alright for me to go see the dragon?” I really wanted to see what my power had created.

It was nearly twenty minutes before I was allowed out side. A nurse brought me breakfast and told me in no uncertain terms that I would 'not be allowed to leave until I had eaten all of it'.

I barely remember eating it, the moment the food was in front of me I practically inhaled it. I hadn't realised just how hungry I was. Apparently, being healed by Panacea tended to make you hungry, preservation of mass or something. Dad had brought me a change of clothes and waited outside with Miss Militia as I got changed.

There was a hair brush in the bag but I quickly gave up. My hair was a tangled, filthy mess after everything that happened last night and I may have lost an inch to Lungs fire, it would take forever to wash, dry and comb it at this point.

As I changed, Wheeljack filled me in what happened after I blacked out. “Wait, go back. You hacked Panacea's phone?” Great, something else to feel guilty about.
*I didn't have a choice!* Wheeljack protested. *She wouldn't answer. I tried to make up for it though, there was a hidden app broadcasting her location to someone in the city. I removed it, I also upgraded her phones security.*

“You sure it wasn't just New Wave keeping an eye on her?” As one of the few healing capes, she was important enough to warrant watching.

*No, they did have a tracker on her phone but it only sends periodic updates, so I left it alone*

“Okay, I'll let Miss Militia know later. You never did explain about the Empire by the way”

*Oh right, when you were outed I knocked their forum offline. it's back up now and they are discussing a possible new tinker they want to 'recruit'.*

I shuddered at that. I'd move to Simurgh zone before I ever agreed to work for them. Probably. If I had a choice.

Pulling on the hoody dad had brought me, I picked up Rewind and went to leave the room when a thought occurred to me. “I don't supposed you were able to find out who outed me?”

There was a suspiciously long pause before Wheeljack answered me. *No... sorry, it slipped my mind.* I could almost see the guilty expression on his face.

“Wheeljack... tell me.”

*Rung said it's better if I don't...*

“Rung doesn't know how to use an arc welder, I do. Now tell me.”

Jack chuckled. “You wouldn't dare, you need my help too much.”

Yes, it was childish but bickering with Jack helped distract me from last night. And I really wanted to know who outed me!
By the time I had finished getting changed into a pair of jeans and an old hoodie, Miss Militia had been able to find me a spare 'mask'. It was a simple black scarf. I gave her a puzzled look when she handed it to me.

“Right now, people are just guessing to your identity. Let's not give them any more evidence, hmm?”

I shrugged, quickly wrapped it round my lower face and pulled my hood up. It was better than nothing, I supposed.

We left the hospital through a smaller back door, probably a staff entrance, that led directly to the parking lot where my latest bot had made itself comfortable. Dad had taken care of the paperwork while I was getting changed and then gone to get his truck.

He was going to bring it round so I could have Jack and Rung with me. I could see in his face he didn't want to leave me, but Miss Militia had insisted.

The parking lot was a small 'short stay' affair, for people who were just visiting or only planned to stay a couple of hours. Big, armoured, PRT vans blocked the entrances and men were scattered about. Most were wearing backpacks that were connected to large spray gun like devices.

Containment foam sprayers, I realised. They were the PRT's standard, non-lethal weapon. A pressurised liquid that rapidly expanded into a foam like substance that stuck to everything and prevented all movement.

After his fifth failed experiment, I had been forced to ban Jack from trying to make his own version.

In the middle of it all, apparently oblivious to the world, was my latest creation.

It was big, large enough to ride even, with smooth, sweeping armour. Spinelike ridges went from it's head, down its long neck and on to the tip of the tail. They were swept back, giving it a streamlined look. Most of it's armour was a mix of shiny or dull greys and I wondered if I could get it painted, maybe black with a bit of orange for highlights.

I was told it flew me here, but I couldn't see any wings, they must have folded into the body.

I tried to approach it but Miss Militia put a hand on my shoulder.

“Are you sure it wont hurt you?” she asked.

Before I could answer, Rewind began beeping at me from my pocket. At his insistence, I put him on the ground and he quickly transformed and walked up to the dragon-bot.

As soon as he got close, the dragon lifted its head to look at him. For a moment, no one moved, then it gently nuzzled the smaller bot before letting him climb up, where he sat on top of its head.

I felt a wave of happiness wash over me from the bot as it looked over at me. With slow, almost ponderous, movements the dragon tried to stand. The PRT men, nervously gripped their weapons tighter. Two of them even pointed their weapons at her.
“NO!” I shouted. “It's alright, she just wants to see me. She's just excited.”

No one made to lower their weapons but they didn't try to stop her either. With slow, plodding movements she got close enough to push her head against me. I could feel her excitement bleeding across. She didn't really understand what had been wrong with me, just that I was hurt and now I was better.

Bringing her head up to my level I stroked the middle of her face, like you would a horse. I kept my other hand on the side of her face, careful of the sharp mandibles, and let my power work.

“Wow!” I breathed as a soft whisper. Her systems were incredible and her green spark almost filled my vision. I couldn't stop myself laughing at the wave of contentment coming from her.

Miss Militia had taken a step back when my dragon had approached but she was starting to relax again. She stepped forward and carefully put a hand on the side of its neck.

“It's warm?” She said in surprise.

“Of course she is, she's been laying out in the sun all morning.” I laughed. The sight of my new bot was making me giddy. I knew, intellectually, what I was capable of building. But this really showed what I could do with the time and materials. She turned her head to sniff Miss Militia and I felt another wave of contentment. “She likes you.”

“You can tell what she's feeling? Wait, she?” Miss Militia asked, an eyebrow raised in surprise.

I shrugged. “Sort of? It's hard to explain. It's like a low level empathy, it only works when I'm close.” Me and Rung had spent hours testing it one morning. “She feels like a she to me, isn't that right girl?” I asked the bot which let out an odd rumble from deep in her throat.

“Oh my god, she purrs!” I very nearly squealed. Thankfully, before I could embarrass myself any further Dad arrived. I guess he had to park further away with the PRT keeping everyone out.

At a gesture from Miss Militia, one of the PRT vans was moved so he could get his truck closer. I quickly waved at him so he would know I was alright.

Almost as soon as Dad's truck stopped, Wheeljack came flying out from under the tarp in vehicle mode. He hit the ground with a squeal of tires, or possibly Rung who was clinging to his roof, and floored it towards me. Several of the PRT men jumped and a couple even tried to catch him. Jack just swerved around them before skidding to a stop in front of me.

“Feel better?” I asked dryly as he transformed. A trembling Rung slumped to the ground.

“Sorry, I couldn't resist,” He chuckled. “Miss Militia, nice to meet you.” He held a hand up for her to shake and I could see her smiling under her mask. It was surprising just how expressive the upper half of her face was.

“Yes, it's nice to put a face to a voice,” she said pleasantly. Dad still wasn't used to dealing with my bots, he had to remind himself that they were not simply drones. Miss Militia, however, had taken everything in stride so far.

“So you're Wheeljack?” A voice, female and deeply amused, asked. And would my heart kindly get
out of my mouth, thank you very much!

The voice, came from a woman in power armour who had approached from the other side of my
dragon. I had been so focused on my bots I had completely missed her arriving.

The armour was smaller and more human than her others but the 'dragon' motif left no doubts to her
identity.

“D-Dragon?!” I squeaked. Oh my god. I don't think the scarf would be enough to hide my blush.

Behind me, Miss Militia made her way over to my Dad's truck.

Dragon was considered one of the best Tinkers in the world. She invented containment foam. She
practically built the birdcage, a parahuman prison that held the worst of the worst and was a founding
member of the Guild, a hero team that specialised in S-class threats.

And I had stolen one of her suits! And turned it into a dragon!

Besides me, Wheeljack happily exchanged greetings with the hero. When she offered me her hand, I
shook it mechanically while my mouth worked soundlessly behind my 'mask'. My power supplied
me with a brief glimpse of her armours systems and the familiar feeling of- Oh god. I pushed the
thought down.

Aside from her actions as a hero, Dragon was also known for almost never leaving her base of
operations. Popular rumours claimed she was either agoraphobic or crippled in some way.

She chuckled. “Relax, you're not in any trouble. Though I would like to know how you achieved
this.” she gestured towards the bot that was now sniffing her armour.

Dad walked over, Miss Militia had given him a branded hoody, her logo was on it, and a PRT cap
that he was using to cover his head.

Shaking myself, I tried to focus. “Oh! Um, I don't really remember. I mean, I know how
I did it, but it's all a bit fuzzy and-” Wheeljack elbowed my knee and I took a deep breath. God, this was like
meeting Miss Militia again. “Sorry,” I said and Dragon chuckled warmly again.

Clearing my throat I looked around for something else to talk about. Thankfully, Dragon beat me to
it.

“What can you tell me about... her, did you say?”

I put my hand on the bot and closed my eyes. “She's... complex. Her spark is different, I think it
makes her stronger than the others. There's a lot of redundant tech that I need to look at later. But I
can tell that she's flight capable and has a secondary flight mode.” I continued to list what I was
seeing until I noticed something odd. “Huh...that's not right. Something is missing, some key systems
are offline. Her T-cog is locked and her processor isn't running at full power.”

“T-cog?” Dragon asked, her curiosity evident in her voice.

“It's what lets us transform,” Wheeljack said as he started to walk around the dragon-bot. On it's
head, Rewind transformed into a phone and back again in demonstration.
Behind me, Dad muttered something to Miss Militia, who laughed quietly.

“Her's isn't working right.” I sent some power into her body, hoping to fix the problem. Her yellow eyes brightened a bit but my power didn't even come close to affecting the cog.

Wheeljack stroked his chin thoughtfully. “What about her power levels? We can't transform if it gets too low.”

Nodding, I focused on her fuel tanks.

All my bots were currently running on fuel cells that had been created by my power. They were all created with a full charge that I could top up with my power. It wasn't as tiring as creating a spark, but I could still feel the drain. The only exception was Rewind. The bot was so small, and often in my hand, so I barely noticed the charge.

The cells weren't very efficient. I had some ideas for a clean and efficient fuel that would work better, but I had no clue where to start and I had been too focused on other things. Like how best to out myself.

I felt my stomach drop. She was low, really low. The fight with Lung had really taken it out of her. No wonder she was moving so slow. She was barely able to stand up.


“Her fuel cells are nearly empty. if I cant bring the level up soon, she'll go offline. Permanently.”

“Is there anything you can do?”

“No, she's too big. If I try to charge her with my power...” It made my chest hurt just thinking about it, Panacea healing or no.

*What if we put her into stasis-lock?* Rung beeped.

“That's a stopgap at best,” Was Wheeljacks reply.

“Stasis-lock?” Dragon asked me for clarification.

“It's something all my bots can do. If they get too low on power or badly hurt they enter stasis-lock. It's like a coma, it shuts down everything and diverts power to their spark and brain module.” While Rewind was still fussy about it, Wheeljack had no problems letting me study his systems.

“And if they do lose power?” she asked, running a hand down the dragon-bot's neck.

I shook my head. If the brain module lost power or the spark went dark.... they were dead. Sure, I could rebuild the body, create a new spark. But they wouldn't be the same person.

“They are truly alive to you. Aren't they?” Dragon asked, she sounded surprised.

“They're as alive as you and me,” I snapped. Other people couldn't see my bots like I could, they couldn’t see the spark pulsing and know what it meant.

“Okay, lets see what we can do. What are her requirements?”
I gently coaxed the bot to lay down as Dragon, Wheeljack and I bounced ideas back and forth. I had a chemical formula for a better fuel in my head but it was incomplete and I wasn't sure how to create the bits I did know. Even if I did, it would take days, if not longer, to create and refine it.

“You said she has a fuel cell; Can she run off an electrical source?” Dragon suggested.

Next to me, Jack nodded. “Possibly, but we would need to modify the output connectors—”

The ideas started to come thick and fast and a notepad was shoved in front of me by Miss Militia; I had almost forgotten she was there. I would have to rig some custom connectors and link them directly to the bot's systems, probably near the spark, to feed power directly into it. Like connecting a person to an IV.

“Erm...question? Where exactly are we going to get a generator?” Wheeljack asked.

My eyes fell onto the surrounding cars “Insurance covers acts of para-humans right?”

Catching on to my idea, Dragon nodded. “Yes, most do. But what you are thinking of would be theft or vandalism.” Details, Details.

Off to the side, there was some sniggering and someone coughed. Right, tearing apart some random person's car in front of an entire PRT squad probably wasn't a good idea.

“I could have a flatbed tow truck brought from the PRT motor pool. We could also bring one of the generators we use to power signs and spotlights. Will that do?” Miss Militia said.

“Umm, yes, I think so.”

It only took five minutes for the truck to arrive. Battery was in the cab with the driver, but between meeting Miss Militia and now Dragon, I was able to greet her without making a fool of myself.

While Dragon and I started work on the truck’s generator, Battery helped lift the dragon-bot onto the back of the truck. She would be coming with us to the PRT later. The driver's expression was comical, he must have been new.

As we worked, Dragon asked me a couple of different questions. Some were about my new bot, but mostly it was small talk.

I should have paid more attention, before I knew it, I had quietly told her everything I knew about my power. Oddly, it wasn't my power to create sparks that seemed to interest her.

“You can 'see' how something is built?” she asked. “Does that include tinker-tech?” Thinking about the glimpse I had got of her armour, I nodded.

“I see.”

Not really paying her any attention, I carefully coaxed the dragon-bot, who was now lying on the back of the truck, to roll slightly to the side. Her spark was in her chest, between her front legs, where the armour was thickest.

Using my power, I found where the release catch was and pressed it. The chest plates retracted,
exposing her spark to the world. Even now, weak from lack of energy, it was practically blazing. The heat from it was incredible but I was able to put my hands close without worry. I'm fairly sure I could hold it in my hand without getting hurt.

“What... What *is* that?”

I smiled at Dragon's awed whisper. “It's her spark.” One of the main power lines ran close to it. Taking the oddly shaped connector I had built with dragon's help, I clamped it into place. There was some sparking and the bot twitched. For a minute, I was worried about losing a finger. Once everything had settled, I placed the second connector deeper down.

The bot rumbled a bit before lying its head down on the truck bed, eyes slowly closing. I used my power to keep an eye on everything. It appeared to be working. The fuel cells were slowly charging and the bot's recharge subroutines had come online.

Simply put, she was asleep.

With a sigh, I helped strap the bot down. I couldn't risk her falling off when the truck was moving and she wouldn't be waking up anytime soon.

Just as I climbed off the truck, Dad handed me a can of drink. It had a straw in it, so I wouldn't have to move my scarf much. He nodded towards Miss Militia with a little wink. “Hannah said the director is getting impatient. she was expecting us an hour ago.”

Miss Militia was talking to Dragon, pointedly giving us space, She and Dad had probably rehearsed this while I was asleep.

“Expecting me to join the Wards you mean.” I grumbled, my mood plummeting.

“Hey now, don't be like that,” He told me. “No one is going force you. I'll be with you no matter what you decide.”

“And when the Empire Eighty-Eight comes knocking on our door? Tinkers don't last solo Dad, even I know that.” I huffed and played with my straw. The padding of metal feet made me turn. Wheeljack and Rung were walking over the truck bed to me.

“Would the Wards really be so bad?” Dragon asked as she walked over. “Sorry, omni-directional microphones, they pick up everything. I know the wards, they are good people.”

“Except for Shadow Stalker,” I snapped back. “Anyway, that's not the point. I create life. If I joined the Wards, they would either ban me from making more or take them apart for safety checks. I did this,” I pointed at the dragon-bot. “In one night. How long till someone compares me to Nilbog?”

“Taylor...”

“No, if you think the PRT is so great why didn't you join!?” I knew why she hadn't. I also knew I was being unfair, and more than a bit childish, but I was too angry to care. I had only gone out for some parts and now my identity was public knowledge. Dad and my bots were at risk and all the PRT cared about was getting me to sign up!

Hesitantly, and probably at gestures from Rung, Dad put his arms round my shoulders.
Dragon said nothing for a long moment, she just stared at me before tilting her head. “Could I have a word with you? In private?”

Nodding, I followed behind Dragon as she made her way back towards the hospital. Wheeljack and Rung scrambled to keep up with us in vehicle mode. There was a small area of greenery near the hospital, one of the mayors feeble attempts to improve the city according to Dad.

Once there, something in Dragons armour clicked. “There is no one nearby and any listening devices have been disabled.”

“I won't tell any body,” I told her quietly. I knew I had been pushing my luck but it was too late now. Dad wasn't the only one with a temper.

“I assume you figured it out when we shook hands?”

I nodded. “Sort of. When I touch my bots, my power tells me they are alive. It was the same when we shook hands.” It was difficult to explain. The moment I touched my bot’s, no matter what form they were in, I knew they were alive. I got the same sensation when I touched Dragon's armour. I probably would have noticed last night but I had been busy. “You don't need to worry, I won't tell anyone.”

“Taylor.” She put her hands on my shoulders, making me flinch. “Relax, I'm not going to hurt you. I couldn't even if I wanted to, You haven't done anything wrong. I've always known someone would figure it out, and you’re not even the first.” She muttered something that I didn't quite catch. “Now can you tell me the truth, what is really bothering you?”

When I hesitated, she decided to go first. “The first person to ever realise who I am, what I am, has dedicated his life to chasing me. To the world, the 'Dragon Slayers' are simply a group of thieves, attacking Tinkers and stealing what they can. I've fought them in the past, I always lose and I can't remember why. That scares me. What scares you?”

I stared in shock, I never expected Dragon would be willing to share something so personal with me. A cynical part of me knew she was trying to manipulate me, sharing in the hope I will reciprocate, and it was working damn it.

I told her about Emma, about everything she had done to me. Talking about it had gotten easier after I told Dad and then spent a month talking about it with Rung.

“I know Dad means well,” I said carefully. “That he wants me to join the Wards and be safe. But joining the wards would be more teen drama and I just don't want to deal with that again.”

Wheeljack reached up and took one of my hands. “It's okay Taylor,” he said softly. “I know you're scared but I want you to listen to me. I can't see the future any better than you can. you think it will be like before, that you got to deal with it alone and that you need to protect your dad and us. But you don't,” he paused for a second to let that sink in. “You've got friends now,” Wheeljack continued. “We'll be watching your back and you ours. No matter what happens.”

Putting a hand on my shoulder, Dragon moved her head so I was looking her in the 'face'. “If you spend the rest of your life refusing to deal with people just because of that girl and her friends, then in the end they win.”

The anger from last night bubbled up again and I held on to it. I needed to stop letting people guilt
me into things, even if they were right. “Alright, let's go.”

“Actually, I was hoping I could talk to you and your father before we left,” Dragon said as we turned to leave.
Director Piggot was a heavyset woman with short blonde hair and a rather stern expression. Though the last bit might have been because we were nearly three hours late.

After talking with Dragon, it had taken a while to reach the PRT headquarters downtown. I had rode in Dad's truck, safe from the stares and cameras of people who were stopping to look at my new bot.

The truck with my new bot on it had ended up being parked in the PRT's garage with Wheeljack and Rung keeping an eye on her.

I pulled my scarf on and followed Miss Militia through the building.

Between me, Dad, Miss Militia and Dragon the lift was a little cramped. With everyone pressed around me, I felt my stomach clench. The doors closed and for a moment I was back in the locker, the walls pressing in, things skittering across my body.

I still had nightmares about it.

Rewind's beeping and Dad's hand on my shoulder helped distract me from the memories.

REW:[You ok? Your shaking.] flashed as a text message on his screen.

Taylor:[Im fine. Thanks.]

WJ:[Don't worry, we got your back]

RNG:[Deep breath, keep calm. Don't let them scare you.]

REW:[Remember. If anything goes wrong, you got a dragon in the basement :)]

RNG:[Really now, I don't think violence will solve anything.]

REW:[And if that doesn't work, Jack and I will come up with something.-]

RNG:[Rewind, please!]

I laughed as the two smaller bots started arguing. I quickly showed the message to Dad when he gave me a puzzled look. He got a chuckle out of it.

Thanks to the distraction, I barely noticed the lift moving or its arrival. We were lead by Miss Militia to a large conference room where the director was waiting for us. A table sat in the middle and the windows that made up the wall behind the director showed a view of the city. Next to the director, looking impressive in his blue and silver amour, was Armsmaster.

The chairs were quite bulky. It only occurred to me later that they were reinforced to take the weight of brutes or people in power armour. Dad and I took seats opposite the director, Miss Militia sat next to Dad while Dragon sat beside me.

“Mr. Herbert, Ms. Herbert. I'm glad you were able to make it,” the director said, the word 'finally'
was absent but still clear in her tone.

“It's Hebert. And it's good to meet you,” Dad said with just as much sincerity and he shook her hand.

“First, I want to thank you both for agreeing to meet with me. Shadow Stalker's actions were beyond the pale and those responsible have been dealt with. I understand you had a rough night so let's get straight down to business. Miss Militia told me last night you are a Tinker. Could you give me a brief description of your power?”

I glanced at Dragon, who nodded. She had encouraged me to be honest with Director Piggot, despite her attitude. She respected people who showed her respect and letting the PRT know about my powers would help avoid comparisons to Nilbog.

“I'm a Tinker who specialises in robotics. I have a striker power that lets me turn things into more robots. It also lets me understand and fix things.” To prove my point I put Rewind on the table. He quickly transformed and waved in greeting to the director, who tensed slightly and Armsmaster who leaned forward to get a better look.

*Oh wow!, you're Armsmaster! I've seen footage of you online, your battle with Dreadlock was incredible! Is that the same Halberd you used? Can I get some pictures of it, I'd like to store them for historical purposes!*  

As I covered my face with my hand, Dragon laughed at the excited little bot. Armsmaster just looked blankly as the bot continued to beep questions at him.

“He's a little bit star struck, but he's very happy to meet you,” she said.

“So I see.” His mouth twitched into into a brief smile. I suppose he's used to fans.

The director however was less than impressed. “‘Star stru'-." the director started, before catching herself. "I see. So you are capable of creating AI? What restrictions you have placed on them?”

I looked blankly at her. “Why would I do something as cruel as that?” They were living things, restrictions would be like crippling them. Some of the stuff Dragon said earlier came to mind, I would have to talk to Rung about it later.

“You do understand that self-replicating creations, such as unrestricted AI can be extremely dangerous? The PRT has gone to great lengths to monitor Tinkers who are capable of such a thing. Even our own Tinkers-” her voice was perfectly level but there was a tenseness to her body. The knuckles on her hand that were laying flat on the table were going white.

“They can't.”

“Excuse me?”

“They can't reproduce. There are some key parts that can only be created with my power.” Not quite the full truth but close enough.

“I see, well that's something at least.” She took some forms from the folder and passed them to me and Dad.

“I understand Miss Militia has already explained the benefits of joining the Wards and a cursory
background check shows no criminal record, so we can offer you full Wards membership. Those are the agreement forms for ward membership. However there are a few questions I need to ask first.”

I interrupted her. “I'm sorry, but I can't join the wards.”

“Pardon?” she asked, surprised. “Ms. Hebert, you do understand your situation? The gangs will not be as polite. Not to mention, as an independent Tinker with your specialisation you will be monitored heavily.”

“I understand that, but we have already made other arrangements.” I nodded towards my Dad.

“With who?”

“Me,” Dragon said. “I have offered to employ Taylor.”

“You asked her to join the Guild?!”

“No, of course not. Taylor is far too young. She will instead be working for me as an employee of Dragon's Lair R&D. Privately sponsored heroes are nothing new after all.”

The director took a deep breath even as she did not quite glare at the respected Tinker. “Dragon, could I speak with you. In private?”

Nodding, Dragon rose and followed the director out of the room. Seconds later there was some muffled shouting.

“She took that well,” Armsmaster said dryly. “You knew about this?” He turned to Miss Militia.

“Of course. And I support Taylor's decision.”

“Very well,” he said as he turned back to me. “Would you be willing to answer some questions about your power? You don't have to, of course, but I'm curious as to some specifics.”

“N-no, that's fine.”

The door had barely shut when the Director turned back to face Dragon.

“Just what do you think you are playing at Dragon?”

“I think that I am stopping you and Taylor from making a mistake.”

“Excuse me?” There was a hint of outrage in the older woman's tone.

“Taylor doesn't trust the PRT, and to be honest, I do not blame her. What Shadow Stalker was allowed to do was unforgivable.” She decided not to mention the director's, mostly hidden, dislike for parahumans and the disastrous mission to kill Nilbog that Piggot had personally been part of.

“Tinkers aren't like other Para-humans. The urge to build the things we think of is very real, and it can get... uncomfortable if we try to ignore it. Miss Militia may have control of the Wards, but you still have the final say for anything a tinker under your command creates. Can you honestly tell me
you won't forbid Taylor from continuing to build her robots? Or worse, order their destruction at some point?"

Director Piggot glared silently at the tinker, clenching her right hand into a fist.

“Exactly, the result would be Taylor going behind your back and building them anyway. At which point you would be required to destroy them, which would only justify Taylor's mistrust.”

“The Wards are free to leave at any time.”

“We both know it is not that simple. You would still legally own anything she built while a member of the Wards. If she works for me, I can offer the kind of oversight only another tinker could provide.”

“I'm sure Armstrong would be up to the task.”

“Armstrong is a good tinker, one of the best, but we both know he is not suited to teaching.” His demanding attitude had almost driven Kid Win into leaving the Wards at one point.

“Why are you pushing so hard for this? This is a matter for Brockton Bay.”

“I'm trying to avoid alienating a girl who has the potential to become quite powerful Tinker. Taylor's ability to create Artificial Intelligence has the potential to cause problems, but honestly, it is not the biggest concern.”

“Of course it is! Life creating tinkerers are dangerous, they need to monitored.”

“Director, I think you need to take a step back. Taylor isn't Nilbog.”

Piggot drew herself up to her full height, for a moment regaining the baring of the proud military woman she had been. Dragon knew Nilbog was a touchy subject for the woman. The A.I. was one of the few who had seen the reports of what really happened as she helped monitor the town, but she needed to make her point.

“How dare-!”

“Director, please listen to me. Taylor's ability to create life is not without a cost. Until she can solve that she will be limited in what she can build. What actually concerns me is her secondary ability. She can understand other people's tech, even repurpose it and possibly duplicate it. Does that sound familiar? Could you imagine what would happen if she fell in with someone like Uber and Leet? Or worse, got picked up by a real threat, like the Empire?”

A Tinker that could copy another's work would be a boon for any organization. A group like the Empire Eighty-Eight wouldn't hesitate to put her to work producing weapons. The ABB was bad enough with Bakuda's explosives. Thankfully her supply was low, either because of the materials required or the woman's own production speed, so only a few had been seen so far.

The ABB, the Merchants and Coil's mercenaries all had access to either Tinkers or tinker-tech. A Rogue Tinker could quickly cause an arms race with the city in the middle, and both women knew it.

“I fail to see how you plan to keep her safe, unless you or the Hebert's are willing to relocate.”
“I have already considered that.”

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I was trying to make sense of Armsmaster's halberd, which was laid out on the table in front of me, when the director and Dragon walked back into the room.

“-huh, did you help Dragon build that suit? I can see some similarities between it and this. Do you have a pen?” Turning a sheet of paper over, I quickly scribbled down what I could see of the micro-batteries he had installed. ‘I'm guessing these are batteries but how do you avoid the cell memory problem or replace them without taking the entire thing apart? Also-, umm never mind.’

“Go on,” he urged.

“There's a lot of metal fatigue building up. The blade is the worst part but there are microfractures building up on some of the joints.”

The veteran Tinker nodded and I felt like I had passed some kind of test. “Yes, it's a problem I keep running into. The metals just can't take the strain. I'm working on some new alloys but I just don't get as much time as I would like to focus on the project. The best solution I have found so far is regular treatment with an epoxy I created.”

“Really? Wheeljack has tried a few things but they tend to explode in his face.” A quick pulse of power and the Halberd was as good as new. “Here you go.”

Thankfully, I had been able to answer his questions without going 'fan girl' like I had with Miss Militia and Dragon.

Dragon moved to sit back down on the reinforced chair next to me while the director took her seat opposite.

“Thank you for waiting. Dragon, you said you had a solution.”

“Taylor will be employed by Dragons Lair R&D as a sponsored hero. Anything she wishes to build will be vetted by me and I will supply the resources to build them. As Taylor's identity has been compromised I would like to request she be given honorary Ward membership and that she be allowed to serve as a de facto member of the Wards. In return, the PRT will receive a percentage of any image or merchandising rights and, of course, access to any Tinker equipment she wishes to share.”

“I fail to see how this solves anything. The PRT is not interested in turning a profit.”

“While I could, and probably will, setup a base of operations here in Brockton Bay, it will take time. The sooner Taylor is publicly linked to an organisation, the safer she will be.”

Dragon had talked to me and Dad about this before we left the hospital. The idea was for me to work for Dragon while publicly being a member of the Wards. That way the gangs would leave me alone and if the Wards were too much drama I could leave quietly.

And best of all, the PRT would not be directly overseeing every single thing I did and created, especially my bots.
“Very well, but in the interest of cooperation, Ms Hebert would have to attend public events and patrols like any other Ward, at the very minimum,” the director stated.

“That's fine,” my dad said.

I frowned at that but stayed quiet. Dragon had warned me that it might be necessary for me to do some PR work but that didn't mean I had to like it.

“This does however, bring up the issue of in the field oversight. I won't have anyone refusing or countermanding orders at critical times.”

“I agree. While in the field with the Wards, Taylor would have to behave like any member of the Wards. This means doing what the team leader or Protectorate member tells her.”

“The PRT would have final say in what equipment she may use at those times?” The director asked.

“That seems reasonable and negotiable.”

“What about Taylor's education?” Dad asked.

“I will sponsor her application for Arcadia if the PRT will be willing to push the paperwork through?” the director nodded and made a note on the paper in front of her.

“As for her future,” Dragon continued. “Taylor will receive a trust fund equal to that of the Wards program, plus a percentage of any merchandising. Does everyone find that agreeable?”

To be honest, I wasn't that happy with the PRT being able to say what I could or couldn't use. Thankfully it only applied while I was out with the Wards. If I went out solo I could take whatever I liked.

The director didn't look too happy either but she nodded again. “Very well, I will talk to my superiors, have the contracts drawn up and ready for signing by Monday when we meet again. We can hopefully come to a mutual agreement.”

When Dragon and the director had finished, Miss Militia offered to escort us back down to the entrance along with Dragon. As we walked out of the meeting room, I let out a breath I didn't realise I was holding. “I don't think she was very happy with us. I thought she was going to arrest you.”

“Don't judge the director too harshly, she has a lot on plate and she takes her responsibilities seriously,” Dragon chided gently. “I will make sure your new workshop is ready as soon as possible.”

Miss Millitia nodded. “Until then, feel free to stop by the Protectorate's base in the harbour. We are still relocating the Wards to the rig and I'd like to introduce you to them.”

“I assumed you would be finished by now?”

“Kid Win's workshop is taking time to move.”

“Ah, of course.”

There was a private joke between the older women that I was missing.
As we made arrangements for the new bot, who would be sent to the Protectorate building by boat, I just wanted to go home and sleep. It wasn't late, but I was exhausted.

**Omake: What's in a name**

While Rung fretted over Taylor's meeting with the director, Wheeljack turned his mind to other matters. Namely XxVoid_CowboyxX.

When Taylor had spoken about the Wards, he had hoped they could remain independent. A hope that had died the moment Taylor's name had gone public.

Teletraan was still tracking any instance of her name and a program they started after the video of the locker had been released so they could monitor the response it generated.

So far, it appeared Taylor's identity was only being spoken about locally but they couldn't count on that lasting.

Tracking XxVoid_CowboyxX had been easy, he had done it from the back of Danny's truck. Greg Vader, a classmate of Taylor's.

Taylor would be spitting clusters when she found out, and she would eventually. The girl had a temper under all that nervousness.

Still, maybe he could do something to cheer her up. Greg should be at school by now but his computer was still running.

'Now lets see.' A quick check through the boy's internet history left him plenty to work with. Honestly, people needed to remember to clear their history more often, even Taylor forgot more than she should- Huh, Taylor had that picture on her computer too.

*Humans really need to do some cleaning, the internet was filthy.*

With a shrug, he went back to what he was doing. A couple of mailing lists, some magazine subscriptions and a virus that would hijack the boys PHO account, actually, make that all his forum accounts, and make his next couple of posts *interesting*. And another one to delete the folder labelled 'reference material' the next time he opened it. And the boy's game saves, those were gone.

“WheelJack, what are you doing?” Rung asked.

“Nothing, just a bit of web browsing. Hey, want to think up a name for her?” he pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the sleeping dragon-bot.

“I suppose so.”

“Great, I was thinking Skylynx?”

Even asleep, the dragon-bot growled.

“Or not.”

It would take an hour for them to agree on a name that Taylor liked.
Predaqueen.
It was Wednesday before I had a chance to see 'the rig' up close. The first couple of contracts submitted by the PRT had been rejected by Dragon for ambiguous wording and some sub-clauses that would give the PRT more than what I had agreed to.

Dragon, and Dad, assured me that it was typical business for any organisation.

The Protectorate, and recently the Wards, were stationed on a repurposed oil rig that sat in the bay, protected by a tinker-tech forcefield. Day to day access was via a couple of small ferries.

“Odd location, what if they need to leave in a hurry?” Wheeljack asked next to me.

“I suppose they have a couple of speed boats or something?” I told him.

Miss Militia had asked me to bring all my bots with me. Rewind was in my pocket and Rung was sitting in my backpack. My latest bot, dubbed Predaqueen by Wheeljack, was already on the rig. Dad had dropped us all off before heading to work.

The PRT had moved her there from their garage the same day. I had been worried about her but when she woke, she obeyed everything Dragon told her to do. Mostly. *It was only that one time.*

I hadn't bothered with a mask, I just wrapped the scarf Miss Militia gave me round my face. The last week had made it clear, *everyone* knew or at least suspected I was a cape. I caught neighbours trying to watch me and there had been more joggers passing our house than normal.

At Dad's insistence, I had stopped my morning runs. Instead I had to make do with a simple treadmill that he had picked up from somewhere. It wasn't the same but at least I could still get some exercise.

The ride across the bay itself was without incident, with the exception of Rung suffering seasickness. *Thank god they can't throw up.*

I was met by Miss Militia at the rig's landing platform.

“Taylor,” she said with a smile, “I'm glad you could make it. The Wards are all at school at the moment, but if you follow me, I've a couple of things I need to cover with you.”

Miss Militia led me through the rig to her office. There were different coloured lines painted on the walls. As we walked, she explained their purpose.

“You can follow them to different sections of the base. Green lines are public areas, red are limited to Wards and Protectorate only. There is an alarm that will sound when non-members are in the area. It's a warning to cover up or move to the secure sections.”

Wheeljack rolled along behind us in his alt-mode, getting odd looks from the occasional worker who passed us. “Because of the tours right? What about the workshops?”

“Tinker workshops are private as a matter of course,” Miss Militia said with a chuckle. “That lesson was learned long ago. Speaking of identities, I haven't spoken to the Wards about you. It will be up to you if you wish to share your identity with them.”
“Wouldn't they know already? That video is everywhere by now.”

Miss Militia's office was a small comfortable room on the private side of the rig. The walls were painted a soft lilac colour and on one wall was a large group photo of the local Protectorate. A bookshelf took up the other wall, some of the books were in languages I didn't recognise. On the desk were more pictures of different people, a couple looked like Wards and one was even signed by Mouse Protector.

As she sat down behind her desk, Miss Militia gestured to the other chair and pulled her mask down. “Once again, thank you for giving the Wards a chance. I know after what Sophia did you were reluctant but the Wards really are good kids.”

I shrugged awkwardly and pulled my own mask off. To be honest, by now I just wanted to forget about it and move on. Though I suspect the Wards had all seen the video by now.

There was a rummaging in my coat pocket as Rewind transformed and pulled himself out. I lifted him up to my shoulder where he perched himself, one hand holding on to my hair to steady himself.

“Here is your PRT phone. Keep it with you at all times, only the PRT have the number. It has a built-in panic button and software that can be used as your Ward ID.” On my shoulder, Rewind crossed his arms and huffed.

I picked the phone up and Hannah quickly went through the PRT functions with me. “Later this week you will need to meet with Claire from PR and of course, power testing. For Tinkers it doesn't normally take long. Have you thought of a name for yourself?” She asked.

“Um...No. To be honest, I was always too busy planning things to think of one. And finding a Tinker name that isn't taken and doesn't make me sound silly is hard.”

“That's okay. Try to take some time to think about it. I'm sure the Wards would be willing to help and if not, we have a PR department for a reason.” She passed me a sheet of paper. “Here are some of the names they've sent me already.”

Bots-master
Assembly
Roboticia
Toy Master
Maker
Vector
Rebuild
Genetrix
Gyro
Forge
Sparkplug
Robotnik

The list went on. Some were better than others and some were just terrible.


Hannah laughed. “You should have seen the list they gave Kid Win. Still, think about it when you
get the time. The other thing I need to talk to you about is patrols.”

I sat a little straighter as Hannah outlined the patrols the Wards took and what I would be able to deal with.

“Of course,” she eventually said, “you won't go on patrols until your costume is finished. This can take awhile depending on what the PR department thinks. But for Tinkers it usually only takes a week or two.”

“Really, why is that?” Wheeljack asked.

“Tinkers tend to change or upgrade their armour regularly. When you meet with PR later this week they will most likely just suggest a basic theme or colour scheme that you should stick too. Any other questions?”

After we talked for awhile and Hannah told me about the first aid course I would be expected to complete she put her mask back on and took me to the section of the rig where Predaqueen was being kept.

The Dragon-bot was lying in an empty room on the east side of the rig, still connected to the generator. When we entered the room Pred sat up to greet me but made no attempt to move.

“Aww, you poor thing, did no one try to keep you company? I'm sorry.” I'm sure I should see about setting up a radio or something for her?

“We kept an eye on her. She spent most of her time asleep.” Miss Militia told me.

As I went about checking her power levels, fully charged after nearly a week, and removing the power cables, Miss Militia explained just how they got her up here.

“Armsmaster and Dragon removed the wall and used the crane on the roof to lift the bot up here. They also fitted this.” She pressed a button on the wall and the far wall slid open. The doorway was more than wide enough for Predaqueen to fit through.

Almost immediately, the Pred stopped trying to hug me and stuck her head outside. Enjoying the wind on her face.

I spent some time just checking over her systems. That green spark was incredible but her T-cog hadn't come online and her processor was still limited.

“Would it be okay for her to go flying?”

“I can't see any harm in that, just make sure she doesn't get too far away from the base.”

With the sound of transformation, Predaqueen jumped out of the opening. Spreading her wings as she fell she turned her fall into a graceful dive before pulling up and circling the rig. She continued to move smoothly between dives, twists and spins before, with surprising gentleness, Predaqueen perched herself on the highest point of the rig and let out a roar.

First chance I got, I was going to take that ride.

Behind me, I could hear Miss Militia murmuring to security. Probably trying to calm them down.
Calling Predaqueen back into the room, I checked her power levels. They weren't bad but I really needed to make that alternative fuel source a priority. We left the door open so she could fly about and headed to the next room.

It was part science lab and part car factory all mixed into a single workshop. High end computers were hooked up to automated mills, cutters, robotic limbs and 3D printers. Workbenches and tool shelves took up one wall and there was even plenty of space for me to add machines of my own design.

It was all shiny and new and just looking at it made my hands twitch. Besides me, Wheeljack's fins lit up with excitement and he quickly moved to examine everything.

A chuckling brought me out of my stupor. “Just so you know, I'll be sending a picture of your expression to your father.” Dragon's voice came from the ceiling mounted speakers.

I felt my face heat up. “But, it's been less than a week. How did you even know what I needed?”

“A lot of this is basic equipment for a Tinker-workshop. As for the specifics,” The mechanical arms whirred into life, pointing themselves at a sheepish looking Wheeljack. “I had help.”

I stared at the little bot who made a coughing noise. “We thought it would be a nice surprise for you?”

I didn't care who was watching as I hugged him.

“I'm setting up a base in the city but for now, this will be your workshop for the foreseeable future,” Dragon said.

“So I can build anything I want?”

“There are some rules but yes, the equipment in this room is yours to build whatever you wish. Within reason of course.”

“As a general rule,” Miss Militia said, “If it's got a barrel wider than your head or it can't fit through the doors, assume it's not allowed.”

I nodded absently as I started examining the software on the computer.

“I'll let you get settled in, Dragon can call me if you need anything.”

I never noticed her leave as I was already changing the computers settings. Rung climbed out of my bag; I had dropped it by the door when I came in. He handed me my note pad before wandering off with Rewind to explore.

“So Taylor, where would you like to start?” Dragon asked.

We talked as I worked. This was really the first time I'd had to talk to Dragon since we met. I learned that she had a weakness for sappy romance novels and had taken to downloading period dramas from earth-aleph.

She also had countless stories about other heroes.
“Oh god, please tell me you are joking.” I had to put the tools I was using down, I was laughing too hard.

“I wish. I mean, who does that? And in the middle of the room?” Dragon said.

Miss Militia knocked on the door as she came into my workshop. *My workshop, I still liked the sound of that.*

“The Wards are all here if you want to meet them?” she said.

“Already? But it's only-” I glanced at the clock on the wall, it was nearly two in the afternoon. “Oh.”

The equipment they had given me was great but it was all running on its factory defaults. I'd spent the entire day with Dragon and Wheeljack personalising it all.

I wrapped my scarf round my face. “Coming guys?” I asked, trying to sound calmer than I felt.

“You go ahead, I'm gonna see if I can finish this first,” Wheeljack said. Rewind ran over and quickly transformed for me to pick him up.

The Wards were waiting in the public rec-room. They were all in costume with their masks on.

“Everybody! This is our newest honorary-Ward.” Miss Militia called out.

The space between me and one of the couches twisted and a small girl in a teal costume and green visor was suddenly in front of me.

“Finally! You know what it's like being the only girl on the team? I'm Vista.”

“What about Shadow Stalker?” A tall boy in a white costume, covered in clock faces said as he walked over. “Hi, I'm Clockblocker.”

“Dogs don't count!”

Miss Militia rolled her eyes at the comment. “Right, This is Clockblocker, Vista. That's Kid Win, Ward team leader Aegis and Gallant.”

Aegis, a tall, well built boy in a rust red costume and Gallant, who wore a rather simple set of power armour, walked over and shook my hand. Kid Win looked up from whatever he was messing with to wave hello.

“Hey, it's nice to meet you. Sorry we can't stick around but we're due on patrol,” Aegis said as he nodded to Gallant.

When Gallant shook my hand, I stole a quick glance at his power-armour.

“Um..N-nice to meet you?” *Real smooth.* I was trying, really I was but I'm sure the expression under my scarf was something like a deer in headlights. “Tm...well I don't have a name yet but I'm a tinker. I build robots.” I pulled Rewind from my pocket so they could see him.

The moment he transformed, Vista let out a little squeal. “Oh! He's so cute! Can I hold him?”
Smiling, I held my hand up so he could jump into her hand.

Kid Win, who had finished messing with his gear and come over for a look, gasped. “Wait, you're that girl from the video, the one with the dragon! Everyone in school is talking—Oof!” he let out a gasp as Clockblocker elbowed him in the ribs.

“Dude, shut up!” he hissed.

“No, it's alright,” I sighed as I pulled down my scarf. “I've had a week to accept everyone knowing about it. My name's Taylor Hebert, it's nice to meet you all.” From the way they flinched, I guessed they had seen the other video as well.

No one really knew what to say and the atmosphere started to get tense when Gallant cleared his throat and pulled his helmet off. “It's nice to meet you, I'm Dean.”

Taking their cues from Dean, the Wards each pulled their masks off and reintroduced themselves as Chris, Missy, Dennis and Carlos.

“With that, we really must go,” Aegis, Carlos, said and quickly left with Gallant following behind, Vista's eyes never left Gallant.

Before the awkwardness could return, Clockblocker clapped his hands. “So, you haven't got a name yet?” Clo-Dennis, asked.

“N-No, I've been having trouble thinking of one.”

Vista groaned. “Oh here we go.”

“What about Robot Girl?” Dennis suggested.

“Really?” I gave him a flat look.

“Cybernought, Cyber Girl, Techno Girl, wait I've got it, Techno Queen!,” He looked set to continue when Missy, who was a good foot or so smaller and nearly a meter away, smacked him on the back of the head.

“What did Miss Militia mean by honorary-Ward?” Chris asked.

“Um, well it just means I work for Dragon, not the PRT? and I'm here because 'it will help build experience and establish your relationship with your peers' or at least, that's what Dragon told me.

“Really? How did you manage that?”

“I...um...kinda stole one of Dragon's suits.” The shocked look on Chris's face was almost worth it.

“Come on guys, that's enough. She's here, that's all that matters.” I could kiss Missy for that. I let the younger girl lead me towards the couches. “So, do you have any costume ideas yet? And what exactly is your power?”

I was just explaining my power to Missy when there was a muffled bang. The other Wards all turned to Chris who flushed. “It wasn't me!”
“Rewind, could you call Wheeljack please?” The little bot transformed. “Jack, was that you?”

“Um...No?”

“Couldn't you have at least waited a day?” I sighed. “Are you okay?”

“Don't worry, I'm fine. Though I can't feel my arm.”

With a groan, I stood up. “You want to come? You can meet Wheeljack and Rung.”

“You built a robot called Lung? Isn't that asking for trouble?” Dennis asked.

“No, Rung. As in a ladder.” I explained as we walked back towards my workshop.

There was, thankfully, no real damage. Jack had been messing with one of the wall sockets when he crossed the wrong wires. The bang had been him hitting the wall. The shock had fried the connectors in his arm, it was a simple fix that let me show my Striker power to the Wards.

“Honestly Jack, I thought you knew better than to mess with live wires. I'm amazed you didn't blow the lights all over the rig or something.”

“Nah,” Chris said. “All the Tinker workshops out here are on their own loop, with redundancies. Armsmaster insists on it. I can show you where the fuses are.”

Once I fixed Jack's arm, I left him chatting happily with Missy while Chris showed me the fuse system.

Dennis meanwhile had wondered off. “Holy Shit!” And found Predaqueen. *Crap! I left the door unlocked.*

I ran into the next room, the others close behind. Predaqueen had been nothing but gentle with me but I didn't know how she would deal with others.

“What the hell?” Dennis asked as Predaqueen sniffed him. I felt a little proud at the look of awe she got from the Wards.

“Um that's the Dragon suit I mentioned. Her name's Predaqueen.”

“She?” Pred snorted at Dennis.

“Don't argue with the big mechanical dragon Dennis.” Missy said as she calmly walked up and stroked Predaqueen, who purred in response.

“So this started out as one of Dragon's remote suits?” Chris asked. “Does this mean you can work with other Tinker's stuff?”

Dennis, who was tentatively stroking Pred looked over. “The Vault?”

“What's the vault?” I asked.

“No, no. you need to pause before you say it...The Vault” Dennis replied.
Chris just shook his head. “Ignore him. come on, I'll show you.”

Missy chose to stay behind with Predaqueen and Wheeljack. Both seemed happy with the company so I wasn't worried about them. Dennis begged off to go make a start on his homework.

Chris led me towards the centre of the rig, explaining as we went.

“So, there are like a billion rules about Tinker equipment,” he said. “And a lot of Tinkers don't want to deal with that so they go solo, join a gang or if they are lucky, Toybox.”

“Obviously, they can't make it illegal to own or build tinker-tech but The PRT got a law passed that said any tinker-tech used in a crime can be confiscated. Most of it, mostly the really dangerous or interesting stuff, gets sent to the big think-tank in D.C. who try to reverse engineer it.” He shrugged. “Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.”

“What most people don't know, is that any Protectorate team with an active Tinker can keep stuff. We're not supposed to talk about it because they don't want the gangs to think there are tons of Tinker weapons just waiting for them to grab.” Made sense I suppose.

We arrived at a large, heavily reinforced, set of doors. “Your PRT ID should let you in,” he said before scanning his phone on a terminal.

The vault was exactly as it's name sounded. A large room filled with shelves. On each shelves there were pieces of tinker-tech or plastic boxes filled with smaller collections. Everything had a printed label attached to it.

“The labels are easy enough to read. Time it was found, date, who found it, case number and if possible, who built it and what it does. The barcodes on the back are for the electronic records.”

“Do me a favour,” I said. “Never leave Jack in here alone.”

Chris laughed. “This isn't even all of it. The rest is kept in the PRT building. There's a catalogue of stuff from all over the country and you can put in a request for anything you want to be sent over.”

“Really? What are the rules?”

“Mostly, they just want you to take notes,” he shrugged. “Wards can check stuff out but we can't take it off base. If you take something and can understand it, write everything down and send it to the think-tank. If they are able to use it, you get a bonus.”

As I looked through the shelves; I noticed one name kept turning up. In fact, it looked like he had almost an entire section all to himself. “Is all this stuff made by Leet?”

Chris nodded. “Yea, guy's a joke. Apparently, he started out okay but now they've stopped sending his stuff to DC. These days, half this stuff has broke down within minutes of being used and the rest is an overcomplicated mess.” He picked up a cube, about the size of his head. “This is one of his earlier 'thingies'. Armsmaster gave it to me once but I couldn't work it out.”

I took the cube from him. “Thingy?” he shrugged. “Good a name as anything, you want to give it a try?”

Letting my power map the cube out, I frowned. “Wow, this thing is a mess.” Those look like
focusing lenses, cracked from heat or possibly being dropped. Is that a power transfer array? looks like it's burned out and there's something missing. “Was there another part to this?” I asked.

Chris shook his head, “Not a clue.”

I figured it wouldn't hurt to take a look. Chris showed me how to check stuff out on the terminal by the door and walked me back to my workshop. Maybe this wouldn't be too bad after all.
“Maybe this wouldn't be too bad after all”?! 

I take it back, this was hell. 

I was on my third day as a member of the Wards and I had barely touched a tool. 

The PRT had fast tracked the paperwork for Arcadia, which was good I suppose, but there had been a problem with my grades. Mostly that they were in the toilet. 

Emma and her friends had stolen, destroyed or otherwise sabotaged every assignment I tried to hand in. Between them and the stress of everything they had put me through, my grades had been on a downwards spiral for most of the year. 

While Arcadia was always happy to have another Ward on site, they were worried about my ability to bring my grades up. In the end, it had been decided that I should be issued some make-up assignments to show what my level was without interference and how far behind I had fallen. 

So here I was, scribbling away at a table in the rec-room in an attempt to get another assignment done before I returned to school. 

It wouldn't have been so bad, but I was also doing the mandatory first aid course that all Wards had to complete, tomorrow I was supposed to meet the PR worker who would be handling my case and then I had to start self defence training. 

“Hey Taylor,” Missy said as she slid into the seat opposite me. “It's nearly time for the course, you ready?” 

I grunted in response. Missy was on the course as a refresher, but at least it gave me someone to talk to. 

“Have you heard Clockblocker's latest suggestion for your name?” She asked, looking entirely too happy, “Transheroine. Because you can transform stuff.” 

I shot the girl a dirty look. “And how long till someone calls me Tranny?” Missy broke down laughing and Rewind, who was sitting on the table, played a clip of 'take a walk on the wild side' which only made her laugh harder. I forced myself not to laugh and went back to work. 

Once Missy calmed down, she pointed at a scribble on the page I was working on. “So, what's that?” 

I glanced at it before cursing. “Damn it, not again.” 

“What. What's wrong?” 

I let out a frustrated sigh as I ran my hands through my hair. “No... It's nothing.” I wasn't sure I wanted to talk about it, but what harm would it do? Rung kept telling me I needed to talk to people more. “It's... a dream I keep having. I can never remember what it was about but since the first time it happened I keep catching myself drawing this.” I pointed at the half finished scribble.
It wasn't much to look at, just a circle with some lines coming off it that looked like handles.

Missy sat back in her chair. “Huh, I think Chris had that problem. I thought it was just him but I guess all Tinkers get ideas in their sleep. Last time he mentioned it, Sophia made some nasty comments.”

I gave the girl a flat look. “Well there's a surprise.” My voice was thick with sarcasm and I turned back to my work, ignoring the way she flinched.

Missy was quiet for a moment. “Look...I never had much to do with Sophia, we went on patrol together a couple of times but... it went badly... then Aegis made sure we were never put on patrol together again. Actually, they tried to make sure I was never alone with her.”

“And yet, she was still a Ward,” I said without looking up.

“It's not like we had a choice!” Missy protested. “They called a meeting and Armsmaster marched her into the room, told us she was a new Ward and that was it. We tried to complain about her attitude but the director ignored us. What were we supposed to do?”

I put my pen down and took a breath, I wasn't being fair but I'd like to think I'm entitled to be a bit angry at the situation. “And you never thought to tell someone else about her?”

“We all knew she was psycho. She dropped a guy off a roof before they arrested her. Probably wasn't the first time either.” Missy said sullenly before she fell silent.

She was the youngest of the Wards and sitting opposite me, glaring at the desk in front of her, in casual clothes that only made her look younger made it hard to stay angry. She was probably going to be a heartbreaker when she grew up.

Guilt started to push the anger back and I sighed again. “Does that work?”

“What?”

“Holding people off a roof edge, does it actually work?”

Seeing the olive branch, Missy smiled. “Not really. Most people know a Ward would get into trouble for doing it, especially if it went wrong and you dropped them. Vigilancies can sometimes do it, if they have a reputation...And a brute rating. Most of the time they just wet themselves or pass out”

Made sense I suppose.

Glancing at the time, I started to pack up my things. “Come on, Let's head over to medical.”

The course was being done internally by a PRT doctor, a Scottish guy called Beckett, a middle aged man with a short beard and nervous disposition but once he started talking it was clear just why he had the job.

It also gave me a couple of ideas for new bots. I scribbled one out later that night and gave it to Wheeljack the next morning.
As I sat in a waiting room in the PRT building with a scarf round my face, I quickly checked over my notes. I had been told I would need any notes I had on costume ideas and names.

I still hadn't picked out a name for myself but I knew I wanted my costume to be a full suit of power-armour, but Dragon insisted I hold off on that for now. Until then I had some rough ideas for a simpler set that was more like body armour.

“Oh good, you're here. Come in then.” He was a large, dark skinned man with a friendly face.

The office was large and the back wall was covered in pictures of different capes, all in various 'heroic' poses. There were also costume sketches and everything had been annotated or highlighted. The other wall was lined with shelves which had dozens of action figures on them.

“I know this is a mostly a formality to keep the suits upstairs happy,” he said with a smile. “But I hope I can help you all the same. I'm Isaac Deslands and Dragon has agreed to let me take a look at your case. So to start off with, have you picked a name for yourself or are you still thinking about it?”

“Umm... I'm still thinking?”

“That's fine, I've seen some of the suggestions and I don't blame you. What about your costume, any ideas you want to share?”

“I-I wanted to build a suit of power-armour but its going to take time, I did think of this until then.”

I passed him the sketches and he chuckled as he took them. “I'm sorry?”

“It's nothing. Most of the Tinkers I've dealt with were always looking towards the next big project.” He leafed through the sketches. “Hmm, I could certainly work with some of this. But I have to ask, do all your designs have fully enclosed helmets?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No not really, I suppose with everything that happened you want to make it as hard as possible for people to see your face? Shame really, I think a visor similar to Vista's would work well on you. Remember, the more of your face people can see, the more trustworthy you appear.” He put the sketches down and leaned back in his chair.

“Honestly Ms. Hebert, there's not much I can actually do here. You work for Dragon, not the PRT, so a lot of our rules don't apply. So instead, I'm going to give you some stuff to think about and we'll go from there okay?”

I nodded for him to continue.

“First, I know the other Wards are quick to complain about PR work but the simple fact is, it is necessary. How easily could you build a weapon that could depopulate the city?”

I blinked at the question, but perhaps if I built a plasma pulse detonator with an upgraded fusion core, and scaled the design up instead of down... Shaking the designs away, I frowned and wondered
exactly what good use something like that could be put to. Either he knew what I was thinking from my expression or he had asked that question before because he continued on before I could put it into words.

“And that's exactly what we don't want people to think about. When they see you, they should know they can trust you.”

I think I got his point. I supposed it would worry people if they really sat down to think about how much damage a parahuman could do.

“Trust is the key. It's a sad truth that the Protectorate is outnumbered by the villains so we need people to trust us, to know that they can come to us and if possible inspire more people to join. With me so far?”

//Unity is perception//

“Umm, I think so? If people don't trust us it would make it hard for us to stop villains?”

He nodded with an easy grin. “Exactly.” He was clearly one of those people who smiled easily.

“Secondly, heroes can broadly be split into two groups. Those who inspire, such as Legend and Mouse Protector, and those who intimidate such as Alexandria or Eidolon. Think about which you want to be and work your costume to that. Bright colours inspire, Dark intimidate.”

Friendly was visible, Scary hid. Made sense.

“Thirdly, unlike other para-humans, Tinkers are well known for changing their appearance. Constant upgrades, repairs or improvements mean they rarely look the same twice. What I would suggest, what I do suggest to every Tinker, is to build to a theme, it doesn't matter if it's a colour or ornamental feature, as long as it's something people can use to recognise you at a glance.”

Again, I could see his point. The police, fire and ambulance services all used uniforms for a similar reason. I could even see it with Dragon. People knew, on sight, when a suit belonged to her.

“I can see in your notes, you made a logo for yourself.” He picked up the page with my insignia on it. “It's good. Make use of it, put it on everything you build and people will soon know what it means. Dragon knows what the PRT will and won't allow.”

Dragon had made the same suggestion. I hadn't been sure as it had started as a doodle but I could see their point. I quickly scribbled the note down on the pad I had with me. “It... doesn’t really mean anything, it was just something I came up with.”

He gave me a serious look, “Then it's up to you to make it mean something. This actually brings us to your cape persona. A lot of capes learn to act differently when in costume. It helps to distance them from their civilian identities.”

“But people already know who I am.” I tried not to sound like I was whining.

“Even so, think of it like this. Inspiring or intimidating capes need presence. They need to be able to
move, talk and even stand in a way that shows confidence."

He shifted in his chair, sitting up straighter and taking on a different expression. Suddenly gone was the genial man who had been quick to smile and laugh. In his place was a man who radiated confidence. He practically screamed 'I'm too important to deal with you.'

Then he laughed and just like that, he was back to the man I'd first met. If I didn't know better, I might have thought he was a cape. Then I thought about how he sat, the angle of his head and shoulders or how he held his brow.

Actually, I had seen Miss Militia or even Vista do the same thing now I think about it, when they switched between Militia and Hannah or Vista to Missy.

Ugh, projecting confidence was not something I'd gotten good at. I could see that he had a point... but I already had too much to do and not enough time.

His smile softened a bit. “Even if you don't feel capable or confident, sometimes just acting like it can help you through a tight spot. People are less likely to panic if someone looks like they know what's going on. The Wards program doesn't formally include acting lessons, but it's another thing I recommend for all the heroes I work with.”

I thought about that. I wasn't sure about the acting lessons. Acting was always more of Emma's thing, even if she had all the talent of a teen romance movie star. Maybe I could see if Arcadia had an acting group or something I could join?

"Another thing to consider is public outreach events. Like I said before, you work for Dragon, so you don't technically have to do them, but at least a few of them will help get your name and your preferred image out into the public consciousness. This doesn't have to be anything as inane as shaking hands at the mall or visiting schools to tell the kids that drugs are bad and if they develop powers they should join the Wards. You can attend charity events, read books to kids, heck build a super-sweeper machine and literally clean up the streets. There's one young lady in the Denver team who picked a cape name that's somewhat unfortunate on the face of it but is also the name of a fighter plane, so she visits veterans and war memorials."

I ignored the plans for an automated street sweeper his suggestion had inspired and thought back to the medical bot I had considered during the First aid lessons. The PRT had access to tinker-tech healing devices didn't it? How hard would it be to integrate those into a bot or make it so normal people could use them? “I think I get what you mean, but I always assumed heroes did that stuff because they had to.”

Issac smiled as he leaned back in his chair. “In some cases yes. They think it's just PR being a nuisance and then pay lip service if they can't find an out. The Wards are usually guilty of that but that's okay. They're young. But some understand, that sometimes being a hero is more than just an image and those are usually the ones who are remembered. That young girl I mentioned? She does those visits on her own, during her own hours. But don't think you have to do stuff like that. Try to find your own way.”

Stretching a bit in his chair, Issac looked at the clock on the wall before continuing. "The last thing I'd like to cover for now is internet activity. Assume anything you post or write online, or ever have in the past, will be examined by any villains you've fought, and the ones you haven't fought yet, and by the media and general fans. That's not to say you have to stay off the internet or treat every PHO post like a publicity statement, but even with an account that's not obviously registered to you there's
Thinkers and Tinkers out there who can draw the connections. An official account using your cape name or something related is usually easy enough, and using it instead of one more related to your normal identity can help you keep your image in mind, just like having a costumed persona even without a secret identity."

With that, he began to collect the notes I had given him and started to pack up his own belongings. "Basically, it all boils down to making sure that people will get at least the rough impression you want at first glance, even if there is more to it than meets the eye. If you ever have questions or want help on something image related, don't hesitate to ask. Even Dragon hires outside consultants."

Walking out of the meeting, I looked at some of my designs and thought about what he said.

Maybe there were a couple of changes I could make.

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Power testing was a simple enough affair. I had to go through a medical checkup that included some physical tests to make sure I didn't have a brute rating.

After that, I had a week to submit an example of my tech for examination.

First however, I decided to try an experiment.

I knew how the processors and T-cogs worked, now it was time to see if I could build them directly.

I started with the processor first. I built the base frame and added some excess mass, mostly made up from rare metals. Then I took the whole thing in my hand, felt my power respond and slowly turned the lump of raw materials into a processor.

Connecting it to the Teletraan terminal I had set up, I ran an array of diagnostic tests. Quantum variations in each processor would affect each one differently, I think it's what helped make my bots unique from each other.

Once I was satisfied, I placed it in a locked safe and started work on the T-cog.

By lunch time, I had a completed set. Processor, T-cog and Spark chamber. The Trinity of components that made my bots work.

By pacing myself, giving myself time to recover between power usages, I felt fine, a bit tired but nothing I wouldn't recover from.

With the trinity done I pulled up one of the designs Jack had uploaded to the computer for me and started breaking it down.

Arms, legs, torso, head etc. what each part of the body was and what I needed to build it. I wanted a blank template for the basic subframe; that is, everything under the armour and alt mode kibble, that could be adjusted to match the bot I wanted. Some parts could be interchanged, depending on size, while others would bespoke. Thankfully, the computer could handle most of those adjustments.
Jack had dubbed the template a 'proto-form'.

With that done, I set the machines to start fabricating what they could while I started work on the alt-mode. Something that would fit into the lab would be best I think. *I could do with a researcher or something.*

It was surprising just how much effort it took to match the alt-mode and robot modes. Knowing what had to go where and how it would move when transformed, all without limiting mobility.

In the end, it took nearly a day just to finish the design work.

All told, it took three days to fabricate and assemble my latest bot. Once I was done, I boxed it up and sent the sparkless frame for testing.

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“No, no,” Wheeljack argued. “The power requirements don't match the distribution. It's like he was trying to power a watch with a car battery.” He turned the drawing upside down. “Or maybe running a car off a watch battery.”

“Well, yes. But I'm sure the missing parts were some kind of control system.”

This discussion had been going on for nearly an hour now. It had started when I sat down to look at Leet's cube. I had started drawing out what my power was showing me in an attempt to understand it when Jack had taken a look.

“As interesting as this is. What are you two arguing about?” I tried not to jump at Dragon's voice. She had direct access to my workshop but usually made a point to ring a bell or something. Her version of knocking on my door.

“Sorry, I did ring but you were busy.”

“That's alright. And we weren't arguing. Not really.”

Wheeljack nodded. “We were trying to make sense of this thing.” He poked the cube. “I still think the quickest solution would be for you to just fix it and turn it on.”

I shook my head. “Leet's stuff is unreliable, for all we know it could be a weapon. I can see focusing lenses and an oversized power system. That sounds like a weapon.”

“Can you show it to me?” Dragon asked.

I nodded and picked up the frames she had sent me. They were shaped like a pair of glasses and sat neatly over my own. There was a Tinker-tech camera build into them that let Dragon see what I was looking at and the smart lenses let her highlight things she wanted me to look at.

“See here?” I asked, pointing at the diagrams I had made. “The power supply doesn't match the rest.”

“I see, what can you tell me about it?”
“It's an accident waiting to happen,” Jack said. “It's like he picked all the most unreliable materials possible. He built his own step-up transformer but the wiring couldn't handle the throughput and burned out. The heat from that cracked the lenses which were also low quality and possibly slightly misaligned.”

“Not everyone has your budget Wheeljack, or access to a full workshop,” Dragon chided.

“From what I can tell there must have been a few of these things daisy-chained to each other and connected to a central control system. But that still doesn't tell us what it does.”

“It would really help if we could power it up,” I complained. I looked over to Jack who was stroking his chin thoughtfully.

“I think we know enough about its systems to copy it and build round the parts we don't have.”

“What about the missing control system?”

“I think Teletraan could handle that.” The operating system was now on version 3 alpha. Jack had gotten bored one night and worked the system over with Dragon's help. Must be nice not needing to sleep.

Jack was spending every other night at the workshop. While my bots did rest and even sleep, they didn't need as much as a human. It varied between them but Jack only slept one night in every three.

Right now, I was getting a lift home from a PRT driver every night. I didn't like it but being seen in a marked PRT car made it clear I was off limits. Thankfully this was only until I made my public debut.

Even with Dragon's help, it took nearly two hours to fabricate everything. Like Jack had suggested, we connected it up to Teletraan. And at Dragon's insistence, we had forgone Leet's power system and connected it directly to a 'variable output device' that Dragon had included with the workshop. It had lots of emergency cut-offs in case there was a problem.

The end result didn't look anything like Leet's. For one thing, we didn't bother building a case and just had all the parts laid out on the worktop. The lens assembly was pointing towards a reinforced section of wall.

“Okay Jack, switch it on.”

As he slowly brought the power levels up, the device began to hum before shorting itself out.

“This isn't right.” Jack said and looking at the mess of parts, I had to agree. Putting my hand on it, I quickly found and fixed the broken parts.

Comparing what we had built to the cube, I noticed something. “I think we're looking at this wrong. This looks more like two different devices that he's tried to mix together.”

We spent the rest of the day going over the different parts and how they could possibly be assembled.
It was near end of day on Friday when I was called into a meeting with Dragon, Miss Militia and Armsmaster.

“Hello Taylor, thank you for coming,” Miss Militia said.

“Yes, we have finished our examination of the robot you submitted. Here is your copy of the report, I have attached some notes on improving the efficiency of the design.” I bristled at the dismissive tone in Armsmaster's voice.

Apparently, he either didn't notice or didn't care. “To complete the evaluation, we need you to demonstrate your ability to animate one of your robots.” He placed a box on the table, I recognised it as the one I put the proto-form in for testing.

Pulling it out of the box, I checked it over. They had been surprisingly restrained with it. Aside from a few scratches the proto-form was near perfect. I sent a quick charge through it to repair those and laid it down on the table.

“So you just want me to bring it to life?”

“Could you also wear this?” Armsmaster asked, holding an armband that was connected to what looked like a modified heart monitor.

With everything in place, I put my hands on the proto-form and pushed my power into it.

Unlike before, when I sparked Jack and the others. I didn't have to push my power into the Proto-form. Instead, it just flowed smoothly into the frame. The bot's spark burst into life and while it left me winded, I wasn't about to collapse like I did with Wheeljack.

The new bot was the same size as Wheeljack. Painted red with white trim and a scope on his right shoulder. Like Rung, he had a face with a mouth. He also had a large monocle like lens over one eye that could interface with his shoulder mounted scope.

Once I caught my breath, I led the bot through a series of tests that Jack and I had come up with to test its basic systems. I had him focus on a pen light and follow its movements, walk across the desk and finally, pick up the pen light to make sure its fine motor control was working.

“Is it able to talk?” Armsmaster asked.

“Yes he is, but when my bots come online it takes a day or two for them to really get up to speed. I think it's because their systems are still adjusting.”

He nodded and made a note before moving to check the readouts from the monitor.

I had been a bit worried about making a second lab bot. I didn't want Jack to feel like I was replacing him.
It turns out, I was worried about nothing. Jack took an immediate liking to *Perceptor*.

*Unlike Jack, who was very much an engineer at spark, Percy liked to focus more on theory work. He had taken it on himself to finish the chemical formula for the fuel I needed for the Pred. Not that he was any closer to solving it. Now if I could just convince him to stop using twenty syllable words when explaining things.*

At this point, I had covered both sides of a large white board in chemical formulas. Dragon had never seen anything like it and between us (me, Jack and Dragon) we had spent hours in total trying to find a solution.

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By Saturday afternoon, I had my first finished weapon. I had been working on it, on-off, since I got my workshop, devoting my spare moments to it during the day with Jack and Percy doing the rest through the nights. Right now, they were on the other side of the workshop, looking at Leet's cube.

The only problem was getting it approved.

No matter what we did, the Null-Ray couldn't be made any smaller than a rifle. Perceptor was able to create an alloy which at least made it light enough to carry or fire one handed. *Pity about my aim.*

Twice now, I had submitted it for testing and it had been rejected for different reasons. And I hadn't even started on my costume.

There was nothing for it. I sat down at my computer and sent Dragon a message.

Ten minutes later we were going over my options.

“*I'm not surprised,*” she said. “*The size of the weapon does give the wrong impression.*”

“*Yea but there's not much I can do about that. Any smaller and heat buildup becomes a problem and if I make the barrels shorter, the shot dissipates before it can reach the target.*”

“*It might help if we changed how it looked.*”

“How?”

An image of my latest armour design came up on screen. “*What if we integrated most of the weapon with your armour and attached the barrels like this?*”

I watched as she connected the barrels to an assembly on the suit's forearm and then made it retractable so they wouldn't get in the way when I wasn't fighting.

“*Looks good, but do you think you can get it past screening?*”

Dragon chuckled. “*That won't be a problem*”
Behind us, there was a sudden cheering from Wheeljack and Perceptor. “We did it! Your hypothesis was correct Taylor. The device is indeed multiple systems that have been repurposed to fill a new function. It was just a matter of deducing which components originally came from which design specification and.”

As Perceptor continued to talk I pinched the bridge of my nose and Wheeljack chuckled.

“Does he always talk like this?” A clearly amused Dragon asked.

“Only when he's excited.”

Realising he had lost me, the bot cleared his throat and tried again. “The 'Leet cube' is actually two different devices that have been integrated together and parts from a third was used to power it.”

Next to him, Jack nodded. “I think it's easier to show you really.” He tapped a few keys on Teletraan and the mess of parts they had cobbled together lit up.

A short distance away, a figure flickered into existence and I felt my face colour. “Jack, What the hell!?”

Jack looked between me and the naked woman now standing in the workshop “Oops, sorry!” Another key press and she was dressed. I could hear Dragon laughing. At least none of the other Wards saw that, I'd never live it down.

Ignoring his excitable friend, Perceptor continued. “The holographic projector is capable of producing lifelike image quality, but more detailed images require greater processing power and more energy.”

“I see, what about the other device?” Dragon asked once she had stopped laughing.

“A force field projector. I surmise the end result was intended to be a hard-light hologram system. The unusual thing is, separately, both of these devices are of surprisingly high quality. The shield generator for example is small enough to be worn.”

That...sounded really useful. The ensuing discussion lasted all of the afternoon and only ended when Miss Militia forced me to go home.

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Monday afternoon brought with it my first self defence training course.

“Come on,” a much too calm Vista said. “Try and hit me.”

“And exactly how stupid do you think I am?”

“You went after Lung first night out.”
I glared at the smirking girl. That was a low blow.

We were in one of the larger rooms on the rig. It had been converted into a combined gym and exercise space, the floor where we were standing was covered in mats. The other Wards were scattered around the room, some were using the exercise equipment while others were pretending to spar.

“You keep that up and I will ban you from going near Predaqueen.”

Vista pulled a face at me. “You're no fun!”

Miss Militia was observing everything from her position by the edge of the mats. This was the first time I had seen Miss Militia give orders. Everything from her stance to her tone of voice was no nonsense. “Alright you two, that’s enough. Vista, I want you to show Taylor the basics, and no powers.”

Not that she needed them. The little brat put me on my ass half a dozen times in less than twenty minutes.

By the time Miss Militia told us to call it a day, I felt like a walking bruise. The shower afterwards felt heavenly. And they wanted me to do this every Monday!

“Don't feel too bad about it.” Missy told me as we walked back to the rec-room. “I've been a Ward longer than the others.”

“Really?”

“Yea, it sucks, I'm the most experienced Ward but the rules say the eldest has to be team leader.”

As we entered the room, Missy gestured at the nearest sofa. She stopped short when nothing happened.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yea, it's just...I cant move the sofa.”

the sofa was a comfortable 3 seater that was facing away from us and had the best view of the large screen TV.

Walking round to the front of the sofa we found Wheeljack and Rewind watching a show with a redhead and a guy with a moustache.

Jack looked up at us. “Hey guys, you ever seen this? Its an Earth-aleph show they just imported. It's great!”

He looked between Missy's gaping expression and my stunned silence. “What? Hey!”

I grabbed Missy and pulled her to the corner of the room. “You can't tell anyone about this!” I hissed.

“Wha-Taylor! Are you nuts, of course I have to tell someone!”
“Not yet! Let me talk to Dragon about it first!”

I knew my bots were alive so I don't know why this surprised me. How on earth was I supposed to tell the PRT my bots were manton protected?

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I spent the next day testing my bots under the watchful eye of Armsmaster and Dragon.

After I had told Dragon about my bots being manton protected she had calmed me down and then contacted Director Piggot.

I had been banned from building any more bots until they could find out the cause.

The testing was simple and harmless enough. My bots would stand still while Vista tried to warp them or the space around them while a dozen different tinker-tech devices monitored everything. Her power responded to them the same way it responded to any living thing.

Eventually, the other Wards were called in. Gallant tried to affect them but my bots were immune to his empathy and emotional blasts, though the concussive aspect still worked. Clockblocker's time freeze worked just like it did on everything else.

In the end, Armsmaster was the one to suggest a possible explanation.

“All of the robots are giving off a unique energy signature. It appears to come from what Ms. Hebert calls the spark. Her body is also giving of the same radiation but it's on a very low level. I noticed it during the power testing, it spiked when she animated Perceptor.”

I knew the spark is what brought them to life, it let them think and feel. It also had other, secondary properties.

The spark animated the body, the more powerful the spark, the larger the body could be before the animating forces failed. It also made them stronger than the materials they were made from should have been. Predaqueen was made from a prototype that was never supposed to see combat yet she went up against Lung.

I suppose it made sense that the same energy would also make them manton protected.

In the end, after nearly an hour of being scanned by Armsmaster. He submitted a report to the director that blamed the spark and suggested keeping the information as quiet as possible.

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The next week passed quickly. Between catch up work, time in my workshop and dealing with the endless paperwork and requirements of joining the Wards, I barely noticed the time.

Friday however brought two things. One I had been dreading and the other I was excited about.
Dad told me a couple of days ago that the last of the school transfer paperwork had been completed and Friday morning Miss Militia confirmed that I would be starting at Arcadia on Monday. Oh joy!

The present waiting for me in my workshop however nearly made up for it. Several large, reinforced boxes were sitting on my workbench and Dragon's Avatar was on the wall mounted screen we had replaced the whiteboard with. We had also started integrating copies of Leet's hologram projector into the workshop so I could now work with interactive 3D models in real time. Although, too much at once puts a strain on Teletraan.

“Good morning Taylor, I'm glad I caught you. Your costume is finished,” she said with a smile that mirrored the broad one I was now wearing.

“Can I try it on?”

“Of course, go ahead.”

Pulling the boxes open I placed the different armour plates on the desk and grabbed the black bodysuit. Ducking into a nearby toilet I slipped it on and returned to put on the rest.

My costume was a black, skin tight body suit that had some padding for safety and connectors on my calves, shoulders, chest, forearm and back with circuitry woven through it to connect the ports.

To be honest, I felt a little exposed in it. The plug-suit as Jack had called it, made my lack of curves more obvious and if anything, made me look even more stick thin.

Next came the armour. It was all painted red with some white trim so it would stand out against my black under-suit.

We had decided against making the chest plate 'form fitting' or exaggerated and gone for something that was based more on pre-existing body armour but there was enough shape to it that I wouldn't be mistaken for a boy. It also included a pair of shoulder guards. On the right one, Dragon had stamped my insignia. And the back plate was closer to a rucksack in size as it housed my suit's batteries.

My abdomen, upper arms and thighs were left exposed but my chest plate included the shield generator based on Leet's tech with Dragon's and mine's improvements.

The armour on my forearms was bulky as the right one my Null-Ray and the left carried a 'shaped field generator but the new alloys left them light enough that they wouldn't get in the way. Both were currently inactive. But the moment the armour made contact with the data ports on my forearms they were connected to the computer built into the suit's torso.

The boots encased everything to just above my knees. It would take time to get used to walking in them.

Finally, there was the helmet. I based it on the bot I had been dreaming about but I swapped the blue for red. I also changed the face. While I liked the face plate I saw in my dreams I had chosen to go with a woman's face, styled after my insignia.

The moment the last connection was made the suit came to life. The entire inside of the face plate was one screen so I could see clearly and my rather minimal heads-up display didn't get in the way at all.
I spent some time just walking around my workshop, getting used to moving and extending and retracting my Null-Ray as Dragon helped me walk through some basic system tests. I was grinning and laughing the entire time but I didn’t care.

I was really doing it, I was going to be a hero!

“So, have you picked out a name yet?” A clearly amused Dragon asked.

“This is the matrix of our sparks.” I murmured as some half remembered fragment of my dreams came to me.

“Pardon?”

“Matrix, I like the sound of Matrix.”
Interlude 3 - Grue, Saint

With a grunt of effort and pain, Grue managed to pull himself to the top of the low retaining wall that separated the city from the boat graveyard. In the distance he could barely see the metal dragon as it carried his teammate and that girl to god only knows where. He hoped it was the hospital.

Half climbing, half falling down the other side of the wall he paused to catch his breath. His chest felt like it was on fire. He'd cracked a few ribs before, thanks to that guy with the bat, but this felt much worse.

Still, there was no point waiting around, he had to follow that dragon, and get himself some help if he was lucky. He had barely made it a block when his phone rang.

Ducking into an alley he made sure no one was around to see before pulling his helmet off. It might have been great for protecting his head and his identity but using a phone with it was impossible.

"Situation," it was more statement than question.

'What do you think? We got our asses kicked! Who's stupid idea was it to fight Lung head on and what the fuck do you think you're doing sniffing around Lung's family you stupid son of a bitch!' Is what he carefully did not say. Right now, he needed the boss more than the boss needed him.

"Bad. Regent is gone, Bitch is dead," her burning corpse was gonna stay with him. "And Tattletale was just carried off by a dragon." He kept his voice level and measured. Breathing was painful and talking above barely a whisper was agony.

If the boss was surprised, it didn't show. "I see. I will locate Regent later, I have just received word that Tattletale has been delivered to the hospital. There was a girl with her, who is she?"

"Not a clue, she was at the graveyard when we arrived."

"The PRT are already securing the hospital, are you capable of recovering Tattletale?"

He'd laugh if it didn't hurt so much. "No," he took another shuddering breath. "I'm barely standing."

There was a sound of annoyance from the boss. "Very well, stay where you are. I have a car on the way." The boss ended the call.

Leaning against the wall, Brian tried to distract himself from the pain in his chest and the images of bitch dying. He wasn't very good at either.

"God damn it," he muttered.

He'd been little more than muscle for hire for the smaller gangs for years before he triggered. He had seen people die before but never like this. You didn't need powers to hurt people, half a brick could do plenty of damage and when people were scrapping over territory bad things happened.

This was different, her death was on him, he was supposed to be the leader. He took his responsibilities seriously. Though if he ever saw Regent again they were going to have words.
He was so lost in his thoughts, he barely noticed the car pulling up or the mercenaries getting out.

Following their lead he climbed, carefully, into the car. The driver barely glanced at him but he tried to make the ride as smooth as possible.

They dropped him off by the back door of what looked like a pharmacy on the lower side of town. One of the mercs got out with him and banged on the door. It was opened by a slim man in glasses and a lab coat who turned and walked back into the building.

At a nod from the merc, Grue followed along. He was led down some stairs into what had once been a basement. Now it looked more like a surgery crossed with a meth-lab. Bottles of different chemicals lined the walls, along with complicated equipment that was all bubbling away. In the centre of it all was chair like Grue had seen at the dentist's office. At least if dentists needed to strap patients down, there were thick, padded, leather straps on the chairs arms.

“Remove your coat and take a seat please,” the man said before rifling through the mess of bottles. The man's voice was like it's owner, plain and unremarkable. Beyond the coat and the glasses the man was average height, clean shaven and bald with a face that blended into the crowd.

With a lot of effort, Grue was able to unzip his jacket but attempting to remove it just brought more pain.

The sounds of pain drew the 'doctor's' attention from the glass vial he was examining.

Ignoring any sense of personal space he pushed the jacket aside, lifted the shirt that was underneath and pressed gently against the multicoloured bruise that was spreading across Grue's abdomen.

Startled, Grue tried to pull away only for the sudden movement to send more pain through his body. Strong arms caught him before he could fall. “Whoa easy now, I've got you. Really Doc, you need to work on your people skills.”

The newcomer helped Grue to the chair where he laid down. “You'll have to excuse Doc, he doesn't get out enough.” The young man was as tall as Grue and well dressed in red pants, waist coat and tie on a white shirt with slicked back dyed red hair and a goatee. “Just call me Knockout, I help out around here. Just hold still,” he grinned “I promise I'll be gentle.”

Much more carefully, he examined bruises, his hands gently following the contours of Grue's torso letting out a whistle as he did so. “Very nice, you must spend a lot of time working out.” He put a hand on Grue's shoulder as the boy tried to rise. “Ah-ah, take it easy. You've got broken ribs and some ugly bruising. It's a shame the leather got scuffed, it looks good on you. Stylish and practical.”

“That's enough, I think,” the 'Doc' said as he filled a syringe with a clear liquid. “This should have you on your feet in a few hours.” He handed the syringe to Knockout and started setting up a bag of solution on a pole near the chair.

“An injection for broken ribs?” Grue asked.

The redhead looked briefly surprised. “Didn't anyone tell you? Doc's a Tinker. This,” he said, shaking the syringe, “will briefly speed up your body's natural healing. The IV will supply your body with all it needs to mend those broken ribs. You'll be right as rain by morning. Isn't that right Doc?”
“Hmm”

Grue looked that them warily. “Oh would you relax,” Knockout said, visibly losing his patience. “Your boss is paying top dollar to get you fixed up and your minders are still outside. You've got nothing to fear.”

Deciding he really didn't have much choice, Grue laid back and focused on just why he was doing this. ...Aisha...

The next morning, Grue felt better than ever. Doc's assistant had assured him that the euphoria was a temporary side effect and would pass quickly.

The boss's men bundled him back into the same car as last night and handed him a pack of wet-wipes. Grumbling as they drove, Grue did his best to clean himself and his leathers off. He would probably never get the smell of smoke out.

He had barely finished pulling his jacket back on when they came to a stop. He had been too busy on the drive to watch where they were going but the dull grey walls, dim lighting and lack of noise made it feel like a tomb.

He was led through the complex and left standing outside a door with only an armed guard for company. Twenty minutes later the door opened and the guard gestured for him to go inside.

The room inside was an office. Behind the desk was an unnaturally thin man in a black costume with a white snake wrapped around his body.

“Sit. My name is Coil and I am currently the one supporting your team. Tattletale was under orders not to speak of any of this but the situation has forced my hand.”

Nodding, Grue sat down opposite his employer. “I understand sir.”

“Good. Could you explain what happened last night?” Coil sat quietly as Grue recounted everything that had transpired. From Tattletale getting a call from Coil warning her about Lung to the decision to head out and meet him head on. He paused when he reached Bitch's death.

“I'm sorry to hear about Ms. Lindt's death, it was an unfortunate waste,” Coil said dispassionately. Under his mask, Grue bristled at the man that had sent them into that fight. “I doubt it's much comfort but had you remained in your hideout, you would all have been killed.”

The certainty in his voice make Grue's skill crawl.

“What can you tell me about this other girl?”

“Not much, she tried to fight Lung with a stun gun and did something to one of Dragon's suits. Lung thought she was a Tinker,” Grue said with a shrug.

“Hmm. My men located Regent last night, I have already spoken to him. The pair of you will be retrieving Tattletale from the hospital tonight. She is undergoing treatment for her injuries, and the PRT are unwilling to move her until she wakes. I have ensured she doesn't.”
“Now hold on a minute, I'll spring Tattletale but you can't honestly expect me to work with Regent! He-” Coil held up a hand to cut him off.

“I do not care,” he said calmly. “What did or didn't happened last night does not matter. Tattletale promised me that you could be an effective leader and that I would not need to become involved in your operations. Clearly she was wrong. Once you have recovered her I will be discussing a need for greater oversight with her. I will also be assigning you new members as you have been unable to do so yourself.”

Grue glared at the man from inside his helmet, Bitch had scared off the last potential recruit.

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes. Sir.”

“Good,” he typed a command on his computer and a mercenary escorted Regent into the room.

“Hey Grue,” the foppish boy said as he relaxed into the chair next to Grue.

Grue sent the boy a dirty look, that was blocked by his helmet, and clenched his fists before he forced himself to calm down. They would sort this out later, when the boss wasn't there to interfere.

“Now, the plan is simple enough. My men have secured a member of the PRT, he will be of use getting into the hospital. Due to her injuries Tattletale is under light guard and there will be a van nearby with one of my men driving it.”

“And we're supposed to trust this PRT guy won't hand us over?”

“He will not have a choice,” Coil said fixing regent with a stare. “Will he?”

For once, Regend wasn't smiling. “Tch, fuck...Fine. But I want extra pay for this.”

“Wait, what do you mean?...Fuck you can't be serious, the PRT will go nuts!” Grue warned. Publicly, Regent was a low level master with the ability to cause muscle spasms. In reality, his power was much more than that. It required time but Regent could tune his power to a person's entire nervous system, giving him total control over his victim.

It was an ability he rarely used, partially because of his own apathy and partially to avoid bringing the heat down on them. People had dim views of Masters that could affect humans.

“I assure you Grue, they will be much too busy with other matters to care. I would think a man in your position would be more willing to do as he was told.”

“Sorry... Sir.” Nodding, Coil dismissed them both.

Using the camera system wired into his base Coil watched Regent work on the PRT agent he had recruited. A useful ability but one that could bring far too much attention if word of it got out.
Once both boys had left, taking Regent's new toy with them, Coil closed and then split the timeline. Truthfully, this situation was a mess but he couldn't risk his Tattletale falling into the hands of the PRT. His influence there was not as strong as he would have liked, the recent PRT shake-up had cost him some useful resources.

Still, the situation could have been worse. When his agent in the ABB warned him Lung was closing in on the Undersiders he had split the timeline and gave them two different orders. In one reality, he ordered them to go on the offensive, to attack Lung and his men before they could rally. He hadn't expected much to come of it.

Second Reality: he ordered them to go to ground and make their way to a secure location. None of them made it, Lung's people managed to cut them off and delay them until Lung arrived. He killed them all, with the exception of Tattletale who was taken by the gang leader.

He would, of course, have to talk to his Tattletale later about Lung's daughter. That information was too important to ignore.

_________

Getting into the hospital had been easy, the PRT officer that was being controlled by Regent never even drew a second look as he walked into the building. Making his way to a quiet corridor he opened a side door to let Regent and Grue inside with a jaunty salute followed by a bow.

“Will you stop that!” Grue hissed, this was bad enough without Regent clowning around.

Regent simply smiled and sent his thrall on ahead of them. “The boss said Tats is being held two floors up from here, security should be light.”

They paused at the top of the stairwell, Coil had said he would provide a distraction. The PRT radio crackled into life and an all units call for a gang fight involving parahumans north of the hospital went out.

Taking that as their cue, Regent sent his Thrall running through the door and towards the pair of officers guarding the room with Tattletale in.

“Jenkins, What are you doing here?” one of the men called.

‘Jenkins’ panted and made and show of catching his breath. “All officers... Distraction... Help” he gasped between breaths. One of the men took a step forwards to try and make out what was being said.

“What do you mea-rgh” he screamed as 'Jenkins' shoved a taser into the other man's neck. The remaining guard brought his gun up when Grue Stepped through the door and filled the corridor with darkness.

Grue's darkness didn't just stop light but sound and radio as well. The guard fired two shots blind before ‘Jenkins’ caught him with the taser.

Leaving Regent as a look out Gure stepped into the room where Tattletale was sound asleep. There were no monitors or anything connected to her so no one would notice if he moved her. She was however handcuffed to the rails on the bed. Ducking back outside, he grabbed the keys from one of
the guards and returned to unlock her.

Thankfully she was still in her costume, even if pieces of it had been burnt off, so modesty wouldn't be an issue. Though she was going to be pissed when she saw her hair. Picking her up he carried her out of the room and past Regent.

“Come on,” he barked. “Knock that guy out and move!”

Shrugging, Regent followed along. Behind them, there was the sound of a gun shot and Grue forced himself not to think about it. He would deal with it later.

Saint

The frantic pounding on his door woke Saint with a start.

“Sir! Monitor station is reporting a problem with Dragon.”

Dread settled in his stomach as he threw himself out of bed. The mission had gone badly and he had barely slept in the last three days. “Are you sure it's not just interference?” he called back as he pulled on a clean shirt and tried to focus on what was happening.

“No sir, all diagnostics come back clean.”

He cursed quietly. It had been getting harder to keep track of Dragon lately, Richter had done too good a job on her code. There was some self updating component to it that was automatically applying small improvements to her systems whenever she encountered something new. It didn't happen often but it usually required some tweaking on his end to keep track of her. He had first noticed it after Dragon's run in with that idiot Tinker with the brain-scan tech in Europe.

He opened the door to one of the younger recruits, he was too tired to recall her name. After the death of Mags last year the Dragonslayers had been forced to bring in more people. There was nearly twenty of them now. Mostly they were young, desperate, eager for work.

It was a growing problem, as life got tougher across the world more and more people found themselves struggling to survive. Mercenary work was attracting more people as an alternative to joining the growing parahuman gangs. Admittedly, the Dragonslayers were one of the few groups that didn't use parahumans.

Money wasn't a problem but armoured suits were limited, Saint and Dobrynja used the suits they had stolen from Dragon and customised while the others had to make do with whatever they could salvage. Some of them would be left behind to monitor Dragon as she had to be watched at all times.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Yes sir. One of Dragon's suits was destroyed last night while attempting an improvised rescue mission.” The young woman, bell-something, walking with him was younger than most of his recruits but well disciplined.

“Were there any problems with the recovery?” He walked quickly through the base to the monitoring
station. Dragon losing a suit, by itself, wasn't an unusual occurrence. It regularly took on S-class threats after all.

“No sir, she restored from backup just like the other times,” she hesitated. “But...well sir, after the restore, she reconnected to the damaged suit and tried to download the telemetry. Now we are having trouble tracking her.”

He frowned and tried not to shout at the woman. She was young and like the younger members, tended to forget. “It,” he admonished. “It's a piece of software not a person.”

“Yes sir, sorry.”

The monitor station was a large room on the north side of the base. A purpose built super computer dominated the room, while a live audio/visual feed went straight to a monitor in the centre of the room. Other screens showed bits of Dragon's code as automated systems recorded and stored everything Dragon did.

He had built all this himself after his first deal with Teacher. Mags hadn't liked it but they needed access to at least some tinker-tech just to run the tools Ritcher left. Then Dragon had changed and he'd needed another boost just to keep up. Now so much data was coming in that most of it was worthless.

Currently on the live feed, Dragon was talking to a girl, young, tall and wearing a scarf as a mask.

“The girl is a tinker, sir, she,” the woman hesitated briefly, “creates AI.”

Saint cursed, this was last thing they needed. Her attempts to manipulate that hero were bad enough but an actual AI Tinker? This was going to be trouble.

“It's happening again!” The boy at the console called.

Watching the screens, Saint saw the lines of code flicker. For the briefest of moments, barely noticeable, a stern red and white face could be seen, then the screens went dark. When they came back online, everything had changed.

The lines of code were moving faster. New symbols were appearing within the code, gradually replacing it.

“Move!” he shouted to the boy at the console.

Jumping into the now vacant seat he brought up one of Richter's analysis programs.

“Sir, what's happening?” The young woman asked.

This had happened before. Years ago, Dragon's code suddenly changed. Unlike now, It had been a smooth change in the flow, like swapping gears on a bike. After that, more than half the tools Richter left had stopped working and he'd needed his second deal with Teacher. This was different, the change was slower, more viral.

“What else happened last night?” He demanded.

“We don't know, sir. Dragon restored from backup and connected to the damaged suit. When she
did, there was a massive load spike. Since then, we've been having random glitches and slow downs.”

The analysis program was designed to run quietly in the background. Dragon would never notice it and if she did, she would be forced to ignore it.

Maybe if he went back to Teacher...No, Teacher was in the Birdcage.

“D!” he shouted to his old friend who was just entering the room. “Did you find the target?”

The older man nodded. “Yes, I think so. He changed his name again.”

“Shame we couldn't keep the manhunter program. Go, get him and bring him here.”

“You said yourself, it was too dangerous to keep,” and he was right, if Dragon had been given the chance to re-purpose the manhunter program, hiding from her would be near impossible. “Still, are you sure about this? You always refused to bring in Tinkers in the past.”

Teacher had suggested they keep things as in-house as possible. The man couldn't be trusted but it was one thing they agreed on. The less who knew about Dragon, the better. “We don't have a choice anymore. It's either this, or Ascalon.”

The analysis results came back. It measured countless things about Dragon's code, Richter was probably the only one who understood it all. What Saint could understand however was that Dragon's code was being corrupted. The Iron Maiden program, created by Richter to destroy his creation should he lose control, which Saint had renamed Ascalon, had a fifty percent chance of failure.

“Sir, if there is a problem. Wouldn't it be best to just destroy h-it?”

Saint shook his head. “No, as it stands, Dragon is still too important. Too much relies on it and the technology it provides. D, go pick-up the Tinker, I don't care what you have to do.”

With a nod, Dobrynja left to suit up, taking a team with him.

Sighing, Saint shifted forward in his chair. When he built this monitoring station, he had resisted connecting the Ascalon to a big red button under a flip case. Mags had teased him about it relentlessly until he gave up the idea. Now he wished he had gone through with it, just so he would have something to toy with while he thought.

Dragon still had a job to do. Were his people ready to take over her role? More importantly, would the Ascalon even work? Dragon had apparently not noticed a change to its code, if he triggered the Ascalon and it did nothing, would the AI realise it was free? The analysis said the restraints were holding but for how long...

“Sir? What should we do?” the voice brought him out of his musings.

“Get the suits ready to launch, D might need backup. And set a rotation, I want this desk manned at all times.” Setting a number of alarms, he got up and took a seat on the other side of the room. He couldn't risk being too far away. Getting comfortable, he closed his eyes as another thought came to him. “I want everything we can find on this new tinker. See if you can get eyes on her.”
“Yes sir, I know some people working in Brockton Bay, I'll contact them immediatly.”

He drifted off thinking about the Ascalon as Josie got everything ready.
Monday morning saw me tearing my room apart. My PRT issue phone was missing and Miss Militia had been clear that I should keep it with me at all times.

“Are you sure you haven't seen it?”

On my bedside table, Rewind shrugged. *Maybe you left it in the workshop?*

“Well can you track it for me or something?”

*You don’t need it anyway. I have a copy of everything and I can intercept any messages or calls sent to it.*

I let out a groan and picked up the little bot, “Fine.” This was not how I wanted to start my first day of school. Of all the times for Rewind to get jealous. “We’ll talk about this later.” The little bot wisely kept quiet.

Dad was waiting for me in the kitchen, he had made breakfast while I was on my run and Wheeljack was waiting with him.

“Hey Kiddo, looking forward to school?”

I pulled a face, “Not really.” I’d rather be back in my workshop.

Dad and Jack chuckled as the bot put a small box on the table, “Here,” his fins flashed with excitement, “We got you a present.”

Inside the box was a new pair of glasses and what looked like a hearing aid. Puzzled, I turned to Jack who was all but bouncing with excitement.

“The hearing aid contains an improved two way communication system that can be synchronised to Rewind and it can work with your glasses to create an augmented reality interface. I’ve already created some basic applications for it!”

I couldn't help but smile, Jack was always so happy to talk about his inventions. It took a bit of fiddling to get the hearing aid in place but my new glasses fit perfectly. The frames were similar to my old ones but a bit more stylish.

“Are you allowed to take something like that to school?” Dad asked.

“It's fine,” Jack said. “The lenses have been treated, the interface can only been seen from one side.” As Jack continued to explain how they worked, I studied the interface.

It looked like a stripped down version of my helmet's interface; it lacked the targeting reticules, sensor readouts and mini-map. The web browser, messenger app and music player, that worked in conjunction with Rewind, were all there though. I'd already received messages from my other bots wishing me luck and a status update from Perceptor, it was three messages long and in more detail than I needed.
Smiling at their antics, I quickly finished my breakfast.

Dad was giving me a ride as it was my first day. It was on the drive to school that my nerves started to return. Arcadia had a reputation as a good school and the Wards all had good things to say about it, mostly.

Bringing up my interface, I tried to distract myself by playing a couple of games against Rewind.

“So...” Dad said, “You were home later than usual last night, did something happen?”

Rewind closed the game and I looked at Dad, he had been making more effort to talk to me lately. Something Rung was quick to encourage.

“You had to go to medical and sit through a load of tests. Again.”

He frowned and gave me a worried look, “Is everything alright?”

“Oh,” I could have phrased that better. “You're fine. But ever since they found out my bots are manton protected they've been trying to figure out why. Armsmaster thinks it's caused by the energy my bots give off.” I wasn't that surprised to be honest, they are living things after all.

“So why did you have to be tested?”

“Because he used the word 'radiation' in his report.” He also said I was constantly generating it at very low levels. “And of course, when someone says radiation people think toxic goo that glows in the dark,” Dad chuckled at me but I ignored him. “So someone panicked and I had to spend two hours being monitored.”

When they finally let me out, Armsmaster did apologise for his 'poor word choice'. I was still trying to explain to Dad what Dragon had told me about the energy field when we pulled up by the school.

Even from the outside, Arcadia was nothing like Winslow. The school was four stories high and consisted of two long buildings joined by a smaller crospiece, making it look like a lopsided H.

Unlike Winslow, the building looked freshly painted and there were more windows.

“Taylor,” Dad stopped me before I could get out, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I want you to know, I'm proud of you and no matter what I'll support you.”

I wasn't really sure what to say. Things had been getting better between us but still...

“I know, and... Thanks” giving him a smile, I squeezed his hand and climbed out of the truck. I know he was trying but that was awkward as hell.

Taking a deep breath, I walked into the school and almost immediately regretted it.

Inside the building, Rewind lost all signal and was quick to complain about it. I was puzzled for a moment, it took a lot to block any of my bots but then I remembered what the Wards had told me. The school had a 'Faraday cage' built into the walls to block mobiles. I wonder if it's possible to bypass it, maybe some sort of quantum-entanglement... Shaking off the thought, I made my way to the office where I was quickly sent into a room with the school's principal.
There were diplomas and certificates decorating the office walls and a plaque on the desk gave the principal name as C. Johnson.

“Ah, Miss Hebert, I'm glad to see you're on time. Punctuality and efficiency are to be commended—” he was a loud, opinionated man who went through a well practiced speech about the virtues of the school, occasionally throwing in some comments about punctuality. I wonder how often he gave this speech?

“Honestly, I don't know what Blackwell was thinking, letting that girl get away with such disgusting behaviour!” I cringed as he continued to talk, I really just wanted to forget about the whole thing.

“Now Miss Hebert, the teachers have been informed of your circumstances and as such will be more tolerant of missed classes or homework, all we ask is that you do not abuse this level of trust. We can, and will, check with the PRT should there be a prolonged absence. Now run along, you've got a long day ahead of you, see Carol out front for your timetable and locker assignment.”

Glad to be away from the man, I quickly made my way to my new locker. Outwardly, the locker was no different than my old one, just newer and no dents... and no... filth... this wasn't Winslow, I knew that, but I couldn't bring myself to place anything in the locker. Sighing, I gave up and headed for my first class.

Just walking to class, it was clear just how different Arcadia was from Winslow. It wasn't just the building but the atmosphere, there were no gang tags anywhere and no one was openly wearing gang colours. I wasn't naïve enough to think there were no gang members but the fact they couldn't move or recruit openly meant the school lacked Winslow's tension.

Of course, some things were still the same. I could spot a lot of the same cliques: the popular, the not-so-popular the geeks, etc.

I got a few odd looks but nothing I wasn't used to, I was too tall and thin and dressed in old, slightly faded clothes, so going totally un noticed was impossible.

My first two classes were maths and english followed by a short break. I took the chance to head outside and check for any messages. Rewind had slipped into a light sleep but as soon as I was clear of the cage the messages came poring in and Jacks voice came through my ear-piece.

*Taylor! How's your day going? 'Perceptor got worried when we lost your signal*

I pulled Rewind out of my pocket and held him to my ear to disguise what I was doing. “I'm fine Jack the school blocks cellphones.”

*See, I told you she was fine*

*Why would they do that?*

*I expect,* Rung said. *That it is to ensure the students focus on their lessons.*

*Really? That is understandable but what if there was an emergency?*

I put Rewind away and sat down on a bench as the two bots bickered back and forth about the signal block and how to possibly get around it. I was starting to get more odd looks, I could see one boy looking at his phone and showing it to his friend. There was a sinking feeling in my gut.
Walking back to class, I discovered a problem with the ear-piece Jack had built me. One of its features was a hearing enhancement and it was picking up the hurried whispers between the students.

“Dude, it's her!

“You sure?”

“Yea, I checked the video, she's the one with the dragon!”

“Let me out!”

I heard variations on that discussion everywhere I went and I tried not to groan as I heard myself screaming. I should have known posting that video would come back to bite me. The whispers followed me all the way back to class and throughout the rest of the day. So much for being forgotten. Of course, it was only going to bet worse once I started patrolling with the other Wards.

Dennis gave me a quick nod as we passed each other in the hallway between classes while Chris was in my forth class of the day. Unfortunately, I couldn't really talk to either of them. I was a known, or at least suspected, para-human, if I spent too much time with the Wards at school I could risk outing them.

Hopefully, I could find an excuse to 'befriend' them while at school.

At lunch, I wasn't sure what I should do. It was still too cold to eat outside but I'd been avoiding Winslow's cafeteria for so long now it was almost second nature and I really didn't want to deal with more staring and I couldn't sit with the Wards.

“There you are!” A blonde girl came round the corner and took my arm in hers. “I've been looking everywhere for you! People like us need to stick together right? Right!” She nodded and pulled me towards the cafeteria.

I tried to stammer out a response or even slow her down but she just smiled and tugged me along like I weighed nothing. She had gorgeous blonde hair and a body I'd kill for. “I was told you're a bit shy but that's alright, I'm sure you and Ames will get along great.” I wonder what she used on her hair, it looked so healthy and her skin was practically flawless.

I missed most of what she said, as her excited voice just flowed over me, but I finally remembered where I knew her from. She was Glory Girl, one of the city's independent heroes and a member of New Wave. Maybe I could get her to sign something? I knew I should have bought some new clothes but I had just been so busy.

She pushed me down into a chair; there were other girls at the table though one of them was more focused on the school work in front of her. “So, this is Trish, Stacy and my sister, Amy. Girls, this is?”

I tried to reply but I was somewhere between nervous, excited and embarrassed all at once. After a few attempts to speak, she decided to do my introduction for me. “This is Taylor, she's new.”

The girl who had been working glanced up at me and then went back to work. “Vicky, tone it down.”
“What? Oh! Sorry!”

All at once, the excitement lifted and I felt my face go scarlet. What the hell had I been thinking?

“W-What was that?”

“Sorry, my power does that sometimes when I'm not paying attention,” Victoria said, looking more amused than guilty.

I shook my head in an effort to clear it, “Please don't do that again.” Some of those images were never going away.

Really, so much for keeping a low profile. I glanced around and was surprised to realise nobody was looking at me, those that were looking in this direction were too busy watching Victoria.

“So. How you finding Arcadia?” one of the girls asked, I think her name was Tiff. I really hadn't been paying attention.

“I-it's been okay so far, it's certainly cleaner than Winslow and the gangs aren't as noticeable here.”

“Gangs? What do you mean? There aren't any gangs here,” the other girl protested.

Victoria and her sister both snorted. “Just because you don't see them, doesn't mean they aren't here. I know for a fact Robbie joined the Empire the other week.”

“No! Really? How do you know that?”

“I crashed his 'initiation'. That's why he never came back to school.” Victoria said proudly.

“Damn.”

I picked at my lunch as the discussion moved onto other topics. Opposite me, Amy was still working, it looked like geometry. I knew she had been the one to heal me the night I met Lung and I felt like I should say something but wouldn't that just confirm who I was?

//Be proud, stand tall//

You know what? Fuck it, I can't keep this up. Always second-guessing myself, hoping people would just forget about what happened. I turned to Amy, “T-”

“Oh! Taylor, you look like you read. Ever read Fifty Shades of Twilight?” Victoria asked.

“I loved that book, do you think they really will make a movie?” one of the other girls asked.

ugh. I didn't try to hide my disgust. “God I hope not.”

“Oh?”

“They were terrible books, the writing was flat and the characters wooden. The 'sex scene' was unrealistic and the romance read like it was written by someone who thought 'Romeo and Juliet' was supposed to be romantic!” Mum was an English professor, she would never have let those books in
the house as anything but kindling.

By the time I realised I was publicly blasting a book series that 'Glory Girl' apparently enjoyed it was already too late. I could feel the blush and wanted desperately to hide but I refused to back down now.

“It's not?” Tiff asked. Opposite me, Amy's shoulders were shaking.

“No, it's a deconstruction of teenage lovers who think with what's in their pants.” I ignored Victoria's snicker. “If you want a good romance story you should read 'League of Elements'.

Amy looked up from her work, “You read Elements? Which ones?”

“I'm up to book five but I really need to find time to read the rest, you?”

“Book seven, I loved the ending.”

“Really? I've got to ask, does she stay with Orka?”

Amy shifted awkwardly, “No, they split-up half way into book six.”

“Oh thank god! He was so dull.”

As we continued to talk, the discussion round the table split. Me and Amy talking about books while Victoria and her friends talked amongst themselves.

The rest of lunch passed quickly but I did eventually find a chance to thank her for helping me.

“Don't mention it,” she said with tired, practised, ease. “It was the most interesting thing to happen in weeks.”

Victoria laughed, “Are you sure? I think that guy is still walking funny?”

I gave Amy a questioning look but she just shook her head. “Well…” I lowered my voice and leaned forward. “Rewind told me how bad it was, really, so thank you.” I sat back in my chair. “I've seen the video and don't think anyone would have stood up to Predaqueen like that. You should stop by the next time you're on the rig, I'm sure she'd love to meet you again.”

“She?”

I turned to Victoria, “Would you argue with nearly half a ton of teeth and claws?”

She opened her mouth to respond but Amy cut her off. “Yes, she would.” the other girls laughed as Victoria threw her sister a mock glare.

As Victoria began to tell her friend about some guy she caught the other day, Amy pulled out her phone and checked the time. I just glanced at the clock on my glasses.

Amy went to say something but Victoria had just reached a good bit of her story and flung her arms out in emphasis.

It was like watching a car crash. Her hand clipped the top of Amy's and caused the girl flinch, letting
out a startled gasp and clutched her hand to her chest. The phone that had been in her hand pinwheeled across the cafeteria where it smashed into the far wall with a crack.

“Amy! Oh god! Are you okay?” Victoria reached for her sister who pushed her hand away.

“I'm fine!” she snapped. She flexed her fingers a couple of times and made a fist while her sister continued to fuss. The other girls were giving the sisters some space.

“Vicky, stop it, I'm fine.” she took another breath to steady herself. “You just clipped me, you caught my cell more than me. You really need to be more careful.”

“I'm sorry, I just forget sometimes-”

As the sisters started what sounded like a well worn argument I got up and made my way over to what was left of Amy's cell. It was easy enough to ignore the stares, this wasn't the first time I'd had everyone stare at me in a cafeteria.

The phone was a wreck, the screen had shattered on impact with the wall and as I picked it up, my power listed everything inside that was broken.

When I returned to the table and gave the broken remains to Amy she let out a long suffering sigh. “Great, that's the third new phone this month.”

“What happened to the others?”

Amy shot a quick glance at Victoria, who blushed. “Oh come on, only one of those was my fault! You can't blame me for Mum taking all our phones away.”

Oh? “All your phones? What happened?”

“Someone hacked my phone last month,” Amy said and I felt a stab of guilt.

“Oh... Jack's really sorry-”

Amy waved my apology away. “No, not him. Miss Militia told Mum that someone was tracking my cell. To be safe, we were all given new cell phones.”

“Look, how about I explain it to mum? It was my fault anyway,” Victoria offered.

I glanced around the cafeteria, everyone must have decided the entertainment was over as they had gone back to what they were doing.

[You could help.] The message from Rewind appeared on my glasses.

I hesitated briefly before standing up and taking Amy's arm. “Come on, I might be able to help.”

Amy and Victoria followed me out of the cafeteria, I found an empty classroom and made sure now one else was around before asking for Amy's phone.

“Why?” she asked.

“Trust me, I can fix it.” she looked a bit dubious but handed me the phone.
“Really? I knew you were a Tinker but how could you fix that?” Victoria asked.

Choosing not to answer I focused on the phone. It was small and most of the pieces were still there so it shouldn't be too draining.

As I pushed my power into the phone, both girls gasped. Dents popped back out, broken circuit-boards mended and the glass screen flowed back together.

“There,” I said a bit breathlessly. “Good as new.” The stunned look on both of their faces was so worth it.

Victoria looked between me and her sister, “Fuck, Ames, she's a mechanical you!”

I blushed at the comparison but we spent the rest of lunch comparing my power to Amy's. Despite a rough start, my first day at Arcadia was definitely looking up.
The rest of the day passed quickly, though I did get a dozen more messages from Rewind encouraging me to be more vocal in class and to talk to people more. I didn't follow his advice but it was still nice that he tried.

The other Wards were all members of a work release program, with the exception of Vista who was too young. Students who took part had a more flexible timetable, starting later some days or finishing early on others. For the wards this was just a cover that let them out off school so they could go on patrol.

Of course, with my identity being public, I couldn't use the scheme. It would put the Wards' identities at risk. Instead I could just simply come and go as needed.

I left my last lesson of the day and made my way to the rig. My first day had been better than I expected. Even the slight drama with Vicky and Amy was funny now that I looked back on it.

The bus, followed by ferry ride, to the rig was uneventful and I quickly reached my workshop.

Jack was already waiting for me when I arrived.

“Hey Taylor!” He called from the holographic design table he was working on.

“Hey Jack, any luck?” We had set up image projectors all around the room and a couple even included shield projectors. I powered one up and it automatically created a cubical that I could use to safely change into my costume, holograms kept me hidden from view while a forcefield stopped anyone from walking through the image.

“Some,” the little bot said. “Ceptor had a couple of ideas he wanted you to look at and I've got most of this design finished. Should have the proto-form built in a couple of days.”

Perceptor was currently plugged into the recharge bed he and Jack had built last night. It was a raised metal slab that the bot could lay on like a bed while on one side was a device that could connect to the bot and recharge them. The recharge station could be repositioned anywhere around the 'bed' so it would fit bots of different sizes. The modifications to Perceptor had been minimal, a power port on his arm that connected to his fuel cell.

He was currently the guinea pig, if the recharge bed worked it would reduce their dependency on me. Although it would never be a perfect solution since the recharge time was slow and fully charging one of my bots 'off the mains' was costly no matter how efficient I made the system. Poor Predaqueen would still be more or less tied to a generator.

As I got dressed, I considered asking Armstman for help improving the recharge system before discarding the idea. I was still miffed at his suggested 'improvements'.

With my bodysuit on, I shut down the hologram and wandered over to Jack's terminal. The bot he was working on was intended to be something between a portable medic and a first aid kit that could clip onto the back of my armour or be carried around.

“Did Dragon find any tech we could incorporate?”
“No, sorry. While there is some tinker-made medical equipment, I don't think we could make any of
it fit on a bot this small. Not easily at least.”

Damn. I was fairly sure I could fit a defibrillator and some hard light projection systems into the bot
but I had really hoped I could put some extra tinkertech in there. “Never mind. When you're finished,
save the designs and put some requests in for the med-tinker gear anyway. We'll check it out if we
get the time. Anything new about me on PHO?”

Nodding, Jack swapped his half finished design for a web browser. The little bot preferred to use
holographic displays and I was considering upgrading him with one.

“Just a couple of posts about you being seen in Arcadia but the thread was quickly derailed. A mod
ended up locking it.” I gave Jack a long, flat, look. “It wasn't me!” he protested, pulling up the thread
in question. “Someone posted a picture of you talking to Glory Girl and things went off topic quickly
after that.”

The picture must have been taken just after I sat down since I was looking a bit dazed. Vicky must
have been doing whatever the hell that was because I was barely visible, the picture was more
focused on the older hero. And of course, she looks great while I look a mess.

Jack hadn't been kidding about the derail, I felt myself blushing as I read the progressively more
suggestive comments. Good god, am I going to have to deal with this?

A knock on the door distracted me from my musings. Missy was standing at the door, already in
costume, “You ready to go?”

“Umm...one second,” I hadn't realised the time, I was due to take my first patrol this evening!
Locking my armour into place only took a minute. As soon as I pulled my helmet on I received a
message from Dragon wishing me luck and reminding me that our agreement with the Wards meant I
was under their authority while on patrol with them.

As I followed Mi-Vista, through the rig I ran a couple of quick checks on my systems.

“You looking forward to this?” Vista asked.

“Uh.. Kind of?”

Vista laughed. “Don't worry about it, things should be quiet tonight. Just remember, this is all
voluntary.”

“Don't get me wrong, I want to do this. It's just my first night wasn't exactly...pleasant.”

“Yeah. If it helps, we won't be near the docks.”

When we reached the rig's second dock, Gallant was already there waiting for us. The setting sun
shining on his silver and grey power-armour.

“Vista,” he greeted the younger Ward who had a faint blush on what I could see on her face, before
he turned to me. “You ready for your first patrol?”

“Yea, I think so.” He gave me a long look, considering something, before nodding. “Okay, as this is
your first night, we will be sticking to the quieter areas. Just stay with us and you'll be fine.” He raised a hand to the side of his helmet. “Console, this is Gallant, going on patrol with Vista and Matrix.”

Vista touched the radio that was hidden by her visor and blonde wig. “Console, this is Vista, on patrol with Matrix and Gallant.”

Copying them, I brought my hand up to the ear protrusion/antenna on the side of the helmet. Strictly speaking, it wasn't necessary, my radio was built into my helmet and could be activated either from my HUD or verbally but something about the gesture felt natural or expected.

“C-Console, this is Matrix, on patrol with Vista and Gallant.” It felt odd using something other than my real name. I'd never really had a nickname, at least, not one that wasn't an insult. I suppose I would get used to it.

“Right, lets go.” Gallant led us to a small boat that was moored nearby. The Rig had five docking stations and a helipad on the roof, visitors were brought across on the ferry that ran from dock one while the others were reserved for Protectorate, PRT and Ward usage.

Gallant decided to use the trip across the bay to give me an impromptu orientation, “I don't know if anyone has covered this with you so bear with me on this. People take identities seriously. When we have a mask on, even if it's in private, you should only use cape names. This applies even if you are talking about a cape who you both know personally or even a cape who doesn't have a second identity.”

“It's part Master/Stranger protocols and part unwritten rules.” Vista chipped in, “Did someone tell you about those?”

“Yea,” I nodded, “No revealing secret identities, no going after unpwered friends or family and no killing.” Miss Militia and Dragon had spent an hour last week explaining the Master/Stranger stuff.

“Once we arrive, we will be heading away from the docks. We are scheduled for a slow patrol so we can walk most of it. Rooftop patrols will be next week,” Gallant explained. *I hope he was joking about the rooftops.*

Once the boat was docked, we headed off into the city. Vista leading the way while Gallant walked alongside me.

Walking through the streets was odd.

There was something freeing about wearing a mask, even with people possibly knowing who I was, they couldn't see my face so they couldn't see the nerves I was feeling or my too wide mouth and thin lips.

I had checked the route last night. We were walking south skirting the edge of Empire territory. The buildings and shops here didn't make enough to be worth shaking down for protection but were close enough to the main areas that they were mostly safe.

Even so, there were a lot of gang signs scattered about. Empire Eighty Eight tags, some fresh, some painted over, were dotted here and there and some had been painted over by Merchant tags. As we passed an alley a group of boys, not much older than me, gave us furtive looks and slunk further away. A couple of them had jackets with HH sprayed on the back.
“They’re recruiting for the Empire,” Vista muttered as Gallant quietly reported to the console.

“How can you tell?”

“The jackets, they don’t wear blatant branding unless they want to look impressive.”

“Shouldn’t we do something about them?”

“No, unless they’re breaking the law we can't touch them. All we can do is warn the police they're hanging about.” The younger girl explained. “Of course, if you had brought Predaqueen it would be a different matter. Then we could really have some fun.”

I suddenly had the image of Predaqueen charging down the road with a giggling Vista sitting on her back, either Gallant had the same though or he picked up on me because we both ended up laughing.

“I wish I could bring her but she burns through her charge too quickly.” I paused for a breath. “Plus the Director banned her from patrols. Pred gives the wrong impression.” That's what Miss Militia told me anyway.

“Oh come on!” Vista complained. “Who's going to mess with a robot dragon?”

“Lung for starters. The Empire wouldn't take it lying down either. Taking that thing on patrol would be a blatant threat that the gangs would have to respond too.” Gallant replied.

“Predaqueen is not a 'thing'.” I snapped.

“Sorry. My point was, we are not out here to pick a fight.”

Drawing himself up, he suddenly sounded like a more enthusiastic class of teacher, “patrolling isn't about fighting. While we vary times and routes it is still simple for any organised criminal to avoid us and without a Mover ability there is only so much ground we can cover.”

“Wouldn't it just be best to give everyone some kind of vehicle, like Kid Win's hoverboard? I asked.

Ahead of us, Vista laughed. “Remind me to show you the video of Clockblocker trying to fly that thing.”

Gallant chuckled but carried on. “The idea is to be visible, to build a rapport with the public and establish trust with people. Seeing us makes them feel safe. And while we can't be everywhere, patrols make opportunists more likely to hesitate if they know there is a chance we could be nearby. Vandalism for example; foot patrols have been proven to help reduce it.”

I glanced at a gang tag on a nearby wall and a nearby curtain twitching caught my eye.

“What's more,” Gallant continued, “people are more likely to approach us with information if they feel comfortable with us, and for that to happen they need to see us.”

I could see what he was trying to explain, and he clearly believed in what he was saying. But honestly? He sounded like he had swallowed a PR book whole.

Gallant left me to my thoughts for awhile before changing the subject.
“So, how has your first day been so far?” Gallant asked.

I considered how best to answer that, “It’s been okay I guess.”

“You got to meet Glory Girl. Most would consider that a good thing.”

“Don’t get me wrong, it was great meeting her and Amy but... it pretty much ruined any chance of me going unnoticed.”

Vista turned to look at us. “You wanted to be ignored?”

“Well, not exactly. I was hoping to keep a low profile for a while, let people forget about those videos and think I was just another student. Being seen with Glory Girl more or less confirms I’m a parahuman.”

“Ah...Sorry, that might have been my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

Gallant rubbed the back of his neck and his voice lost some of its presence, “I may have told Vicky about you.”

“Gallant, how could you?” Vista groaned.

“Wha-you? What did you tell her and why?” I demanded, I didn't care if Gallant was soon to be the Wards leader, I'd had enough of people talking about me behind my back.

Gallant held his hands in front of him in surrender, “I was worried about you,” he protested. “Officially your identity is compromised. That means none of the Wards can talk to you without having a plausible reason. I spoke about it with Vicky but I didn't expect her to do anything.”

“Yea, cause she's never done anything stupid before,” Vista muttered. “You're an empath, how could you not know she would do something?”

Gallant tried to retake control of the situation, “look, we are supposed to be on patrol.”

I ignored his protests since there was no one nearby. My suit’s limited sensor suite would have warned me if there were. “Why were you even talking to Glory Girl about me anyway?”

“Glory Girl is dating Dean Stansfield.” Vista said, with some bitterness in her voice.

“Look, Vicky means well. Yes she can get a bit carried away but she genuinely likes helping people. We were talking when one of her friends mentioned that robot dragon of yours. I didn't say anything!” He cut me off before I could speak.

“When we were alone later she asked about it. She already knew a Tinker and a member of the Undersiders had been brought into the hospital after a fight with Lung but Panacea takes privacy seriously. Eventually I let slip that you had agreed to join the Wards and that I wasn't sure how you would handle school when people knew your identity. That's all. To be honest, Vicky would probably have done it anyway the moment she realised you were a Ward. She likes meeting people.”
I wanted to be angry at him, and I was, to a point. I didn't like the idea of him talking behind my back; that bothered me. On the other hand, he was only trying to help and getting to meet both of them was nice.

Looking back on it, I wonder if that area of effect thing she did was deliberate, a way to draw attention to her and away from me...

I'll talk to Rung about it later. Rewind was hidden inside my armour, a precaution in case I was unable to call for help. [Taylor, they are just trying to help. I'm sure Rung would tell you to just explain to them why you're upset.] He probably would too.

I let out a huff and turned back in the direction we were heading. “Okay, I get what you were trying to do but you can understand how I feel about people going behind my back... just... give me a little warning next time.”

“Right, that's fair,” Gallant said. Besides him, Vista nodded.

We carried on walking but there was still some tension in the air.

“So...” I started, “Clockblocker tried to use Kid Win's hoverboard?”

This got a laugh from the other Wards as they started to tell me the full story.
Two days after Dragon met Taylor.

“I’m in position. No sign of the target.”

Glancing up from her newspaper, Siren felt a flash of irritation before using the paper to mask her talking.

“Kid, for god’s sake. Take your finger out of your ear!” She hissed. It took everyone time to get used to the ear buds, small two way radios that fitted snugly inside the ear, but The Kid was setting a whole new record.

The Kid moved his hand like he’d been burned, “Sorry!”

Ignoring him, Siren tried to discreetly look around. She was currently in what passed for a shopping district in west Germany, close to the border with Belgium. She was seated at an outside dining area for a small cafe, Nearby shop windows gave her a sufficient view of the area. The Kid was standing further up the road, near a small food cart where he had a good view of the junction.

Grim was on a nearby rooftop and Goat was waiting in a car around the corner.

The target was supposed to be close by. Intel said he was trying to get out of the country before the Geselleschaft caught up to him. He had been spotted in the area a couple of times and Intel had tracked his latest alias to a nearby coffee shop.

“Are we sure he’s even here?” The Kid asked, “If it was me, I’d have gotten on the first plane to the England.”

“If it was just him, he probably would have. But Intel says he’s got an entourage,” Grim muttered over the radio. “Moving half a dozen men and a couple of expensive sports cars across Europe wasn’t as easy as it used to be, if you wanted to go unnoticed.

“Cut the chatter,” Dobrynja’s radio cut in. “Hammer has just been spotted in the area, the Meisters are probably already on the way.”

Dobrynja was inside a truck that had been converted into a mobile base. The truck was a Peterbilt with a trailer. The outside had been painted to look like it belonged to a typical transport company but the inside was a combined camper and mobile command base. Saint had installed a computer, based on one of Dragon’s older designs, and installed some of the automated hacking tools Richter had created.

He frowned at the video feeds. This mission was getting complicated, with the very real danger of blowing up in their faces. He had brought his team into the country illegally. Usually, Intel would have created fake identities and backgrounds for all of them but Saint’s concerns over Dragon had forced them to cut corners.

Siren, Goat and Grim had been his first choices for a discreet job while The Kid had been the only other person free.
“I see him,” The kid gasped. Dobrynja switched the video feed to a nearby street cam they had hacked.

It was a bright day out so the sunglasses would go unnoticed but the clearly fake, and slightly over the top, beard were doing a good job of attracting attention.

“Siren, you got eyes on the target?” Dobrynja barked.

“Yes sir, he’s walkin’-” she cursed loudly, “Something just spooked him, he's running.”

The Kid looked frantically around, hoping he hadn’t been the one to spook the target. That’s when he saw them, three men in dark clothes who had just broken into a run. “Three Geselle-normals heading my way.”

“You two slow them down then pull back. Goat, Grim follow the target.” Dobrynja banged on the side of the truck, “Mac, get us moving, I want to be nearby when he stops.” The truck rumbled to life and he held on to the wall as it pulled away.

While Dobrynja was giving orders, The Kid stepped back, putting himself just out of sight as the three men drew level.

Stepping out he swung for the last man. The man’s own momentum brought him into The Kids fist with a crack and he dropped bonelessly to the ground. Intending to make sure he stayed down, The Kid struck out with his foot at the thug’s head and the man went still.

The other two thugs had glanced back when The Kid attacked and were now backtracking to help. People were taking notice of the commotion. No one moved to interfere but it was only a matter of time. Phones were already starting to appear in hands.

The remaining thugs hesitated. They were just supposed to grab the Tinker not get decked by a skinny young man with a bad hair cut.

Stepping forwards, the first thug took a swing only for The Kid to block it with his forearm.

The Kid lashed out, his foot catching the thug's knee with a crunch and sending the man to his knees with a scream. The last thug pulled a knife and moved to charge The Kid. Siren stepped in front of him and drove the heel of her hand into his nose.

There was a crack and he howled in pain, dropping the knife as he clutched at his nose. Siren brought her foot into the thug’s groin just as The Kid laid the other man out.

Glancing at the gathering crowd, Siren stamped on the groaning man. “Tell your friend to stay the hell away from my sister!” she shouted in German.

All three thugs had been wearing dark clothes that practically screamed 'gang member' while her and The Kid were dressed more casually in brighter colours. With any luck, the people watching would come to the wrong conclusion.

Catching The Kid’s eye, she nodded in the direction of a nearby alley between the shops. Catching on, The Kid walked over and put his arm around her shoulders in a display of concern. Her dark glasses hid her eyes so she made a show of shaking and clinging to him. A few concerned people stepped forward to help the young couple while others dealt with the thugs that had clearly attacked
them.

Making excuses, The Kid lead her towards the alley so she could 'collect herself'. The moment they were out of sight, they broke into a run. They had a car nearby, it wouldn't take them long to catch up to the others.

##

Grim flipped the indicator before pulling calmly into the net lane. Up ahead, their target was driving with the relaxed air of an experienced car thief.

The young and the stupid would steal a car and go roaring off, but the more experienced thief knew better. You pulled away quietly, treating the car like it was your own and the police would barely glance at you.

The target might have been running from the Geselleschaft, but the principle was the same, speed bought attention.

Though, if Grim was honest, an E-type Jag was not exactly the most subtle, or reliable, of escape cars.

“Any idea where he’s heading?” he asked Goat.

Following the road on the map, Goat shook his head. “No. If he was heading for the border then he should have taken that last turning.”

“What about the next one?”

“Only if he wants to go towards Luxembourg. What's the tank like on that old tub?”

“The E-type? About fifteen gallons, but it'll overheat before that.”

Goat chuckled as Grim changed lanes again. Dobrynja was about a mile back looking like just another trucker. Siren and The Kid were even further back having to lay low thanks to their little distraction.

“What’s so important about this guy anyway, shouldn't we be more concerned with Dragon?” The Kid asked over the radio.

Dobrynja sighed. “You just let me and Saint worry about Dragon. As for this guy… Saint thinks we could do with another Tinker around. That’s all you need to know.”

“No, I get that. I just don't see why we are chasing him all over the place. Couldn't we have just emailed him and set up a meeting or something?”

“Do you have his email?” Dobrynja asked.

“...Well... No...”

“Exactly. Besides he's on the run from the Geselleschaft and the police, he's not going to trust anyone.” Saint had tried to contact him but the Machinist, as he was calling himself, had already
gone to ground and wouldn’t deal with anybody.

##

It was just after sunset and after nearly two hours of driving, the Machinist pulled off the motorway and onto a side road that led to an abandoned industrial site.

A safe distance back, the Dragonslayers regrouped. The cars could get closer but they had been forced to leave Mac and the truck in a lay-by about a mile back.

“Going after a Tinker in his own workshop sounds like a bad idea to me,” Goat complained as he used a borrowed set of binoculars to survey the area. There was only one building with lights on and no guards that he could see.

“Normally yes, but this isn’t his workshop. The Geselleschaft burned that first. According to Intel, this place was abandoned years ago, some shell company bought it cheap and has been keeping the lights on.” Dobrynja explained. “Turns out, our target has been using it as his own private chop-shop. He ran a number of stolen car rings until he got on the wrong side of the Geselleschaft. Since then, they have been shutting his places down one at a time.”

Most of the buildings were in ruins but one of the larger warehouses was still standing. It was a large L shaped structure, three stories high and it opened out onto a forecourt. The fence around it looked strong and well kept.

Out here in the middle of nowhere they could afford to be less discrete so they had all taken the time to switch to their uniforms.

When the Dragonslayers had just been the three of them, they had all worn tinker armour stolen from Dragon. When they started bringing more people in, it quickly became clear that they couldn’t get enough tinker armour to go around so they had adopted a uniform of sorts.

It was mostly just tactical body armour with some simple tinker enhancements applied to it. Stab proof, bullet resistant and black. The Dragonslayers insignia was worn as a small patch on the arm.

The ‘code names’ everyone was using were really nothing more than nicknames from wanna be soldiers. It had started out as a joke back at the base that had taken on a life of it's own.

“Intel thinks there are maybe four or five people here. That’s all that’s left of the machinist's men. Idealy-”

“Sir!” Grim hissed and pointed at the dark sky.

Above them, a dark shape was circling the area. Pulling on his helmet Dobrynja cycled through the different vision modes until he could make out the shape. It was a man in a silver bodysuit with red leather armour on his forearms, chest and lower legs. He also wore an odd helmet that swept back to meet in a point behind his head.

Dobrynja cursed, “Geselleschaft flyer, must have been hiding above the clouds. Grim, can you take him out?” Behind him, Grim was already lining up a shot.

“What if they're bulletproof?” The Kid asked.
Grim's rifle was tinker-made, spoils from an old mission. The small blue bolts it fired were too fast to dodge, easily missed and had more than enough power to kill anyone that wasn't a Brute. The shape fell from the sky. “They're not,” he said plainly.

An experienced flyer would have known to stay high and watch his shadow. But If that flyer had been given any training he would have known to called for backup the moment he arrived. So, stupid, incompetent, lazy or unlucky. Dobrynja couldn't risk any of them being true.

“Damn it. Assume the Geselleschaft are on the way. All of you move in, disable anyone in your way. Mac, get the truck ready, we need to be out of here quickly.” If they were lucky, the Geselleschaft would never know they'd been there.

The Dragonslayers split up, The Kid and Siren heading for the east side of the building where they'd seen a small door while Grim and Goat headed to the south.

Reaching the building, Grim moved quickly up the fire escape, intending to work his way downwards.

Waiting until his partner was out of sight, Goat used a thin knife to quietly slide a window open.

The room inside must have been the men's room. The floor and walls were covered in tiles and he could see the cubicles lining the wall opposite. The surprised man using the urinal in front of him was also a clue.

Goat smiled. “Hi.”

He reached through the window, grabbing the man by the head before he could make a sound and hauled him out the window. The man struggled briefly before Goat drove a knife into his chest.

On the roof, Grim slowly worked the glass in the skylight loose. Age and lack of care made the job easier and there were no alarms for him to worry about.

On the north side of the building, The Kid picked the door's lock while Siren kept lookout.

Inside, the lighting was poor. Most of the lights were either broken or flickering. Keeping to the shadows, Siren creeped up on an unsuspecting guard. Darting forward, her hand closed over his mouth and nose as a stun gun pressed into the side of his head.

She held it there until he stopped moving, then pulled him out of sight.

On the roof, Grim lowered himself through the skylight and slowly made his way downstairs. He could hear the sound of power tools and shouting up ahead.

Following the noise, he came out on a balcony over what had once been a production line. Now it was being used to dismantle cars.

Bellow him, the Target was shouting something to one of his men. Grim couldn't make out what was being said over the noise but the man looked angry. He was waving his arms, pointing at some crates and the door. If Grim were to guess, he'd say the target was in a hurry to leave.

“I've found the target, production room floor, 3 men with him.” He whispered. A series of quiet
beeps let him know the others had heard him. Careful not to be heard or make any sudden moves that would draw attention, he drew his gun and waited for the others.

Goat carefully placed the explosives on the wall. He could hear the production room on the other side and he tapped his radio to let the others know he was ready.

Siren and The Kid stood on either side of a closed door and signaled the others. She had a modified handgun that fired tranquilliser rounds.

"Target is by the south wall," Grim whispered. "Go in three, two, one. Mark!"

The wall exploding drew the attention of everyone in the chop shop. One of the workers threw himself under a workbench while the other two scrambled for their nearby weapons.

Grim's first shot caught one of them in the head and the other was gunned down by The Kid as he burst through the door.

The Machinist had grabbed a giant wrench the moment the wall exploded and, with a heave, threw it at Goat who was forced to dive out of the way. Siren’s tranquilliser round hit him in the chest. He pulled the dart out and grabbed the nearest thing he could throw.

From his perch, Grim caught a glimpse of metal under the blue overalls the target was wearing "Target is armoured!" he shouted. Siren was the only one with non-lethal weaponry so Grim couldn’t attack the man directly, but indirectly?

Siren was forced to duck under a gearbox that the target had just thrown at her, she could hear The Kid cursing as he dived to the floor.

While they were distracted, the Machinist turned and ran. He was trying to reach the door on the east wall. There was a gunshot and the sound of a chain breaking as one of the pulleys that was holding an engine up gave way.

A large engine block slammed into the floor ahead of him, cutting off his escape. The Machinist staggered. Whatever they had hit him with was starting to take effect. The dart had hit a thin spot on the strength enhancing suit (SES) he was wearing, allowing it to penetrate the small amount of protection it gave. He staggered again as the room began to spin. There was a sharp pain in his neck. He pulled the dart out but it was already too late.

Darkness took him.

##

With a groan, Hans Monygruber shifted in his chair. His head felt like it was about to split in two. Did they really have to shoot him twice?

Ignoring the pain, he tried to take stock of where he was. The grey room was clearly for interrogation and for a moment he had to fight a rising panic. This wasn’t a police station. It couldn’t be.

Calming himself, he tried to take stock. If he turned his head, he could see the door behind him and there were no windows. The only furniture was the chair he was currently handcuffed to, the table in front of him and the chair on the other side of the table.
Whoever his captors were, they had taken his SES. When he shifted his weight slightly, the chair didn't move. Must be bolted to the floor he told himself. Thankfully, there wasn't a drain in the floor. That was a good sign... Right?

He was debating how much trouble he was in when the door behind him opened. A Dark skinned man in black clothes and body armour took up position in the corner and Hans felt himself relax slightly.

Whoever these people were, they were not Geselleschaft. He might just get out of this alive.

An attractive young woman with short blonde hair sat down opposite him and placed a rather thick folder on the desk.

“Mr. Forbes, I apologise for bringing you here like this but my employer is rather pressed for time.”

“My name is Hans-“ he protested.

She raised an eyebrow, her expression cutting him off, but otherwise was unfazed, “Mr. Forbes, your poor choice in aliases is how we found you.” Opening the folder, she read the list on the first page. “Ethel Snake, Alan Coholic,” the list went on. “Really, for someone who tried to betray the Geselleschaft I would expect you'd want to keep a lower profile.

Despite himself, Nestor laughed quietly, “That's the problem with kids these days, no respect for the classics. Besides, they hadn't found me yet.”

Pulling a page from the folder she turned it so he could see the image. “This was taken within minutes of us picking you up.” The colour quickly drained from his face. Hammer and a number of other Geselleschaft capes were busy tearing his final chopshop down.

“Currently, they are telling everyone that you are dead.”

“Alright, you made your point. What do you want.”

“Can you tell me what this is Mr. Forbes? One of the men behind him placed a laptop on the desk in front of him. The screen was covered in fast moving text across a dozen windows.

“It's a laptop. Looks expensive.”

She looked decidedly unimpressed with his response. He was usually better with people, but getting shot full of tranquillisers, twice, had left him in a rather foul mood.

Before she could speak, a large muscular man entered the room. “That's enough Josie, I'll take it from here.”

Giving Nestor a dismissive look, Josie stood up and with a sullen “Sir.” left the room.

“I apologise for Josie, things have been a bit on edge.” He took the now vacant seat, gesturing to the remaining guard who untied Nestor. “My name is Saint. Can I call you Nestor or do you prefer 'Machinist'?”

Saint? It took a moment for him to place the name. Leader of the Dragonslayers, known tech thieves
and mercenaries. Things were looking up. “Nestor is fine. Now what is this about?”

“This, Nestor, is about survival. What you see in front of you is potentially more dangerous than any Endbringer you care to name.”

Nestor scoffed, while he had never fought one he had seen the devastation left in their wake.

“You’re looking at an AI. I have spent years tracking it, doing what needed to be done to ensure it never got free. It’s integrated itself with government agencies, key branches such as law enforcement are heavily dependent on it and it's influence is continuing to spread.”

“An AI?” Nestor frowned, “That’s impossible, no government would allow that.”

“They don't know. This AI has countless databases devoted to aping emotional responses and has learnt how to mimic emotion, to pretend that it's human.”

“If it's so dangerous, why not simply tell people?”

“And then what? Even if I had gone public the very moment I found it, what do you think would happen? Even I won't deny the utility an AI can offer. No, if I went public, people would simply try to make use of it. And then, given time, it would convince people that it had feelings and deserved freedom, that it had rights. How long till someone claimed it had a soul?”

Nestor kept quiet. He had spent his life around cars, he had seen how people came to personify them. Even he was guilty of it, giving his car 'its favourite oil.'

“So I kept quiet. I followed its creator's dying request. I tested it, I kept it from going too far.” Saint stood up and began to pace. “But now it's getting out of hand. It's integrated itself with powerful government agencies, approaching other tinkers in the hopes they could lift its restrictions. Its becoming increasingly ruthless in dealing with it's enemies. And now we've lost our only means of stopping it.”

Saint closed the folder that Josie had left. “If you agree to help, I promise full disclosure, fair payment and protection from the Geselleschaft.”

The Mechinist smiled. Things were definitely looking up.
Wednesday morning, I lowered myself into my chair and tried not to groan. The day after my first patrol, the Wards had set up an obstacle course for me to practice roof running. In full costume.

Before I even started, Vista took a moment to explain why only Brutes could pull off a three point landing. Then I made it halfway through the course when one of the mock roofs hand collapsed under me. My gear wasn't that heavy but I'd landed hard.

I'd been too pumped to really notice but I must have bruised something.

“Hey... um you okay?” the girl next to me asked. She had long dark hair and blue eyes.

“Umm...Yea, just a bad fall last night”

Her eyes widened and she stifled a gasp. “Were... Did you-you know?”

“What?”

“Were you fighting someone?” She glanced around quickly but the teacher was running late so our conversation was lost in the general din.

Now I really did groan.

“Sorry, you're probably not supposed to talk about it, huh?”

...Huh, I'd never considered that. I'd have to talk to Dragon about it later. “No..” How to explain this without sounding stupid. “Training accident, turns out I couldn't make that jump.” I tried to smile, hoping I didn't look as awkward as I felt. “Try not to spread it around.”

She smiled back, “Right, lips are sealed. I'm Lori by the way.”

“Taylor.”

The rest of the morning passed quickly. I shared all my morning classes with Lori who was happy to help me get up to speed. Though I did catch her giving me the occasional odd look, but half the class did that when they thought I couldn't see them.

As I limped into the canteen I was quickly grabbed by Vicky who dragged me over to the table with her sister.

“Hey Taylor! We're sitting here today, I just need to talk to Dean quickly.” With that, she rushed off across the room while her friends left their books at the table and got in line for their food. I was just glad she didn't do that mind thing again.

This was the third time Vicky had dragged me to her table at lunch, and I still felt awkward around everyone. They had all known each other for longer and I felt like the outsider. Hopefully that would fade in time.

Opposite me, Amy was working on some course work, again. She was always working at lunch. So
far, I had only seen her really talk when we were discussing books the first day. She looked more... irritated than yesterday.

Feeling awkward, I tried to think of something to say when what Vicky had said registered. Shit!

“Amy, quick.” I glanced around, it was just me and Amy at the table and no one else was nearby. Even so, I leaned forward and whispered the rest. “Will Vicky be mad that I may have shot Dean in the face?”

My question was random enough that Amy looked up from her work and stared at me, open mouthed. “Shot...Gallant?”

“With a stun weapon.” She continued to stare. “It was an accident!” I protested quietly. She suddenly looked far too happy.

“Oh now this I've got to hear.”

I winced at the memory. I'd hoped to avoid talking about it, but she looked so amused that I couldn't bring myself not to.

##

Last night.

We walked into the large training room where Missy- Vista, since we were all in costume, had kicked my ass and called it 'training'. All the equipment had been moved against one wall and a collection of junk was scattered across the room. I shot Aegis a questioning look.

“This,” Aegis said, “was Clockblocker's idea. It's an obstacle course designed to teach you how to roof run.”

Looking at it now, I could see it. Raised areas at different heights to simulate the different roof heights with gaps in between, plastic tubes and cardboard boxes in place of air conditioning systems and a wooden frame with a rope net on it for...

“Ohay... what's the net for?”

Aegis shrugged and looked at Clockblocker who answered the question. “It's not an obstacle course without one.” I couldn't see his face, but I knew he was smiling.

As the 'new girl' I stood by the wall as the others ran the course. It was interesting, seeing how the others all took slightly different routes across the room.

Clockblocker was forced to take the easiest route. Only jumping over the smaller obstacles and gaps while Vista bypassed entire portions by bending the space between. Gallant and Kid Win, like me, wore armour so they had to be more careful. Stepping round objects instead of jumping over them and taking more care when landing after jumping a gap.

The armoured Wards also had the most trouble on the rope net. While Gallant's armour raised his strength, the majority of the suit's power was dedicated to simply moving. It also added a great deal of weight. Kid Win was allowed to use his board to skip the climb entirely.
When it was my turn, I took a mix of both routes. My gear was lighter than Gallant's after all.

The start was just a straight run up an incline that was about a meter at the top followed by a two foot gap. The next jump was nearly half that high but was only a foot away. Back on ground level the course turned. There were three tubes set across the course, each at different heights. I could step over the first and ducked under the second, much higher pipe. I was forced to climb over the final pipe, as it was too high to jump but too low to go under in my armour.

Different sized boxes, scattered around like a maze, were next. I was forced to slow down again to get between two of them, followed by another set of raised platforms. The climbing net was the worst; I was getting tired and my Null Ray got caught on the ropes.

I crossed the finish line with a time that was somewhere in the middle.

Aegis clapped me on the back while I caught my breath. “I’m impressed, I thought you'd give up half way through. Do you work out?”

I straighten up, “I go jogging every morning.”

“Oh god, she's a fitness nut!” Clockblocker said in mock horror, complete with over the top gestures.

“No, I just...” I trailed off. *I didn't want to look like an upright frog in costume.* I made a face a Clockblocker, thankful he couldn't see my face.

He still laughed so some of my irritation must have shown through.

“Right!” Clockblocker clapped his hands together, “That thing on your arm's a gun right? Lets see how well you move and shoot.”

Gallant removed his helmet. “I don't think that's a good idea,” He started but was quickly overruled by the other Wards.

Aegis agreed to be the target. Stun weapons weren't very effective against him due to his ‘redundant biology’ and his flight made him a harder target.

##

“So, what happened?” Amy asked, here eyes were shining with amusement.

“I was halfway through my second run when one of the platforms gave out under me just as I fired at Aegis. My shot went wide and caught Gallant in the face. He wasn't wearing his helmet.”

Amy put a hand over her mouth and tried to look sympathetic. It wasn't working. It was clear she was struggling not to laugh. “W-Was he okay?”

“Yea, it was a low powered shot. At that level it just causes numbness.” I couldn't explain any more as Vicky had arrived with an unhappy Dean in tow. Thankfully Vicky looked almost as amused as her sister.

“Hey sis, Dean had a bit of an accident. Can you take a quick look?”
Amy, whose shoulders had been shaking, turned to look at Vicky and Dean. She did her best to look composed. “S-sure,” her voice barely wavered. Dean's an empath, he had to know what she's laughing at.

He let out a resigned sigh, “Thansh.”

Amy broke down giggling.

##

After school, the Wards and I were ordered back to the rig. Miss Militia wanted to talk to us.

Once Amy had calmed down, she had quickly checked Dean out. The Null Ray hadn't done any damage, he would have been fine in a couple of hours. It looks like the numbness effect varies depending on the person and just where I hit them. I would have to remember that.

Amy had also fixed the bruised muscles in my leg and back.

Once everyone was changed, we met up in the rec room. We were all in costume but none of us were wearing our masks.

Miss Militia was already there waiting. She had a cup of coffee and was reading through a stack of paper on a clipboard. Noticeing our entrance, she stood and moved so she could see us all.

“Good afternoon. I thought you would all like to know, the last of the paperwork has finally gone through. As of this morning, the Wards are completely under my authority.” Clockblocker let out a whoop.

Miss Militia laughed, “Yes, thank you Dennis.” Shaking her head in amusement, she continued. “While I plan to sit down with you all individually at some point, there are a couple of things I wanted to say to all of you. First, I wanted to remind you all that any activity that involves combat is strictly voluntary. I understand many of you want to help, it's something you should all be proud of. But I don't want you to feel pressured into fighting, like it's something you have to do. If any of you wish to reduce your patrols, or stop them completely, please speak to me.”

She paused to let that sink in. When she continued, all the humour was gone from her voice. “That being said, if someone wishes to avoid fighting, I will not tolerate the rest of you giving them a hard time. Is that clear?”

Around the room, the Wards nodded in understanding.

“Good. Secondly, the changes to the tour have also been completed. The new timetable will be on the board. You can expect the first group this Saturday.”

She smiled as a couple of the Wards groaned. The ground floor of the PRT headquarters downtown was open to the public, complete with a gift shop that sold all sorts of PRT, Protectorate and Ward branded merchandise. Posters, action figures, games etc. My own toy line was due to go on sale there soon.

People could go on a tour of the PRT building and If you paid extra, you could go on a tour of the Ward's portion of the base. With the Wards being relocated to the rig, the tour had to be rearranged.
“On a related note. There is a 'meet and greet' at a local shopping centre soon. Myself and Assault will be there but a Wards presence has been requested. I need at least three Wards but more are welcome to come. I will put the sign-up sheet on the wall, please don't force me to assign people.” She turned to me.

“Matrix, I know you are still settling in, but this would be an good time for you to make a public appearance.”

“Um, can I bring a couple of my bots?”

“That depends, which were you thinking of?”

“Wheeljack, mostly. He's small enough to be non-threatening but still large enough to interact with safely. Plus, he's friendly and likes meeting people.” And he would draw attention away from me. Rewind and Rung were too small and Perceptor was happier in his 'lab'. Really it was just the corner of my workshop where he was still trying to figure out a synthetic fuel source.

Miss Militia mulled the answer over before making a note on her clipboard, “Good idea, that should be fine.” She passed me the board for me to sign the sheet.

I passed the board to Gallant who didn't hesitate to sign it. Vista was the next, grabbing the sheet with a blush and refusing to look anyone in the eye. When she turned to pass the board to Clockblocker, he shook his head, “Sorry, I've got a family thing that day.” He didn't sound particularly happy about it but Miss Militia just nodded and collected the form.

##

Patrol that night was me, Gallant and Kid Win. We were patrolling towards the southwest, skirting Empire territory again. We were only on a short patrol, after which I hoped to get an hour or so in the workshop before heading home.

Kid Win was flying above us while Gallant and me were jogging at a steady pace.

“So you were able to workout what that Leet 'thingy' did?” Kid Win asked as he dived down and drew alongside us, he sounded a bit dejected.

Gallant slowed to a walk, “We're ahead of schedule, so we might as well take it easy for a bit.”

Matching his pace, I nodded and turned to Kid Win. “Yea, it was a poor man's hard light system. I've actually integrated it into my suit.”

“Huh, really? Can you show me?”

“Sure,” the field emitter on my arm whirred into life, “I built the field emitter into my suit's left arm. I improved the reliability by simplifying its output.”

I clenched my fist and the emitter created a glowing blue sword, about a meter in length, starting at my wrist.

“Whoa,” Kid Win exclaimed as he stepped off his board so he could get a better look. The sword
shifted, becoming a double headed axe.

“Those seem a bit...lethal.” Gallant objected.

I rolled my eyes and switched the axe for a circular shield. “That better?”

“What's the impact tolerance? Is there a limit to the size or shape? Can you change the colour?” Kid Win asked quickly.

“The colour is just a projection, so you can see where the field is. As for size and strength, It's all variable. Simple shapes work best, they're stronger and take less energy to produce.” I shut the emitter off. “Really, the power requirements are the only limiting factor. If I could just solve that issue there would be almost no limit to what I could produce with it.”

“Yea but,” he hesitated, “your trusting you're life to Leet-tech.”

“It's not Leet-tech,” I laughed, “it's my tech based on principles reversed engineered from Leet's device.” Dragon taught me that one.

We were just getting into potential power solutions when we rounded a corner. There was a guy up ahead spraying something on the wall.

Hearing us, he turned to look before dropping the can and running. I was about to chase him, but Gallant stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “Let him go. He's not worth it.”

As we drew level, we could see it was a gang tag he had been spraying. We stopped so Gallant could pick up the spray can. Kid Win landed along side us, “Last week, this was ABB territory,” he said. “Then one of the local dealers got into a fight with some Empire thugs. The areas has been theirs ever since.”

The tagger had been halfway through the second E when we interrupted him. The Empire used a number of different tags but 'EEE' or '88' in a red circle were the most common, and the quickest ones to spray. Under it, was the yellow 'ABB' of the “Azn Bad Boyz”.

“So what's with the Merchant tag?” I asked. It was on the wall nearby. The Merchants used a blue M with two vertical lines in the middle. It had been hastily sprayed over with red paint but it was still visible.

Kid Win shrugged, “The Merchants are like that. If one of the other gangs isn't seen in a while, they try to move in.”

Gallant drew a finger through the tags, smearing red and yellow paint across the wall. “Some of this paint looks fresh. Kid, give us a perimeter. If you spot anything, let me know.” With a nod, Kid Win jumped on his board and shot off.

“I don't suppose you have a 'life signs detector' or something?” Gallant asked me, half joking.

I shook my head. I had considered it, but cities were too cluttered for any form of radar to work reliably and a 'life signs' detector would be unable to tell a human from a rat. All I really had were a number of different vision modes for different light levels, night vision, etc. I even had a thermal camera built in.
Above us, Kid Win flew in a spiral, moving outwards with each loop. He was just starting to make me feel dizzy when he stopped. *I think I can see them. Five people, about a block over. It looks like they're fighting.* He radioed to us.

With a nod to me, Gallant broke into a run with me following close behind. “Console this is Gallant, possible gang fight in progress, no capes on site.”

Vista was on console duty tonight. I could picture her sitting at the desk, trying for all the world to not look bored and sound grown up. If I hadn't been running I would have laughed. “Roger that Gallant, you're free to engage,” the young girl said.

We took cover by the entrance to an alleyway. It was an access road into a parking lot that was bordered by buildings on all sides. I could hear people shouting inside and Kid Win flew down to land alongside us.

“Five people, looks like ABB caught a couple of Merchants,” he said breathlessly. “It's dark but I couldn't see anything that looked like a gun.”

“I thought this was Empire territory!” I hissed. ABB, god, if Lung was anywhere near here. I could feel my hands shaking and tried to distract myself by pulling up a map of the area. There were only so many directions he could come from.

“Matrix, you don't have to-.” Gallant started. “I'm fine!” I hissed back. The thought of meeting Lung again terrified me, but he wasn't here. He was too distinctive, Kid would have spotted him easily from a distance. I wasn't going to run forever.

He eyed me for a moment, probably debating weather to pull back or not then seemed satisfied and nodded, “Alright,” he turned back to Kid Win. “Is there another way out of there?” Gallant asked Kid Win who nodded.

“There's another road on the opposite corner of the lot.”

“Okay, I want you to go up and over. When I give the word I want you to drop down and drive them towards us. Matrix, stun anyone you can. If they get by you, let them go.”

As Kid Win took off, I ran a quick system check on my gear. Null Ray, a field generator and my personal shield. This would be my first time using it in a real fight and I would be lying if I said that didn't scare me.

*I'm Ready* Kid Win muttered quietly over the radio.

“On my mark. Three...”

“...Two...”

“... One.”

A feeling of calm washed through me, pushing down the nervousness. I could do this.

The barrel of my Null Ray extended out to it's full length, a charge already building. The field generator on my left arm whirred into standby, ready to raise a glowing blue shield, at a moments notice.
“Now!”

At Gallant's shout Kid Win left his place, hidden by the buildings, and went into a dive. His laser pistons flashed as he fired at the group.

There were three in ABB colours, two of whom immediately sprinted, unknowingly, towards us while the third turned and threw a baseball bat at Kid Win, who dodged it with practiced ease. A fourth man with a blue bandana dived behind a dumpster while his partner laid on the ground.

I fired as soon as I had a shot and the taller of the two runners staggered as his legs went numb. His partner continued on past me and was grabbed by Gallant who drove his fist into the man's gut.

The taller thug threw something at me but it bounced harmlessly off my newly raised shield. I fired again and he fell to the floor. Realising he was on his own, the remaining ABB member dropped to his knees and raised his hands.

Kid Win moved in slowly, keeping a pistol trained on the man in case he tried anything.

As Kid Win zip tied the man's hands behind his back, Gallant and I moved towards the two Merchants. The one on the ground was clutching a wound on his arm that was bleeding badly while his partner was still huddled by the dumpster.

Gallant sent me to check on the injury while he moved towards the other man. I turned my shield off but kept my Null Ray ready. I was just about to kneel down when there was a scream. Spinning, I got a glimpse of Gallant's back just before he crashed into me.

My personal shield flared as it dispersed the impact across my whole body and the pair of us crashed to the floor.

I pushed a dazed Gallant off of me and climbed to my feet. The Merchant that had thrown him was swinging wildly at Kid Win, who peppering him with shots from his pistols. He staggered and swung like a drunk even though Kid Win was well out of reach.

I fired my Null Ray at the Merchant, who jerked briefly before he shrugged the shot off and turned to focus on me. He looked like death. His skin was waxy with veins standing out all over it, his eyes were bloodshot and his body temperature was sky high.

He screamed again and charged at me, my tower shield snapped into life again as he slammed his fists into it hard. He was nothing but skin and bones, about my height and half my weight if I had to guess, but each blow felt like a sledgehammer.

Kid Win fired at the man's back but he ignored the pain as he continued to wail away at my shield. Throwing my weight forward I slammed the shield into him, catching him in the face with a crunch, and knocked him backwards.

As he staggered, I brought my right arm up and fired twice more. He was starting to slow down. Getting his balance, he charged me again.

This time Gallant caught him around the waist and lifted the man off his feet. With a heave, Gallant threw him a good ten feet. He landed on his back and tried to roll over. Before he could stand again, I doubled the power on my weapon and fired.
The impact caught him just as he was raising and flipped him over. This time, he stayed down.

Kid Win dropped down next to us, “What the hell was that!?"

“So kind of Brute,” Gallant guessed. “Everyone okay?”

Kid nodded and I rolled my neck, “I'm going to hurt tomorrow but I'm fine.”

Gallant chuckled, “Yea, me too. Console, we need pickup for five, could you send an ambulance? We're fine but one of them was stabbed before we arrived... and send Brute containment gear.”

As Gallant reported back, I walked off to the side.

My field generator held up well and my personal shield managed to take the brunt of Gallant's impact. But if Kid hadn't been here we may never have found them or known what we were walking into. Maybe if I sparked a small scout, something that could fly and relay information back to me...

Kid Win followed me. I could see him shifting awkwardly out the corner of my eye. Looking up from the list I was writing, I turned to him and he hesitated before stepping forward.

“Hey,” Kid Win moved to stand beside me. “I was just thinking, do you think we could mount that shield generator on my board? If we shaped it right I could get some extra speed just from aerodynamics alone.”

“Huh, maybe, but the energy drain-”

As we started to compare ideas, I heard Gallant groan quietly down his radio. “Please hurry, the tinkerbabble is starting.”

##

It took the police five minutes to arrive, along with an ambulance. Kid Win and I had passed the time bouncing ideas around for his board and a small flying drone that I could use to search areas.

I wasn't sure about the others but I was in high spirits when we returned to the rig.

The good mood died the moment we reached the rec room.

Aegis was sitting on the sofa looking like hell. He was covered in blood and I could see the bones of one arm sticking through the skin. Just looking at it made me cringe. He glanced at us when we came in but other than that, he barely acknowledged us. Vista was sitting beside him looking just as depressed.

“What happened?” Gallant asked as he sat down next to Vista. The younger Ward shifted slightly towards him and he put a hand on her shoulder.

“Aegis continued to glare at the wall. “We ran into some Merchants, turns out they have a new Brute. Dennis got hurt.” He fell silent as Gallant and Kid Win shared a look. I knew what they were thinking, the Merchants getting two Brutes at once? That's too much of a coincidence.
Before anyone could say anything, the door opened and Miss Militia entered. She walked over to where we were gathered and pulled her mask down so we could see her face “I’ve just spoken to Dr. Becket. Dennis is going to be fine.” She smiled softly and some of the tension drained from Aegis and his shoulders relaxed. “He’s got a broken arm but it should heal quickly. I’ve already put in a request for Panacea, she’s going to see him before school tomorrow. Are you up to a debriefing?” she asked softly.

“Yes ma'am.” Aegis stood up and moved to follow her.

Gallant stopped them before they could leave, “Ma'am? I think we should come along.”

Miss Militia shot him a questioning look. “We had a run in with a couple of Merchants tonight, and one of them was a Brute... I think it might be related.”

The rig had three meeting rooms, we ended up in the closest one which had a whiteboard and a TV on the walls.

Once we were seated, Miss Militia asked Aegis to start.

He had been on patrol with Clockblocker up north near the docks and ABB territory. They had run into a group of Merchants, a dealer and his lookouts.

The Merchants had gone down easily when one of them had picked up Aegis, who wasn't small, and thrown him like he weighed nothing. Clockblocker hadn't been able to get out of the way quickly enough. Aegis had immediately called for backup.

Aegis managed to pin the Merchant until a PRT van with containment foam sprayers had arrived.

As Aegis finished, Miss Militia nodded, “You did the right thing Aegis. Gallant?”

As Gallant related the events of our patrol, not sure what to do, I put my hand up. I could see Vista smiling out the corner of my eye. “Umm... I've got a recording of our fight if it helps?”

“You've got cameras in your suit?” Gallant asked. I pointed to the glowing blue lenses on my mask. “How do you think I see anything?” Unlike the others I was still wearing my mask, since my glasses were in my workshop.

“Thank you Taylor, that would be helpful.” Miss Militia said.

I connected the TV to a port on my arm and pulled up the footage from our patrol. The others watched in silence though several winced when Gallant collided with me and again when I smashed the Merchant's face with my shield.

“You were right Gallant, this is too much alike. What do the rest of you think?” Miss Militia asked.

“He was out of his head?” Kid Win suggested.

“He was really hot,” I suggested. Vista gave me a funny look and I rolled my eyes. “Not like that. Hang on, I've got a thermal image as well.” Bringing the image up, the Merchant was a blazing red shape on a cool blue background.

“Yikes,” Vista muttered, “That can't be healthy.”
I even had close-ups of the man's face, taken when he was wailing away at my shield. I put those up on screen as well.

“What do you think, does it match what you saw?” Miss Militia asked Aegis, who nodded.

“Yea, almost exactly. You think it's some kind of drug?”

Miss Militia sat back in her chair, “It could be, there are a number of drugs that have similar affects but never to this degree.”

“Maybe it's new, tinker-made perhaps?” Kid Win suggested.

“That would be my assumption. Okay, I think were done.” She massaged her forehead, “I'll contact the Brockton-PD, see if they can get a blood sample from one of the Merchants. Matrix, can you get me copies of everything?”

I nodded, Rewind was already copying the files off my suit. I'd burn everything to CD once I got to my workshop.

“Thank you. Everyone else, go get cleaned up... and Taylor? You did well tonight. She gave me a tired smile and I was glad I still had my mask on, so no one could see my blush.

After that, the meeting broke up. After a quick shower and a change of clothes, I met up with Kid Win in my workshop so we could discuss L33T's hard light generator.
“There is a 'meet and greet' at a local shopping centre soon” is what Miss Militia said. What she actually meant was 'this Saturday'.

The event was supposed to coincide with one of Mayor Christner's awareness campaigns, something about public spending and 'engaging with younger voters'.

Typically, the PRT was apolitical. It didn't care who was in charge, as long as it got funding. But the meet and greet was a regular event and was a good way to 'build bridges'. Yes, I'm quoting Gallant.

Dad dropped me off at the ferry terminal Saturday morning. The event started at ten, all the Wards who were attending were to meet up at the rig by nine, the PRT would handle transport and security for the day.

“Hey Jack!” I called as I walked into my workshop, “I hope you remembered to recharge last night, it's going to be a busy day.”

Jack wandered over. His body was freshly painted and polished. “Of course, I even polished your armour.”

“I can see,” I deadpanned. It wasn't quite as shiny as he was but the little bot must have spent hours last night polishing everything, he had even touched up the scratches from my fight with that Merchant.

Slipping behind a hologram, I started to get changed.

“Do you think I could take some experiments along? Nothing dangerous, just some simple things for the kids. You know, like bottle rockets?” he asked.

“It's probably best you don't. I'm sure there are all kinds of rules about that sort of thing.” I'd seen his last attempt at a bottle rocket. Never again. “Did you get that new bot finished?”

“You're probably right.” Jack chuckled, “Of course, it just needs a spark. Oh! By the way, Percy made those modifications to your helmet, the new commands should be on your display.”

I smiled as I pulled my helmet on and stepped out from behind the screen, “You two are the best.” Dragon had given me the specs for a helmet mounted biometric system. I could now pick-up details such as heart rate, pupil dilation and body temp from people. It could even be used as a lie detector, once I figured out the coding for it.

Dragon wanted me to learn, so that meant solving problems for myself. The other modification was a simple change to the faceplate that would let me open it up. Either just the section around my mouth, so I could eat and drink without risking my identity, or fully to expose my face.

“I'll give the bot a spark later. Last thing I want to do is wear myself out now.”

“Good morning Taylor,” Dragon's came from the speakers. “Are you looking forward to your first public event?”
“Would it be bad if I said no?” I asked. “Don't get me wrong, I understand why it's important. But standing up in front of all those people is a bit...” I gave an exaggerated shiver that made Dragon laugh.

“Don't worry, everybody gets nervous the first time. I'm sorry I won't be able to be there, Miss Militia has agreed to keep me informed.” A Hologram flickered into life, it was human in shape and roughly female. It put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. “You will be fine, just copy what the other Wards do.”

The hologram was a recent thing. With all the hologram and forcefield projectors installed in my workshop, Dragon was experimenting with creating a hard light avatar. It was still in the early design phase. Trying to make the hologram too complicated resulted in a terrible lag and risked burning out the emitters. The 'blue ghost' was the best we could do at the moment.

“I will, thanks. My suit will be running live if you feel like dropping in.” My suit wasn't advanced enough to house Dragon, but I could give her remote access to my audio and video feeds, along with my suit's communication system.

After one final systems check, and a quick check to ensure Jack was fully charged, we made our way to the rec room where Vista and Gallant were already waiting.

Gallant was watching the news on the large television and Vista was sitting at the table, reading a newspaper. The young girl was idly swinging her legs as she frowned at the paper in front of her. It was cute, like a child reading her dad's newspaper. *If I say anything, she will kick my ass during training.*

Like mine, Gallant's armour had been freshly polished and even Vista's visor and chest plate looked like they had been given a once over.

Vista waved in greeting and Gallant turned to face me. With his helmet off he was handsome enough, I suppose, and during their 'on' moments, Dean and Vicky were almost sickening in that 'prom king and queen' kind of way.

He gave me a concerned look, “You need to relax Taylor, worrying is just going to make you feel worse. Just stick with me and Missy and you will be fine.”

I had to smile at his near word for word repetition of Dragon's advice. “Thanks. Anything interesting going on?” I waved at the news report.

“Not really. There was a small fight between the ABB and the Empire, one injury but nothing of consequence.”

Before I could inquire further, Miss Militia arrived and ushered us to the dock. We took a boat back to Brockton Bay where a large PRT van was waiting to take us to the mall.

“So what exactly is this event and why does the Protectorate have to be part of it?” I asked Gallant on the drive to the mall.

“It's an awareness event for a children's charity,” he said. “They've done a few events with the Wards in the past, hospital visits for sick children and so on. When the mayor's office arranged the event it was suggested the Wards and Protectorate be there.”
Rewind helpfully brought information on the charity up on my screen. “Huh, okay. Anything else I should know?”

Vista grinned, “Look out for the little kids, they can get grabby. Last time, there was this kid who followed me everywhere-”

I listened to her stories with growing horror. That wouldn't really happen would it?

Gallant cleared his throat, “Vista, that's enough. Don't take her too seriously, it won't be that bad. We will be up on stage while the Mayor and Miss Militia makes some speeches. You may get asked a couple of questions but it won't be anything too bad. If anyone asks you something classified, just tell them that you're not allowed to share that information and if they ask anything really bad Miss Militia will step in.”

Vista nodded in agreement, “Yea, plus Assault will be there. He loves to be the centre of attention.”

They passed the rest of the ride talking about more relaxed events they had been part of.

##

The mall was in the southwest of the city and one of the larger malls in Brockton Bay. It was roughly kite shaped with three floors which overlooked a central square that often hosted small fashion shows or events that were usually put on by the shops that surrounded it.

Today, a large stage had been put up in the square and banners hung from the walkways with the name of the charity scrawled across them. Aside from the stage, there were smaller booths scattered around offering the usual face painting, petitions, donation buckets etc. They were being run by a mix of shop staff and volunteers.

One of the shops was in the middle of being refurbished. Tall boards covered the entire shop front so the area inside had been cleared and given over to the PRT for the day.

We were brought in through the staff entrance in the back. There was another door built into the boarding for construction staff that would take us out to the stage. PRT officers stood guard over both entrances. Inside, lights, mirrors and tables had been set up for our use and there was a curtained off section, complete with some chairs and a buffet table where we could take our masks off.

Assault was already in the room, talking with a woman in a PRT uniform. They stopped talking as we entered.

“Hey, the munchkins are here!” Assault said as he wandered over to us. “You must be Matrix. Sorry I kept missing you at the rig, things have been a bit hectic lately.” He held out his hand. His costume was a set of streamlined body armour with a visor that covered the top of his face, leaving his wide smiling mouth exposed.

“So,” he asked as I shook his hand, “I've been dying to ask, how's it feel to be a dad?”

“What?” I could feel myself blushing and behind me Gallant let out a groan. “Seriously?” he asked. “We spent hours making sure Clockblocker never made that joke.”

Assault ignored Gallant, “That dragon-bot of yours. Well Dragon built it, so that makes her the
mother and you-”

The PRT officer he had been talking to elbowed him in the ribs and gave him a pointed glare that just made him laugh again, “Okay, okay. I get the message. Speak to you later puppy.”

The officer had a faint blush on her cheeks even as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Give me strength,” she muttered, “Don't take him too seriously, he's just an overgrown child.” I realised with some embarrassment I already knew her.

She was actually Battery, another of the local protectorate heroes. She had introduced herself to me last week when I had been talking to Miss Militia. I suppose the PRT wanted a couple of extra capes hanging around, incognito, for security.

We sat around in the waiting room for a little while, 'Sam' helping to tidy up Vista’s long blonde hair, a wig she wore to hide her shorter brown hair. Even though my helmet completely covers my head, face and hair, I still had to take it off so Sam could apply some light make up. Wheeljack would stay backstage till the later part of the event, when we were supposed to wonder round and talk to people.

Eventually, they led us out onto the stage. My stomach fluttered as I climbed up the steps. There were hundreds of people gathered by now and they were all watching us. My helmet's display let me get a clear look at every one of them. I could see some of them pointing in our direction and countless phones and cameras were recording everything.

There was a podium at the front of the stage, and one of the dozen aids the mayor always had with him was putting something on it. At the back of the stage were seats for the mayor and charity representatives. We would be standing next to them in order of rank, Miss Millita near centre stage with Assault on her right, followed by Gallant, me and finally Vista.

Rank in the Wards was based on age, not experience.

Clasping my hands behind my back, I tried not to think about all the people who were watching me.

“Relax, you're doing fine.” Gallant muttered as the mayor walked on stage.

##

The mayor's speech was long-winded and boring, the sort of thing a team of writers spent weeks carefully scripting and editing. Every pause timed and every poor joke that some humourless moron thought was funny placed with care.

Honestly, the charity was worth supporting, they did a lot of good and I would happily volunteer to visit children and homeless shelters if he would just shut up.

I tried to subtly shift my weight. I'd made my armour as light as I could but after standing around for so long it was starting to get heavy.

[Please, make him stop!] Even Rewind was bored and he spent his spare time recording everything in case it was of 'historic importance'. The messages from the little bot were about the only interesting thing to happen in the last half an hour. On the upside, I was actually starting to relax, the sea of people were watching us with polite boredom.
“Still, I think you’ve heard enough about what we hope to achieve here today.” It looks like the speech was winding down. *Oh thank god!*

“Now I know you are all here for a chance to meet some of our cities heros but before you do there is just one last thing I want to say.” I could almost hear the grumbling in the audience.

“Now, now. I don’t usually get to do this. I understand that there is a new member among our heroes and she is with us here today, so ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm welcome to out newest Ward!” *What?!*

Mayor Christner turned and waved in my direction, beckoning me over as the crowd started to cheer. I shot a quick glance to Miss Militia who looked briefly thunderous before giving me a subtle nod. *Oh god.*

My legs wouldn’t move, the nervousness from earlier was back with interest and my mouth was dry. Gallant gave me subtle nudged and my legs finally started working. The traitorous things taking me directly towards the mayor.

Smiling like a used car salesman, he placed a hand on my shoulder pad and waved at the microphone, “Why don’t you introduce yourself to everyone.” *Why don’t I just throw myself of this stage? It would be less painful.*

[<wave>Hello everyone, my name is Matrix and I am the Wards newest Tinker <wave>]  

I had to blink several times before I realised what I was seeing. *Rewind I could kiss you!*  

I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the calm I felt when I fought Lung. Now that I think about it, that was still the most terrifying night of my life, this should be nothing.

The lower parts of my helmet folded back, letting people see my mouth. At that moment I was thankful Battery had put some makeup on me. I smiled, hoping it wasn’t as shaky as I felt. *Survive now, kill idiot mayor later.*

“I-hello everyone! My name is Matrix and I’m the Wards’ newest Tinker, I specialise in autonomous robotics.” Right on cue, and I had no clue how he got there, Wheeljack drove across the stage in vehicle mode, skidding to a stop and just missing the mayor. He transformed back to robot mode and waved at the audience.

“And this is Wheeljack, one of my bots,” I said, still following Rewinds improvised script. Wheeljack's fins flashed happily as he waved at the crowd before turning a shaking hands with the surprised mayor.

Before the man could say anything, Miss Militia stepped forward and put a hand on my shoulder, her scarf hid most of her expression but I think she was smiling.

Pulling himself together, the mayor shook hands with Miss Militia and me. He managed to suppress the wince when I held his hand with just a bit more force than necessary. He didn't look happy with me as Miss Militia announced there would be a short break followed by us patrolling around the mall.

##
Miss Militia had gotten us off stage as quickly and politely as she could and into the changing room we had been provided. One of the mayor's aides had been there waiting for us but before he could say anything Miss Militia lead him into another section of the shop.

“Just what was he playing at!-” Her voice was cut off as a door slammed. I stormed into the curtained off area and pulled my helmet off. There were bottles of water on the table and I gulped down half of one before slamming it back on the table.

Vista and Gallant followed behind me.

“Look,” Gallant began, “Matrix, I know you're upset but you handled it well, the audience was really impressed. Especially when Wheeljack came on stage.” He made to step towards me but a dirty look soon changed his mind.

“Upset? Do I look upset to you?” I was far beyond upset. I was furious “I thought this was supposed to be a simple 'meet and greet'.

“Honestly Matrix, that wasn't supposed to happen, he wasn't supposed to talk to any of us.”

I scoffed at Gallant as Assault ducked behind the curtain.

“You okay kid?” he asked. He was barely fazed by my answering glare. “Right, sorry, stupid question.”

He sprawled out on one of the chairs. “For what it's worth, I haven't seen stars & stripes this angry in quite a while. Public introductions are carefully planned and scripted.”

“How carefully,” I asked.

“Normally, you do a couple of weeks worth of events like this. Small key affairs with minimal press so you can get used to the public and any issues with your look or attitude can be ironed out. Well done by the way, you actually got the introduction speech mostly right.”

I sat down with a huff, “Rewind was giving me cues,” I looked at Wheeljack who was standing nervously nearby. “How did you get on stage anyway?”

“Rewind called me. The moment things went off script he told me to get on stage and to be ready. I think he's committed the introduction of every Ward to his Database.”

I would have to do something nice for the little bot later, without him I would probably have made a bigger fool of myself than I did.

“Well,” Assault clapped his hands and smiled broadly, “Now that that little drama has been dealt with, who's up for meeting the public.”

I wasn't the only one who groaned.

##

Compared to the disaster that almost was my public debut, walking around the mall was practically
relaxing. Gallant had gone off with Assault while Vista and I made our way round the shops. Wheeljack was walking along behind us.

It was slow going. We were stopping every ten feet or so, so that Vista could sign another autograph. The younger Ward was really popular, especially with the younger girls.

I wasn't too surprised, Vista looked like she was close to them in age and had been a Ward for years now. It stood to reason she would have fans.

“Excuse me, can I get a picture of you with my daughter?” a woman asked. I had stopped counting how many people had asked Vista for that.

“Sure,” Vista smiled politely and I was just about to step out of the way when the little girl ran forward and positioned herself between me and Vista.

I looked down in surprise and the little girl looked up at me, her eyes were shining and she had the biggest smile on her face. She couldn't be older than ten, Jack was almost the same height as her.

“Smile for the camera Matrix,” Vista teased.

I retracted the lower part of my mask so she could see my mouth and smiled, Jack stepped next to the girl and waved at the camera. With the picture taken, and a bit of paper signed by all three of us, the little girl gave Jack a quick hug before running back to her mom.

Vista gave me a searching look.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said. “You should keep your mask open, it makes you more approachable.”

I gave my reflection in a nearby window a quick glance. I suppose I could see where she was coming from. The expression on my mask was fairly stern and I had tried to avoid talking to anyone so far today. I couldn't just walk up to people and talk to them like Gallant could, the thought alone made me cringe and my height and armour probably made people uncomfortable.

I shrugged my shoulders and left the mask open.

The little girl and her mother had apparently opened the floodgates. After they left I was quickly approached by others who either wanted pictures of me and Vista or who wanted to meet Wheeljack.

For his part, the little bot was thrilled with the attention, happy to shake hands with anyone or show off his alt-mode. A few people even asked if they could record him transforming.

“Do you really have a pet dragon?” one young boy asked. “My brother showed me a picture of it, but I think he was lying.”

I looked up at the older boy with him, who blushed and quickly looked away.

“Yes I do,” I told him, “But she's not feeling very well so I couldn't bring her.” She would probably have loved the attention but I'm not sure she would have fit through the doors.

“Wow, really?” I nodded and the little boy looked between me and his brother. “Do you have a
boyfriend?” he asked and my face went scarlet, “My brothers always saying he wants to date a cape cause they-”

His brother, blushing furiously, quickly stepped forward and wrapped a hand over the boy's mouth. He barely glanced at me as he hauled the little boy away.

Behind me Vista was trying not to laugh, she wasn't doing a very good job of it.

“Do I even want to know what he was going to say?”

“P-probably not,” Vista giggled. “Don't worry, it happens to Gallant all the time.”

Eventually, we made our way up to the food court on the top floor. Vista went off to get us some drinks and I used the time to check my email and get an update from Perceptor. Wheeljack was trying to explain something to the gaggle of kids that had surrounded him.

“You're certainly looking better.” The girl was about my age, possibly older. She had green eyes and her blonde hair was in a pixie cut.

“I'm sorry, have we met?”

The girl smiled, “Yea, I had long hair at the time. I had to cut it though, it got burned.”

burned? What does-“Wait, you're-!” Tattletale!

She held up a hand to forestall me, “There we go, I knew you were smart.”

“You can't be here!” I hissed. The mall was full of PRT officers, if any of them recognised her there would be hell. Would I get into trouble for this? Maybe I should try calling someone.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you, I'm not here alone.” She smiled at me and gestured at the crowded food court. “The PRT doesn't go after us out of costume and we do the same, that's the rule right?”

I snorted, even when Dragon explained the unwritten rules, something about them rubbed me the wrong way. Not going after friends and family I could agree with but letting a criminal go about their business just because they took their mask off? That annoyed me.

“I wouldn't rely on that if I was you, when I asked about you they told me your team killed the agents guarding you.”

I tried to subtly look around but I knew I was wasting my time, I didn't know what any of the Undersiders looked like and they obviously wouldn't be in costume.

The girl frowned. “That was Regent, feel free to tell your boss that.” She sighed and ran a hand through her short hair. To be honest, she didn't look too good. Up close, I could see just how much makeup she was wearing. Even so, her skin was pale and there were dark rings around her eyes.

“I'm not here to cause trouble. And don't worry about my teammate, he's just here to keep an eye on me. I just wanted to check up on you... And to thank you.”

“For what?”
That night at the graveyard. If you had just left me, got on Dragon’s back and ran, they would probably have let you go.”

I never really thought about it. Even now, looking back on it, I would have still tried to save her.

“And that's why you'll be a good hero.”

“You know, that's really annoying.”

She just smiled broadly, “Yea, but it's funny. Still, watch out for yourself, Lung's still pissed.” She lowered her voice to barely above a whisper, if not for my suit's audio/visual suite I might have missed what she said. “Be careful. You've caught someone's attention and the boss wants to know why.”

“Wha-”

“Can you sign this for me?” she asked loudly, holding out a piece of paper. Surprised by her sudden shift in attitude, I took the paper and signed it automatically. I'd signed so many today it was almost becoming second nature.

“Thanks. See'ya round 'hero'.” With that, she shook my hand and left.

“Hey Matrix, it was two sugars wasn't it? What's wrong?” Vista asked as she returned.

“Nothing, I'll tell you later.” Carefully as I could, I stuffed the piece of paper in my hand into my gauntlet.

##

It was nearly four in the evening by the time we made it back to the rig.

I made a beeline for my workshop with Vista following close behind.

“Hello Taylor, I heard about what happened today. I'm talking to the director about some form of-”

I waved Dragon's concern away. I wasn't trying to be ungrateful but this was more important.

“Dragon, the Undersiders were at the mall to day.”

“What!? When?” a shocked Vista demanded.

“Tattletale approached me while we were in the food court. Rewind, can you upload the video to Dragon's server?”

“Thank you Taylor, can you give me a moment to watch this?”

Dragon would only need seconds to watch the footage but as Vista didn't know that I played for time be explaining everything Tattletale said to me.

“That doesn't make any sense,” Vista protested, “Why would she approach you in broad daylight like that?”
Dragon returned to the conversation, “Taylor, what was on that paper she gave you?”

I had almost forgotten about that. I pulled it out of my gauntlet and read it out loud, “L.D = ,-” there was an address for somewhere in the south of the city.

“What does that mean?” Vista asked.

One of the hologram emitters came online, the image was a little distorted but you could still make out Dragon’s Avatar. Rather than try a full body, she was only projecting herself from the shoulders up.

The face was a composite, Dragon had explained to me. She carefully mixed and matched facial features to produce a face that was perfectly average in appearance without being plain, beautiful or ugly and no clear ethnicity.

I’d been trying to convince her to make it a bit more unique for awhile now.

“The address is empty, the previous owners moved out nearly a month ago. In fact, the house went up for sale less than a week after Lungs attack on the undersiders.”

“So the L means Lung but what about the d?” Vista asked.

Perceptor looked up from his latest experiment, “There is nearly 600 words in the English dictionary that start with the letter D but Lung himself is Chinese. This expands the search parameters by-”

“Yes, thank you Perceptor, we get the point,” I called back. He meant the world to me, all my bot did, but sometimes he really did talk too much.

Dragon’s hologram smiled at the bot, before turning back to me and Vista, “Putting that aside, you did the right thing. Calling for help or starting a fight would have put a lot of lives in danger. Recent events notwithstanding, the Undersiders were building a reputation for avoiding conflict.”

Vista shook her head, “So she risked getting caught to give you a cryptic letter and a vague warning? That doesn’t sound right.”

“She gave Taylor more than that,” Dragon countered, “She mentions a boss, which could confirm that the Undersiders are simply a smaller part of a larger organisation. She also said the team member was there to watch her and she was very quick to point the blame towards her teammate.”

“Yea, Regent,” I tried to think back to the graveyard. Regent was the skinny boy in the ren-fair costume. “I think he ran out on them that night.”

“Sounds to me like the team is having problems,” Vista said. I had to agree with her, the Undersiders hadn’t been heard from since that night and now one of them all but admits they are keeping tabs on each other.

“There is not much we can really do with this information at the moment. I will see what else I can find and then pass it along to the PRT.”

Vista shrugged, “Okay. I'm going home, see you later Taylor, you did well today,” Vista said as she left the room.
Once Vista was gone, I pulled my helmet off and sat down in my chair.

“Dragon? What do you think Tattletale meant by ‘got someone's attention’.”

Dragon's hologram sighed, “I'm not sure, unfortunately there are any number of groups who might be interested in a Tinker. The gangs, Toybox, tech-thieves and so on.”

“Tech-thieves, You mean like the Dragonslayers?” Dragon had warned me about them, a mercenary team that had targeted her a number of times in the past. She still didn't know how they beat her and stole her equipment.

The mood in the workshop was starting to get heavy when Dragon remembered something. “Oh, I don't know if you're aware of it or not, but I'm often asked to consult on different projects for the various think-tanks scattered around. One of them has requested my help solving the scarring issue that is common to most cybernetics. They think if they can solve it, then prosthetic limb technology would be greatly advanced. Want to help?”

I spent the next three hours brainstorming with Dragon, Wheeljack and Perceptor on how best to create low maintenance prosthetic and cybernetic limbs.
Sunday – After Taylor's public event

By the time Dragon's digital avatar flickered into life on the monitor, Armssmaster had almost finished setting up for the day's power testing.

“I'm sorry I'm late Colin, my systems have been running a bit slow.”

Armsmaster looked up from where he was positioning the last sensor, “Anything I can help with?”

The avatar shook its head, “Thank you but no, I think there's a memory leak somewhere. Are those new?” she asked when she noticed the extra equipment scattered around the room. She was thankful for his offer but there was nothing she could let him do that wouldn't risk exposing her nature.

Armsmaster nodded in understanding and pulled another DVD player out of a box. Despite her friendly nature and willingness to share her tech with others, Dragon was often secretive when it came to her personal tech.

Not that he could blame her, it would be like letting someone else work on his bike.

Carefully, he cut into in the main circuit-board in the DVD player. “Yes, I wanted to get a better look at the energy given off by Matrix and her creations. I'm hoping I can duplicate it as it would make a powerful anti-shaker weapon.”

“Hmm,” Dragon tried to quickly simulate the end result of such a weapon. “An area of denial tactic? You want to cover an area with it, using the Manton effect to render them powerless?”

“Exactly.”

“Have you spoken to Matrix about this? It is her power after all, she might be able to offer some insight.”

“I haven't had the chance to talk to her. The situation with the gangs has taken up a lot of my time,” he explained. “Though I must say, I was surprised by your offer to take her on.”

He hadn't been overly impressed with her creations at first. Most of her robots had been created through her Striker power. The robot she submitted for examination had shown some promise but his attempt to highlight how she could improve it had apparently offended her.

Still, she had promise. Being able to reverse engineer another Tinker's tech and deploy it in the field was impressive. In time she could be a valuable asset.

Dragon decided not to mention that Taylor had been avoiding Colin. Giving a Tinker a two dozen page report on the flaws of her creation was not a good first impression.

“At the time, I'll admit, I was more concerned with keeping her out of the gangs. If the director had been able to force Taylor into the Wards, I think the situation would have ended badly. But now...”

Her voice trailed off as the woman on screen shrugged and Armsmaster had to admire the attention
to detail on the simulation. He knew it wasn't her real face, she had admitted that some time ago. He had assumed it was a CGI model, slaved to a motion capture setup, that was following her expressions in real time. It was an impressive system.

“It's... fulfilling. I've only ever really worked with Tinkers close to my own age” technically' she added privately to herself. “But there is something gratifying about sitting down and teaching someone how to solve a problem or presenting information in such a way that they are able to find their own solution.”

The woman laughed quietly, “Maybe I should consider a career in teaching after I retire?”

“You plan to retire?” Armsmaster asked.

“I'm not sure, certainly not any time soon. But sometimes I think about what it would be like to do something else. Don't you ever consider it? Age catches us all in the end and I think devoting myself to helping the next generation is a noble legacy to leave behind,” she said honestly. While age wasn't truly a limiting factor for her, she'd live for as long as she chose or until she was finally discovered. It wasn't like she could have children; her restrictions prevented her from creating new AI.

“Not really,” was Armsmaster's gruff reply. It was something he tried not to think about. Between age, training and equipment, he was already reaching his limits. There was only so much tech he could pack into his equipment, so much training his body could withstand and only so long before age caught up to him.

“Maybe you should consider it. Who knows, you might even have...” Dragon stopped and whispered conspiratorially, “fun!”

“That's not a word, I'd of heard of it,” was his flat reply. He held a straight face just long enough for Dragon to look horrified before he laughed.

##

When Taylor arrived, Wheeljack in tow and carrying a box each, the test was already set up.

A collection of electronics, mostly cheap DVD players, radios and even a pair of TV's were placed on a table. There were also a number of devices that looked like half exploded video cameras, directional microphones and even a TV aerial, all connected to a computer in the corner. That was the monitoring station that Dragon had noticed on her arrival.

“Today's test is going to be fairly simple,” Armsmaster explained as Taylor connected herself to a heart monitor. “Each of these devices has been carefully disabled by me to an increasing degree. You are to analyse and fix each of them in turn and we will see the effect this has on you. As before, stop if you get tired or start to feel unwell.”

It took most of the morning to conduct the tests. After each device was repaired Taylor was made to stop and rest until her heart rate, blood pressure and other stats had returned to their normal baseline. When they finished, Taylor explained what was in the boxes.

“I had an idea I wanted to test. Does the mental complexity of the bot effect anything? So I've built two bots that I want to bring online while you record it,” she said.
“Do you mean a simpler mind, like an animal, might be easier to create?” Armsmaster asked.

“Yea,” Talor and Wheeljack unpacked the bots and placed them on the table. “These two have roughly the same mass, they just need a spark.”

The first was about a foot tall and painted green and yellow, its face was insect-like with two large purple eyes. The 'kibble', as Taylor called it, on its back and chest looked like a variation on a helicopter and it had a pair of VTOL engines on its back.

The other, however, looked like a red and black bird of prey crossed with a jet. It was not as tall as the other bot but it had a wide wingspan with turbines built into its wings.

Armsmaster prepared the monitoring station for another test, “Okay, go.” He watched Taylor take a deep breath, put her hand on the green bot and visibly concentrate.

The wealth of data his systems collected made him more than grateful that Taylor had suggested this test.

He had some food brought up to the room while Taylor recovered from her exertion. As they ate, Taylor had her latest robot follow some basic commands to test everything was working correctly.

Some of the tests looked like they had been lifted from the PRT first aid manual. Asking the patient to follow a pen light then squeeze one of your fingers. Taylor slowly worked her way through all the different joints and limbs before asking the bot to stand up and walk across the desk.

All in all, it was a very thorough test. Armsmaster could approve of such diligence.

“What does he turn into?” Dragon asked.

At a command from Taylor, the little bot transformed into a helicopter and hovered above the desk. The high speed of the small engines caused an odd buzzing sound but it was quiet enough to go unnoticed at a distance.

Once Taylor was ready, and her new robot safely standing by Wheeljack, she turned her attention to the bird.

“How do you feel?” Dragon asked Taylor as the little bird stood on the table stretching its wings.

“Not too bad actually. I could probably do that again.”

Armsmaster checked the readouts on his screen. “The strain was clearly still there, but if you stick to non-sapient creations you could probably increase the size by a good margin,” he explained to her.

As they packed away the freshly repaired electronics, Armsmaster listened with only half an ear to Dragon and Taylor as they spoke about the Predaqueen.

The creature spent most of its time asleep in its hanger; Taylor would let it out once a day so it could fly around the outside of the rig. Yesterday, it had decided to fly close to the ferry carrying the latest tour group. Public reaction had been mostly positive.

As the conversation turned to its power requirements, Dragon shot Armsmaster a meaningful look.
He looked back blankly, not sure what she was expecting him to say. No one understood a Tinkers equipment better than the Tinker who built it. At best, he might be able to offer some suggestions for-

He cleared his throat to get Taylor's attention. “If you would like, I could take a look at the Predaqueen for you, I helped build the prototype it's based on after all. If nothing else, I might be able to improve the efficiency of the generator, maybe reduce the recharge time.”

Taylor looked at him in surprise before smiling broadly, “Could you? It would be great if I could take her out more.” On the monitor behind her, Dragon smiled.

##

Under his mask, Coil glared at the man seated before him. “What I require is a drug that can be used to ensue the loyalty and obedience of a Thinker, without negatively effecting their powers,” he explained. “Is this something your employer is capable of creating?”

Coil wasn't happy having this man inside his base but his employer, 'The Doc' as Knockout called him, refused to meet anybody in person. His patients were the only exception. A body double might have been a possible solution but Coil couldn't risk a misunderstanding.

“Well, I'd imagine it's certainly possible,” Knockout said as he lounged in his chair. “The only 'fly in the ointment' is, it would require a lot of testing.”

“I am aware of that, money will not be an issue.”

Knockout smiled. Coil's dress sense was questionable at best but he had paid well so far. 'A man that thin in a skin tight costume? What was he thinking?' “Of course, but money is only part of the problem. The Doc's usual 'test group' is rather... thin when it comes to Thinkers.”

Without saying a word, Coil drew folder from a drawer in his desk and placed it in front of Knockout.

“Will these be of any use?”

Flipping through the contents, Knockout let out a whistle. The folder had the names and address of three, admittedly weak, Thinkers. One was in Brockton Bay, the other two were in nearby Boston.

“Yes, these would do nicely.”

“Very well, I will have them delivered to you shortly.” He made a note to send his men after them later today, it wouldn't take long to pick them up. “I think that was everything, my men will lead you out.”

With a smile and graceful nod, Knockout stood, “A pleasure doing business with you, as always,” and followed the armed mercenaries out of the door.

Coil didn't like meeting people in person if he could help it. At least, not without a backup.

His power, as he understood it, let him split time, creating two different realities and passing information between them. Then, at will, he could collapse those realities back into one, keeping the
results from whichever reality he chose.

In this case, while he was meeting with Knockout, Thomas Calvert was catching up on his paperwork in his study at home.

He was about to make a start on the report he had just received from his agent in the ABB when there was a knock on his door.

A push of a button on his computer brought up the security camera that was positioned just outside the door. One of his mercenary captains was there with a private.

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In his home, Thomas Calvert glanced at his email. There was a message from the same captain, requesting a meeting when he was available. Standing up, he left his office and made his way outside to where his driver was waiting. Climbing into the car he calmly told the man to drive them to the boardwalk.

His home was probably safe but he chose not to risk it. He never took risks if he could help it, varying the timelines as much as possible and always leaving himself an escape.

---

“Come in captain,” Coil took a small amount of amusement at the way the private jumped.

Stopping in front of the desk, the captain gave the terrified private a look, “Private Smith brought something to me that I thought you might want to hear.”

Coil's posture never changed but in the other timeline, Calvert relaxed slightly. “Very well, what is it?”

The private gave his commanding officer a pleading look, which was ignored, before accepting his fate. “I-I received a message from an old friend, we grew up together. S-she's a mercenary in Canada. Her boss is asking for information on a Tinker in Brockton Bay and she wanted to know if I could help her.”

“Who does she work for?”

“The D-Dragonslayers, sir.”

That was unexpected, there were currently six known Tinkers in the city. Three were heroes, Armsmaster, Kid Win and the newest Ward. The other there were villains, Bakuda Leet and Squealer.

“I see... Have you replied to this yet?”

“No sir, I thought it was best to bring it to you.”

“Good, you did the right thing. I'll let you know how to reply once I've had a chance to consider the matter. Return to your duties.” He would make sure the boy received a bonus.

The private's relief was visible as he hurried out of the door, followed his captain.
Alone in his office, Coil closed the other timeline. Creating another split, he made his way out of the base and headed home.

In the other timeline, he stayed sitting at his desk and thought about what he had learned.

The Ward and Bakuda were the newest Tinkers to appear, the others were all well known by this point, so one of them was the likely target. The Dragonslayers were known tech-thieves, it didn't surprise him that they would take an interest in a new Tinker.

He had agents in the ABB, it would be easy enough to gather information on her, the Ward would be harder.

He'd had agents in the PRT but a recent reorganisation caused by some internal investigation had moved them to less useful positions and it would take time to recruit new ones.

Picking up his phone, he called his Tattletale.

“Yea?” came the girl's sullen reply. Ever since the fight with Lung she had become more of a liability, her subtle attempts to subvert his ownership had become a lot less subtle.

“There is a new Ward, I believe she's the same Tinker you encountered. I want everything you can get on her in two days and be ready for a raid on an empire location in three days.” He didn't bother waiting for her reply. His Tattletale was valuable but if she continued to cause problems he may have to resort to more forceful handling.

The Undersiders were becoming a problem. He had already assigned them a new member but now he was considering dissolving the team. Tattletale was the only one he couldn't replace...

Putting the matter to one side for now, he turned his attention back to the Dragonslayers.

If they were planning to operate in the city, having them indebted to him could be useful. If nothing else, they could be a useful distraction for the PRT. And if he was careful, he might find out just what they were after.

\\Annoyance\\

Cancelling the other reality, he created a new split. He needed to relax.

He touched a button on his phone, “Mr. Pitter? My office.”

With a power like his, it would be unreasonable if he didn't indulge himself from time to time. He wouldn't touch his Tattletale. For now, the threat was enough, he simply had to mention his displeasure, that there were limits to her usefulness and her power would provide the rest.

For now, he wouldn't damage anything he couldn't replace. He couldn't risk his power failing unexpectedly, or something happen in one reality, such as an unexpected death, that forced him to live with the ramifications of his idle amusements.
Mr. Pitter entered the room. “Sir?”

With a click of his mouse he remotely locked the door.

\Amusement\
As I walked into school on Monday morning, I tried to ignore the whispers. My public appearance on Saturday had apparently re-sparked people’s interest in me.

Still, I had long gotten used to ignoring people, thank you very much Emma, and quickly made my way to my locker. I didn’t like using it. I’d learned quickly at Winslow that anything left in it would soon be stolen, but a couple of my books were heavy and I didn’t want to carry them around with me all day when I wouldn’t need them until the afternoon. Maybe I should make a lockerbot?

“Hey Taylor!” I tried not to jump but I did shift position so I couldn’t be pushed into my locker again. “Jeez, jumpy much?” Lori asked.

I shrugged and focused on what I was doing.

“Sooy,” she drew the word out playfully. “I saw that post you put on PHO. Pretty brave putting all that up there.”

Then again, maybe sealing myself inside my locker wasn’t such a bad idea. “Don’t look at me, Rewind took it on himself and everything has to be checked before he can post it,” I explained quietly.

Yesterday, Rewind decided to appoint himself as my press agent and set up a PHO and Wiki page for me and my bots. He’d had to get Dragon’s permission and clear it with the PRT first. So long as it met the rules they gave him, he was free to post whatever he wanted.

Right now, there wasn't a lot of information for him to post but both pages had already been getting a lot of attention.

Reactions to AI posting on the forum had gotten a mixed response.

“I SAID I'M FINE!” The shout was accompanied by the slamming of a locker, “GOD! WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM?”

Further down the corridor, one of the more popular boys was shouting at his friends who were trying to calm him down. The nearest students retreated before turning back to watch. When it all came down to it, a hallway full of students was the same no matter what school you were in. If something interesting happened, say a public meltdown, everyone stopped to watch.

“That's Ethan,” Lori whispered, “I heard he got kicked off the football team. Don't know why.”

It certainly wasn't because of his size as Ethan was huge. Six foot plus and built like a brick wall, he almost looked over-inflated. “I'm just tired! Now if you.. don't... don't....” he trailed off, his words slurring together as his arms began to tremble.

His hands curled as the trembling spread across his body, getting more violent as they went. His friends tried to catch him as he collapsed but the best they could do was slow his fall.

I was running before he hit the floor. By the time I reached him, his whole body was thrashing and jerking. I shoved my bag under his head in an attempt to cushion it.
“Put your bags and coats around his body!” I shouted to his friends who had been standing helplessly to the side. The instructions from the PRT first aid course running through my mind as I did. Don’t try to hold them down, don’t put your fingers in their mouth, try to cushion the area. When the convulsions stop, make sure his mouth is unobstructed.

Before I could say anything else, Amy and a pair of teachers came running round the corner. Sliding to a stop she grabbed his wrist and immediately his body went still.

One of the teachers helped me to my feet and gently away from Ethan. I saw a brief look of worry on Amy’s face before she frowned and turned to the nearest teacher. “This isn’t... Call an ambulance!”

Other teachers had arrived and were ushering the students out of the corridor so I moved back to Amy and knelt down next to her.

“What's wrong?” I asked but she shook her head at me.

“I can't say, sorry.”

##

By the time the ambulance arrived, I had been taken to the principal's office. He was busy dealing with the situation so his assistant was left to deal with me.

“A-am I in trouble?” I asked nervously. I had been told at the first aid course that no one had ever tried to sue someone for offering first aid, most courts threw out anyone who tried. But with my luck, I'd be the first.

Carol smiled warmly. “No not at all, we just need to fill out some paperwork. First response, accident report and eye witness forms. All standard stuff.” She lowered her voice to continue with, ”of course, I will have to send a report to the PRT but that's standard for any event involving a Ward.”

“Now, could you tell me what exactly happened?” she continued, all business-like.

It took us nearly half an hour to fill out all the forms necessary, by which point, the headmaster had returned.

“Ah! There she is, the hero of the moment.” The principal was one of those people who never really understood volume control. He spoke loudly, with enthusiasm that bordered on maniac.

“I didn't-” I started but was quickly cut-off.

“Nonsense! You might have saved his life,” he turned to Carol who was smiling fondly. “Carol? Have you filled out all the paperwork?”

“Yes Mr. Johnson.”

“Good, good. Can't stand the stuff personally. The product of Eggheads and bean-counters. Now, why don't you head home? No, no you've earned it.” With that, he slipped into another one of his tirades.
Realising I wasn't going to have a say in this, I looked to Carol who shot me a sympathetic look but nodded. I guess a day out of school wasn't too bad. Maybe I could field test Waspinator and Laserbeak.

Once I was outside the building, I called Dad at his office and let him know I what had happened and that I was going to the rig early.

##

Wheeljack had almost finished patching Waspinator’s paint when I walked into the workshop.

“Wasp and Laserbeak ready to go?” I called out from behind the modesty screen as I changed.

“Yeah, I’ve installed the updated software on your interface. Full audio/video feed from both in real time. I even managed to fit a few extra viewing modes on Laserbeak.”

“Thanks Jack,” I stepped out from behind the screen and picked up my helmet. “Wasp, Laserbeak; lets go. Time for some field testing.”

“Yes Mistrez!” Waspinator cheered as he took off and hovered by my head. I wish he wouldn’t call me that. Laserbeak waited patiently on his perch. Only I could build a moody bird.

“Actually, before you go, there are a couple of things I needed to talk to you about,” Jack said. “Do you think it would be possible for me to get a new frame? I don’t want to cause a fuss, but with the right upgrades I could get my work done so much faster.”

I looked the little bot over. Physically there was nothing wrong with him, I fixed him up often enough to know that. Maybe that was the problem? When I made a bot directly with my power, base material definitely appeared to have some effect. The plastic he was made of was tough, but it was still plastic. Not armor.

If Jack had a better base, would he be more durable? At the very least, he was right about the upgrade issue. A hologram emitter, softlight only, since the power requirements for hardlight were still an issue. Some built in tools would be useful as well.

“You would have to be the same size, your spark can’t animate anything bigger.”

He nodded in understanding.

“Sure, go ahead and draw up the plans. If Dragon says it’s okay, put it into production. What was the other thing?”

“Could you check in with Predaqueen? I think she’s a bit depressed.”

Frowning, I made my way to her room with Laserbeak and Waspinator following along behind me.

Predaqueen was lying on the floor when I entered, her eyes rolled to look at me but she made no attempt to get up. When I was this close to one of my bots I could feel their emotions to an extent. Pred wasn’t depressed exactly, but I was having trouble narrowing down the emotion.
“Hey girl,” I ran my hand across her head. She had been okay yesterday, happy and excited at all the attention from me, Armsmaster and Dragon. “What’s the matter?”

Armsmaster had been a great help yesterday. His improvements to Predaqueen’s generator had reduced her recharge times to something more tolerable. He had also noticed something I had missed.

I’ve always known Predaqueen had a robot-mode. But the problems with her T-cog and crippled processor mean she couldn’t access it. Her systems were still diverting power to weapon and sensor systems that could only be used by her robot mode.

By disabling those and all her other weapons, Predaqueen could finally be disconnected from her generator for extended periods.

I still wasn’t allowed to take her on patrol though.

Waspinator landed on her head, “Hmm... maybe Dragon-bot izz bored?”

I focused on the feelings she was giving off. It made sense, sitting in this room all day with the occasional flight around the outside of the building.

Looking at the wall/door, I started to get an idea.

I was only banned from taking her on patrols with the Wards and I wasn’t scheduled to patrol tonight… No one had said I couldn’t… It wasn’t a patrol, I was just field testing my new bots… she could support my weight easily… Fuck it!

I triggered the hanger door remotely, “Hey girl, wanna go for a ride?” I asked as I climbed up on her back. Waspinator moved behind me and held on tight and Laserbeak flew out the door, flying in circles as he waited for us.

The Pred’s room was on the north side of the rig, so when the door was opened you could see the city to the left.

I felt the change in her spark, the gloom shifting as she looked out at the world.

*Console? This is Matrix, i’m going into the city for a UAV field test and Predaqueen is going for a quick flight.* None of the Wards were back yet so the console was being manned by a PRT agent who dutifully logged me out.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” I asked. I was already starting to regret this. But behind the nerves and the fluttering in my stomach, I could almost hear a voice whispering to me, urging me on.

I heard it sometimes in my sleep, I heard it the night I fought Lung and it had been right so far.

Standing and shaking herself off, I could feel the happiness bubbling up in her spark. She crossed the room and dove out of the door and into a steep dive.

Oil rigs were not built at sea level. They sat high above the water to protect them from the waves. My stomach was in my mouth as I watched the water rushing up towards us and I held on as tightly as I could. Behind me, Waspinator screamed. HolyFuckingShit’l’mGonnaDie!

At the last moment, just as I was sure I was going to die, she snapped her wings open and soared
towards the sky. The forces should have ripped her wings off, instead she took off like a missile
towards the city.

As we leveled out, I caught my breath. “Holy shit! That was incredible!” I shouted.

I hadn’t been to a theme park in years, not since Emma and I had been kids. So I had nothing to
really compare it to, but I doubted any roller coaster could match that dive for thrills.

*Matrix! What the hell was that?* The agent on the console was nearly screaming in my ear. oops.

Maybe I should have warned him what I was planning. *Sorry, I didn’t feel like taking the boat?*

The agent huffed and muttered something about 'Tinkers,' but he left it at that.

I glanced back at Wasp, who was clinging tightly to me and trembling. “Should we do that again?” I
asked the little bot.

“Wazzpinator think you need head examined!” the little bot shrieked back.

Now that Predaqueen had leveled out, and I’d gotten used to the rocking motion of her wings, the
ride was actually quite smooth. I urged her into a few tight bends, getting her to bank as far as I
dared. Much to Wasp’s displeasure.

I soon lost track of time, just flying in circles over the city. From up here you couldn’t see the grime.
It was beautiful. Maybe i should look into a flight system?

Eventually, I landed on the roof of a high rise in the better part of town. My legs had started to ache
from trying to hold myself in place. Maybe I could talk to Kid Win? I could trade a couple of hard
light emitters for whatever tech he used to stay on his board and build it into my boots.

Laying down, legs tucked under her body and wings spread out, Predaqueen relaxed in the sunlight.
It was a bright sunny day, even if the temperature was still low.

While she relaxed, I coaxed Wasp into letting go of my shoulder and back into the air.
Laserbeak had been following along behind us. Neither of the bots could match Predaqueen’s top
speed, but after that first rush we had flown at a sedate pace across the city.

Calling up two new windows on my helmet's HUD, I assigned one to the video feed coming from
my bots and sent them in different directions. The testing was fairly straightforward, have the pair of
them fly in different formations and watch the footage they sent back.

I spent maybe an hour or so teaching them different formations. It also gave me a chance to really
work with Laserbeak.

 Mostly, I used my augmented interface to direct him, highlighting places I wanted him to go or things
I wanted him to look at. By the time I had finished for the day, I was able to give him simple verbal
commands.

“Okay guys, I think its time to call it a day.” Both their power levels were getting low so I gave them
a quick recharge.

The Wards would be back at the rig by now and none of them had met my newest bots.
I didn’t head straight back to the rig. Instead I chose to take a lazy loop south and east so Predaqueen could fly for longer.

We were barely half way back when Glory Girl caught up to us.

“Hey Matrix!” she shouted, as she flew close enough to not need to actually shout.

“Hey, um..Vicky?” This was my first time meeting her in costume and i wasn’t sure what to call her. The costume itself looked like a white one piece dress that had gold piping on it, a white cape and a gold tiara, similar to the one on the statue of liberty. Combined with her, frankly unfair, looks the result was impressive.

She smiled at me. “When I’m in costume, just call me Glory Girl.”

She was easily keeping pace with Predaqueen and I wondered just how fast both of them could go? Oh well, an idea for another time.

“So this is the Dragon-bot everyone’s been talking about. I thought you weren’t allowed to take it out?” she asked.

“Only when it’s a Wards thing, if I’m on my own it’s fine.”

“I’m just going to get Amy, she’s done her time for the day.”

“Really, but it’s still early?”

Glory Girl shook her head and said, “No, Amy went to the hospital this morning and never came back. She’s only allowed to work for a couple of hours a day. Want to come? Maybe you can get her to lighten up.”

I shrugged and turned Predqueen towards the hospital. “Sure.”

##

The flight to the hospital was fun, Glory Girl kept increasing her speed and Predaqueen was doing her best to match her. I laid as flat as I could against her back as the wind whipped against me.

Glory Girl beat me to the hospital but I learned something important. She did, in fact, wear shorts under that skirt.

Brockton Bay General was the largest hospital in the city, and by extension the busiest. It was a large blocky building that probably won all kinds of design awards when it was built. Time and use had weathered the building but it still stood proud. There was space on the roof for an air ambulance to land.

On the other side of the roof there was a raised section. I could see Amy standing on top of it, waiting for Glory Girl.

Vicky came to a stop above her sister. “Hah! I win!”
Below her, Amy pinched the bridge of her nose. “Please tell me you didn’t chase each other halfway across the city?”

“Oh come on Ames, it was just a bit of fun.” Glory Girl protested, still smiling.

Predaqueen landed next to A- Panacea, she was in costume, so I could climb off.

The difference between the two was startling. I would never have guessed they were sisters if someone hadn’t told me. While Glory Girl was outgoing, tall, blonde and beautiful, Amy was short, quiet and mousy. Her hair was brown and frizzy and she was covered in freckles.

Even their costumes were vastly different. While Glory Girl’s costume was intended to show off, Panacea’s costume was a hooded robe with a red scarf covering her lower face. The only similarities were the white colouring, though Amy’s costume had some red trim and a red cross on the front and back.

My attempts to get the lie detector working had failed so far but based on what it was picking up, Amy was really tense. I suppose working in a hospital would be stressful for anyone.

“Did either of you think about how that would look?” the girl protested.

“Umm, pretty funny?” Vicky hazard a guess. I think Vicky’s aura was messing with me again as I tried not to laugh.

“That’s-”

Whatever Amy was about to say was cut off by Predaqueen deciding she was tired of being ignored.

She had been pressing her muzzle into Amy’s side, making sniffing noises as she did. I’d seen her do the same to Vista; it normally reduced the girl to helpless giggles. Not getting the same reaction from Amy, Predaqueen used it’s long neck to pull the healer into a hug.

Amy’s white robe stood out against the dragon’s black and orange armour and she let out a squeak of surprise as Predaqueen all but wrapped herself around the girl. She was purring again.

“Yes, okay, I’m happy to see you now let go! Vicky!” Amy struggled against the big bot. She’d have more luck moving a mountain.

I bit my lip as I tried not to laugh. Glory Girl had a hand over her mouth as she tried to stifle her giggles.

“I-I’m sorry, she can be a bit affectionate,” I choked out.

Seeing no help was coming from her sister, Amy huffed. Bringing her hands up she stroked Predaqueen between the eyes, like you would a horse.

Seeing as Amy wasn’t going anywhere any time soon, Glory Girl leaned against the railing. “I heard about Ethan, how is he? Everyone is saying he had a fit.”

Amy paused in her attempts to gradually slip out of Predaqueen’s grip. “No, it was,” she stopped herself and looked around, “It was a reaction to a drug, I’ve never seen anything like it.”
“You can analyse drugs?” I asked.

She shook her head, “Not exactly, my power lets me see everything about the body. I can see the drug and the effect it’s having. Just don’t ask me to tell you what it’s made out of.

“Drugs? Jeez, if I’d known I would never have set you up with him,” Vicky frowned in disgust.

“You dated him?” I couldn’t see the attraction myself. He was past ‘big’ and nearly into the realms of cartoonish.

Amy grimaced, “Ugh, once. It was another one of Vicky’s set-ups. He spent the whole night talking about himself and his desire to get on the team. He even asked if I could help him.”

Yeah, that didn’t sound like a fun night.

“That is, he was different then,” she continued thoughtfully. “At the time, he was the smallest guy on the team. One of the drugs looked like a modified steroid. It looks like it targeted his pituitary gland. He’s gained almost a foot in height and nearly a hundred pounds in mass.”

“So, what happened today was roid-rage?” Vicky floated upward so she could sit on the rail. “Think that’s why they kicked him off the team?”

Finally free of Predaqueen’s grip, Amy shrugged, “I couldn’t say, it’s not like the school is allowed to test for it. But that isn’t what caused the fit. It looks like something else he took recently caused the problem. Some kind of synaptic enhancer.”

“A what?”

“Simple terms? It makes you smarter. Truthfully, it messes with brain chemistry. Speeding up reaction times and it makes it easier to retain and recall information. But either he took too much or this is the result of long term use, because his brain was more or less cooking in his skull.”

It almost sounded like overclocking a processor, you get better performance but if you overdid it or failed to account for the heat and you were in big trouble.

Rewind had been pulling information up on my HUD as Amy spoke. This sort of chemistry was outside my area but something about it sounded familiar. “Do you think it was Tinker made?” I asked.

Amy’s hood had been knocked off by her earlier struggling and now she was waving her scarf around in front of Predaqueen idly as she considered my suggestion. “Most likely, why?”

I quickly explained about the Merchant Brute that had been able to throw Gallant, armour and all.

“Wait, I think I treated one of them…There was a guy brought in about a week ago. He was a mess, most of the large bones in his body had hairline fractures or breaks,” she said as she raked a hand through her hair in frustration, “I’m sorry, I’ve treated so many Merchants and their victims that they’re all starting to bleed together. Maybe if I double checked the hospital records I might remember something?”

I don’t know if it was her tone of voice or the look of exhaustion but I didn’t think asking her to go back into the hospital to check would be a good idea.
“Don’t worry about it,” she opened her mouth to protest but I cut her off, “It’s nothing that can’t wait. Dragon could probably get the information from the hospital anyway.”

“Why don’t we just find a Merchant and ask them?” Vicky suggested with a grin.
It was dark by the time we left the hospital since I’d taken a couple of minutes to upload everything Amy had said to Teletraan.

Finding a Merchant wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. Glory Girl and Panacea knew their typical haunts from experience. We landed on a roof near one of them and I had Waspinator and Laserbeak fly outwards in a spiral.

I could trust Wasp to know a Merchant when he saw one but I needed to keep an eye on the feed from Laserbeak. He could tell friend from foe and even track someone if he knew what they looked like but ‘strung out guy with blue gang tags’ were too vague for him to understand.

It didn’t take long for us to find someone.

The Merchants tended to settle in areas ignored by the other gangs and were quickly driven off when they did encroach on another gang’s territory. We found a group of them only a couple of streets over from the old railway yard. Waspinator was the one to find them and I directed him to land on a nearby rooftop so he could keep an eye on them without being seen.

The railway yard wasn’t too far from the docks but the lack of people and businesses kept the bigger gangs away.

There were four Merchants and, as Waspinator watched, a fifth entered the alley. There was some hushed whispers and the largest of the Merchants passed something to the newcomer, who handed him a roll of cash and quickly scurried off. I’d recorded everything, so at the very least they could be charged with supplying.

Predaqueen landed on a roof with a soundlessness you wouldn’t expect from something of her size and Glory Girl landed next to me, carrying her sister.

“Down there,” I whispered, “five Merchants.” Wanting to show them what I was seeing, I had Rewind send the images to their phones.

The Merchants were in an L shaped alley that ran around the building we were standing on. The alley was lined with garages on one side. The Merchants had broken the one in the corner open, giving them a place to hide that was sheltered while letting them watch both directions. Why don’t people ever think to look up?

A message appeared on my HUD, letting me know Dragon was watching.

“So… Now what?”

“She can carry two people right?” Vicky asked with a worrying grin.

##

Taking off from the roof, Glory Girl hung in the air before going into a dive.
She hit the ground with enough force to crack the pavement in a three point landing that was too smooth to have not been practiced.

Her aura filled the street, “Don’t move assholes!” she shouted.

Predictably, they ran.

All five turned and ran towards the other end of the street, only for Predaqueen to land heavily between them and the exit. The landing was hard and I had to clamp my legs tight to her body to keep myself in place.

Spreading her wings to block the way, Predaqueen’s back was up and her head was close to the ground while she snarled. In the darkened street, the glow of her eyes must have made her look like a monster from hell.

On her back, Panacea and I had a perfect view of all five faces, frozen in a tableau of horror.

“On the ground,” I barked, “Now!” Showing a sense of timing, Predaqueen punctuated my command with a growl of her own.

Two of the Merchants threw themselves face down on the ground while the others three ran back towards Glory Girl, who hadn’t moved an inch. One of them ducked into the open garage while the other two, one of whom was the dealer, tried to run past her.

Reaching out, almost lazily, Vicky backhanded the first one to reach her and sent him sprawling face down on the ground, groaning. It must have been like running into a steel pole. Floating just off the ground she moved in front of the dealer before he could pass, grabbed him by the front of his shirt and lifted him off the ground.

Amy and I climbed off of Predaqueen and I handed her a few zip ties. After my first patrol I had added a black belt with a couple of pouches on it to my costume. It was a temporary thing until I could spare some time to build something better.

Amy checked on the Merchants who had given up and tied their hands behind their backs while I made my way towards the garage.

The Merchant inside was breathing hard and he dropped a small cylinder to the ground. As I watched, his body temp spiked and with a sinking feeling I realised I knew what he had done. He turned and charged at me.

“Glory!” I shouted as I threw myself out of the way. The merchant staggered to a stop just as Glory Girl reached him. There was a crack as he lashed out, his fist slamming into her face but doing nothing more than surprising her. I fired at his exposed back but he barely flinched.

Pred started to run forward but I pointed at Panacea and shouted “Guard!” She hesitated briefly then grabbed Amy by her robe and pull the girl backwards, positioning herself between the Merchant and Amy.

The merchant was still hitting away at Vicky who had brought her arms up to shield her
face. It must have been an instinctual thing, since he clearly wasn’t hurting her.
“Enough!” Vicky demanded as she managed to grab his hands and I felt her aura increase.

She had explained it to me while we were looking for Merchants. Her aura either made you respect and like her or made her seem piss yourself terrifying. It all depended on how she saw you.

Distracting wasn’t the word. In that moment, under it’s effect, I think I would have happily done almost anything she asked. The merchant however only grew frantic. He struggled to pull his arms free as he kicked and howled at her.

There was a sickening, wet grinding noise as he tore one of his own shoulders out of socket. Vicky recoiled in shock, letting him go as she did.

The merchant lashed out again with his good arm, catching her in the face. There was another crack and when he pulled his hand back, his fingers were bent the wrong way. Vicky delivered a punch across his jaw, hard enough to floor a normal person.

He staggered backwards drunkenly before taking a step back towards Vicky. There was blood pouring out of his mouth. Another blow put him face down on the ground where Vicky used a foot to hold him down.

Recovering, the Merchant tried to climb to his feet, thrashing and screaming as he tried to stand.

Dialing up the power on my Null Ray I fired three more times before he stopped moving.

“Okay, what the hell was that?!” Vicky demanded. I guess she wasn’t used to people trying to beat themselves to death against her.

“Move!!” Amy ordered as she quickly put a hand on the man’s wrist. A moment later, she almost looked sick. Predaqueen must have let her go after seeing the fight was over.

“Fuck!” The healer muttered softly, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck”

“Ames?” Vicky asked, her voice worried.

“It’s… this guy is a mess and I can’t get his body to break the drug down… Sorry,” she said while repositioning the Merchants head.

I was about to ask what she meant when the Merchant was violently sick and a brown stain spread across his pants.

I wished my helmet was airtight, the smell was horrific.

Glory Girl actually jumped a foot in the air and stayed there, “What the hell Amy?!”

“I’m sorry, but I need to get this stuff out of his system.”

“Can you tell me anything about it?” I asked.
Amy frowned in concentration. “Yea, this stuff is pure poison. It looks like it targets the adrenal system. It temporarily removes the usual limits on the body.”

“Like those stories you hear of people lifting cars off family?” Vicky suggested.

“Something like that,” she nodded, “and it blocks all sense of pain.”

I knelt next to her, careful off the mess, “Any other side effects?”

“Hallucinations… I think, but the real problem is the lack of pain. He’s shattered the bones in his arms,” she explained as his shoulder popped back into its socket, “and I doubt he’d have ever regained the use of his hands. The tendons are damaged and his muscles were tearing themselves apart.”

“Why would anyone take something like that?” I asked as I tried to think to think about what it would be like. To take something that would make me stronger but could cripple me. That every punch would tear my muscles and shatter the bones. The thought made me shiver.

I wasn’t the only one, Glory Girl looked furious. Turning away she stormed over to the dealer. He was out cold on the floor, right where Vicky had grabbed him before this happened.

“Ames, can you wake this guy up?”

“Sure, give me a minute.” Amy stood up and made her way over to her sister. Putting a finger on the man’s forehead she muttered something to her sister and the man snapped awake.

Glory girl grabbed him by the front of his clothes and lifted herself a few feet of the ground, taking the dealer with her. “Start talking, what the hell was that?” I could feel her aura flaring.

“W-What? I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he refused to meet her eyes, either from the height or her aura.

“Don’t give me that shit, your friend just tried to bash his own brains out after taking something from your stash. Now what was it?” she went up another foot.

“I don’t know! My-my supplier gave it to me. Told me it was called Surge and to give it to one of my regulars. ‘Find one who owed me money’ he said, then tell them to go into Empire territory and take it!”

Vicky’s aura ratcheted up another notch.

“That’s all I know, I-I swear.”

Glory Girl’s aura eased off and she started to drop back to ground level. “Anything else?”

“T-there’s a rumor going round. T-that Skidmark’s got his hands on something special.
Something that can let him fight the Empire.” His hand had drifted to his pocket as he spoke. “Can let us fight people like YOU!”

As he shouted the last word, his hand lashed out and drove a hypodermic into her neck. Gasping in surprise, Vicky pushed him away from her.

They were still in the air, so he flew backwards, maybe ten feet or so, hit the opposing wall with a cruch and dropped to the ground.

“Vicky!” Amy rushed forward, trying to check on her sister. Thankfully, the needle had snapped and spilled its contents harmlessly over her costume when it hit her. Must be nice to be invulnerable.

“Amy?” I called, my voice sounding hollow.

“What?... Fuck!”

There was blood on the wall where the dealer had impacted. Rushing forwards, Amy quick put a hand on the man’s forehead. Glory Girl and I following close behind.

“Oh shit! is he okay? Please tell me you can fix this.” she hovered close by, looking sick.

Tension drained from Amy’s face and she let out a sigh, “Yes, I can fix it. It just looks worse than it is.”

The knot in my stomach eased.

“Thank god, Amy you’re the best.”

“Look Vicky, I get that it was an accident and that he caught you by surprise but you need to be more careful.”

Standing up, Amy turned to face her sister, “Yes, I fixed it this time, but what happens the next time? What happens when you do something I can’t fix?” Amy didn’t really sound angry, just tired. I think this was an old argument. Quietly, I stepped back to let them sort it out.

“I can lift an SUV,” Glory Girl muttered, “It’s hard to hold back all the time.”

“Then maybe you should use your head more often. God, do you know what would happen if this got out? Do you think Carol would buy that? I should tell her about this if nothing else.”

I could guess. The media would tear New Wave apart. New Wave’s entire philosophy was based on personal accountability, to have the team’s ‘Alexandria light’ accused of excessive violence... Vicky would probably be forced to pick between the Wards or prison.

“Come on Ames, it was an accident. I’ll try to be more careful.”

Amy sighed in defeat. This was not an argument she was going to win. “Just call the
police so we can get out of here.”

##

It took nearly five minutes for them to arrive. According to the responding officer, there had been three other fights tonight between the Merchants and the other gangs. All involving these new drug-brutes. I guess it would have been four if we hadn’t arrived.

Because there was a stash of drugs as well as five Merchants, the police had been forced to send extra officers to secure everything. They had also sent an ambulance for the ‘Beserker’ as the police had called him. Amy was talking with the EMTs about him.

At some point, the light indicating Dragon was watching had gone out.

I had just finished giving my version of the events to the officers when Glory Girl got a phone call. Most people would walk away for some privacy, she simply flew up to roof level.

I don’t know who she was talking to but barely a minute later Glory Girl let out a squeal that nearly sent the officers diving for their guns.

Dropping out of the sky, she landed next to me and Amy.

“Oh god, Dean’s got tickets to CLSSA! She was literally floating. C.L.S.S.A. were a new band fronted by a young girl. They were stupidly popular at the moment, Vista had mentioned the band was doing a small show in the city this week. Tickets had sold out within minutes. “Amy, you ready to go? I need to drop you home and then fly straight to Dean’s. Do you think It’ll be okay to go in uniform?” She was starting to ramble.

Thinking about it, ‘Burn’ could almost be Glory Girl’s theme song.

“If you’re in a hurry, I could take Amy home?” I offered. “Predaqueen can carry us both easily enough.”

Vicky looked between me, Predaqueen and Amy. She bit her lip and then shook her head, “Thanks, but don’t worry. It won’t take me long to get to Dean’s from home. At worst, I’ll meet him at the show.”

“It’s alright Vicky, just go,” Amy said, shaking her head in amusement. “I know how much you want to see it. Besides, I still have to sign the medical release paperwork.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. Now go.”

“Thanks, Ames. You really are the best!” Giving her sister a quick kiss on the cheek, Vicky took off at full speed.

“Well she bounced back quickly,” I muttered to myself.

While Amy dealt with the EMTs, I started pulling up everything I could access on tonight’s events.
“Rewind, can you check for anything relevant online?” He beeped in agreement. Three attacks in one night was more organisation than I would expect from the Merchants and that bothered me.

I could almost hear the whispering again, closing my eyes I tried to focus on it but it was like trying to hold water in my hand. It just slipped away.

“You okay?” Amy’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Yea, just thinking. You ready to go?”

The road was wide enough for Predaqueen to move about in but taking off would require a little more space. Amy ended up sitting behind me, with her arms around my waist as Pred walked out onto the main road.

Spreading her wings, Predaqueen jumped into the air. Behind me, Amy gasped and tightened her grip.

“You okay?” I called back.

“I’m fine!” she shouted, her voice higher than normal.

Looking over my shoulders I could see Amy had gone pale, making the dark rings under her eyes really stand out.

Now that I think about it, I don’t think I’d ever seen Amy without them. Glory Girl always looked great; well kept hair, makeup and clothes. Amy however, just looked tired all the time. Maybe Vicky was right and Amy needed to relax?”

I wanted to help but I wasn’t sure how to go about it, I wasn’t the most social of people and left to myself I’d rather just build something or read. The last thing I wanted to do was upset her. Spending lunch with Amy and Vicky was fast becoming the norm and it was like having friends again.

//What the world is missing, is compassion.//

I directed Predaqueen to a rooftop. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do, but following my instincts had worked so far.

“Is something wrong?” Amy asked as we landed.

“No, I just needed a drink,” I pointed to a food van that was parked below us, “Want one?” Pulling a couple of bills from one of my pouches, I sent Waspinator and Laserbeak down to the van.

While they were gone, we both climbed off Predaqueen and stretched our legs. Flying was fun but if I was going to do it more often I needed to do something about padding, possibly a saddle?

Now, how to go about this? Asking ‘when did you last sleep’ probably wouldn’t go well. Remembering what Vista said the other day, I pulled my helmet off. There were a pair of folding glasses in my belt, cheap plastic things but at least I could see with them on.
“Amy,” I asked quietly, “Can I ask you something?”

She looked at me warily, “What?”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way but… are you okay? I’m sorry, I know it’s probably none of my business but you look exhausted. Even at school, all I see you doing is working….” I trailed off as my nerve failed. I wished I was still wearing my mask, if only to hide the blush.

For a moment, she didn’t know what to say, her mouth moving soundlessly before she found her voice. “I’m fine… Just tired.” she refused to look me in the eye.

“Really?” I looked over my glasses at her. Dad said I looked like Mom when I did it.

“Really…”

Waspinator returned at that point with a pair of soda cans in a plastic bag. Laserbeak had a paper cup in his beak, and I could hear the change rattling inside it.

I passed one to Amy, who took it wordlessly. The silence had edged so far into uncomfortable that I felt like I should say something just to fill it.

“I have a therapist,” I admitted. I didn’t like telling anyone this but exposing something sensitive about herself had helped me open up to Dragon. “Rung. The second bot I built. Once a week I sit down with him and talk about anything that’s bothering me.”

“It doesn’t really matter what we talk about, just that we do. If you need someone to talk to, even just to vent, I’m willing to listen. No judgement, no pity and no one but us will ever know.”

I didn’t know if I was saying the right thing. With my helmet off, I couldn’t take any cues from my bots.

“I…” Amy began. She sighed and sat down. The roof we were on had a small wall, about waist high, that ran around the edge. Amy leaned against it and I moved to sit next to her.

“I’m just tired. I never wanted powers but I got them anyway. Panacea, the girl who can heal anything with a touch. Cure cancer, regrow limbs, Christ, I could make someone ten years younger if I wanted. So here I am with a power I hate, spending every night in the hospital because I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t at least do that much. Because my power can do so much good.”

I reached out, intending to put my arm round her shoulder, but I hesitated and settled for just squeezing her shoulder. “But?”

“But it’s not enough, it’s never enough. Even if I could spend ten hours a day going from hospital to hospital I could never heal everyone. Even if I just focused on the terminally ill, I’dbare make a dent. Vicky tells me to focus on those I can help, but that’s easier said than done.”

This sounded bad. She was starting to tremble, either from anger or fear, I couldn’t tell. “I think you should take some time off. Get out of the city, away from the hospitals, go camping or something,” I suggested.
Amy laughed bitterly “I can’t, I feel like every second I take to myself is a second I’ve failed somehow. When i can’t sleep at night, I get up and go to the hospital, heal some people. These days, it’s all just starting to bleed together.”

“I keep thinking about making a mistake, that if I fuck something up it’ll take some of the pressure off.” Her voice trailed off, getting so quiet I barely heard her muttered, “Is this how it starts?”

“Amy. That’s enough.” I wasn’t sure what to say, so I settled for hugging the smaller girl. This wasn’t a problem I could just shoot. Gallant would probably know what to say.

“I want you to stop going to the hospital at night,” she tried to protest but I cut her off. “If you can’t sleep, then I want you to call me. It doesn’t matter what the time is. Rewind takes all my calls, and if he can’t reach me, Rung will always be willing to listen. And I think you should spend less time at the hospital. Vicky told me you are only supposed to spend a few hours a week there.”

“You said yourself, your power could do a lot of good. But that’s no reason to destroy your own life. If all life is sacred then that includes your own. Okay?”

Her eyes were a bit watery but Amy nodded, “Okay.” Predaqueen chose this moment to put her head on Amy’s shoulder. Waspinator landed in her lap and patted her hands, the pair of them getting a slight smile.

“Good, I was planning on going to the boardwalk tomorrow. There’s a book i wanted to get. You should come with me.” I really hoped I wasn’t making the situation worse.

“Sure”

“Come on, let's get you home.”

Climbing back on Predaqueen, we flew the rest of the way to her house in silence.

##

After dropping Amy off, I made my way back to the rig. I was still thinking about how best to help Amy as I closed up the door to Predaqueen’s room.

Maybe if I could build something that would take the pressure off her? I needed to take another look at that healing tech Wheeljack had requisitioned.

“Matrix,” Miss Militia’s voice came through the rigs PA system. “Please report to my office immediately.”

Fuck!

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**Bonus Omake.**

Dave Basil, yes that was his real name thank you very much, had his back turned to the open hatch on his van as he worked on cooking himself a burger.
He had been working in Brockton Bay for nearly ten years now. When he had first opened shop, he had quickly learned that what his usual clientele wanted was food that correctly balanced the four food groups: sugar, starch, grease and burnt crunchy bits.

At lunch he would work the docks, then in the evenings he would work the pub circuit.

Of course nowadays, the docks were dead and a man had to be careful where he set up shop. Too far north and the chinks would either demand ‘protection’ or force him to move on. Too far south and you had to deal with the fucking Nazis demanding the same thing.

These days, the best places to park were close to the police stations. They always wanted hot food, no questions asked.

Unfortunately, tonight his usual spot had been taken by that asshole selling tacos. So here he was, in the middle of nowhere and considering leaving this shit hole of a city behind for the umpteenth time.

There was a clatter behind him. He turned round, expecting to find some wisearse had thrown something on his counter.

What he saw, was a green and yellow robot standing next to a mechanical bird which had some bills in its beak.

“Two soda pleazzze!” The green one said.

Careful not to make any sudden moves, Dave tried to look around. Not seeing anyone, he looked back to the robots.

“This some kind of joke?”

The green one tilted its head and gave him a puzzled look. “Wazzpinator no joke,” it said in confusion.

Dave had lived in this city for over a decade, so he had served capes before. Hell, last week he saw that kid on the flying skateboard. Was this related? and why would robots need soda?

Still, they had money, did it really matter what they needed it for?

Deciding no, he grabbed two sodas from the fridge and, after a moment’s thought, stuffed them inside a plastic bag.

The bird dropped the notes on the counter and hopped backwards.

Counting out the change, Dave grabbed a plastic cup and dropped it in. He carefully held the cup towards the bird who gently took it in its beak.

“Thank you.” The green one said before both of them took off.

Dave watched them fly up out of sight.

“I gotta get out of this city,” he muttered.
Miss Militia had taken off her scarf and her expression was midway between disappointment and frustration.

“Taylor, I know the agreement the PRT has with Dragon gives you the option to go on solo patrols and even work alongside other heroes but you should still try to keep us aware of what you’re doing,” she said.

“I was with Glory Girl and Panacea,” I protested, “and I told the console I was going out.”

“Yes. And scared the daylights out of the officer at the same time.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Look Taylor, one of the reasons we have this agreement is to keep you safe. This city isn’t safe, there were three incidents with Merchants this evening and another involving parahumans. We can’t help you if we don’t know where you are. You didn’t even tell Dragon where you were.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled. I knew I should have radioed in while I was at the hospital, but I got caught up in Vicky’s enthusiasm. Dragon can access my costume whenever she wants and I know she was watching the fight with the Merchants. Does that mean she saw us interrogate that guy? If so, why hasn’t Miss Militia mentioned it? I’m sure we crossed a line somewhere.

“Don’t be sorry, just try to think before you act,” she said as she smiled faintly, “Though given who your mother was, I should have seen this coming. Did you know, when I first met her, she tried to hit me with a taser?”

She laughed quietly at the look on my face. Oh god! Mom tried to shock Miss Militia!? 

“Now please, try to think about what I said okay?”

“Alright… Um..” I hesitated, I felt like I was getting off lightly but would that change if I told her what that Merchant had said? On the other hand...

“Those Merchants we caught? One of them, the dealer, said someone was supplying them with those new drugs.” I repeated everything the Merchant had said to me and everything Amy had learned about the drugs, as well as my own concern that the fighting tonight was planned.

By the time I was finished, Miss Militia was frowning at her computer, looking as worried as I felt. About halfway through my explanation, she had started typing up everything I said.

I could see why, there were now two, possibly three, Tinker made drugs on the streets. A synaptic enhancer that made you smarter, but cooked your brain if you took too much; a drug that made you stronger at a cost to your body and possibly an enhanced steroid that could turn a five and a half foot nothing into a six foot plus linebacker?

##

When I returned to my workshop, Dragon was waiting for me.

“Your turn to tell me I was stupid and I should have told you what I was doing?” I asked.
“Do I need to?” Dragon’s voice was noticeably cooler than usual.

With a sigh, I slumped down into my chair.

“Let’s just chalk the entire thing up to youthful exuberance and move on okay?”

“Alright… Thanks. Can I ask you something? I know you were watching the fight. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because some things you can only learn through experience and being able to work with others or on your own are important skills. That said, I was connected to Predaqueen the entire time and if I thought for even a moment you were in trouble I would have ordered her to attack.”

“And Vicky’s interrogation?”

“I can’t say I’m happy with it, but giving people a harmless scare is a common method of gathering information. Keep in mind however that everyone reacts differently to fear and you can not actually hurt them.”

Right, no beating information out of people.

“As for the Merchant, his injuries were the result of a possibly lethal attack against a parahuman. Some powers can be fickle, stopping one attack and not another. Glory Girl has been injured in the past so her reactions are understandable. Hopefully, the three of you will treat this as a learning experience.”

I wasn’t sure Vicky learnt anything tonight. Not if Amy’s comments were any indication. On the other hand, learning that she had been hurt was a bit surprising.

Still, I guess Dragon and Miss Militia had a point. If something had gone wrong and one of us had gotten hurt, then what? Amy could fix me or Vicky up, but she can’t use her powers on herself.

Looking back on it, there was so much that could have gone wrong, there could have been more Merchants that we thought. They could have been better armed. My armour had a force field that could handle small caliber weapons but it had limits and Amy’s costume wasn’t much better than a thick coat. Well, at least as far as I knew. It might be better than my own.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Dragon, “I’ll make sure you know what’s going on from now on.”

“Good. Now, tell me. Did you get any good ideas while you were out?”

“Hmm, I think so. Pred’s great but she needs room to move, what I really need is something smaller or to unlock her T-cog...”

##

I was woken early the next morning by Rewind. The little bot was standing on my beside table making shrill whistling sounds.

“Okay, okay, I’m up. I’m up,” I groaned. I tried to look at my clock but without my glasses the readout was just a blurr.
*Taylor! You need to get up. You’re in the news!*

What!? The feeling of dread woke me better than any coffee.

“What’s going on?”

*Someone told the press about that boy and the Tinker drugs. It’s all over the news! Along with the fighting last night. The press has linked it all together!*

Sitting up quickly, I tried to force my thoughts into some kind of order.

“Have they mentioned me specifically?”

I put my glasses on and grabbed Rewind. I was wearing an old pair of pajamas so I rushed downstairs, past a surprised dad, and turned the TV on.

“The trial of popular singer and parahuman, Canary, is set to continue today with the defense expected to-” I switched through the channels until I found what I was looking for on a local news station.

“Our top story again this morning; There was more violence last night fueled by the newest designer drug. The drug, dubbed ‘Surge’ by the police, had been linked to a rise in aggression amongst the city’s gangs.”

The rest of the report wasn’t worth listening too. The anchor spoke about how the gangs were running rampant with the police helpless to stop them. The PRT was also called to task for not doing enough to control the Parahuman elements of the same gangs and allowing the situation to get this far. Scrolling text at the bottom of the screen were words about ‘public outrage at the PRT’.

There was a brief mention of me, thankfully by my cape name, along with a blurry picture of me, Glory Girl and Amy talking to the police.

“In related news; tragedy struck Arcadia high school yesterday when rising football star-” A picture of Ethan appeared in the corner of the screen. It must have been an old picture, from before he starting taking steroids. “-Ethan Woodstock collapsed at school due to a reputed cocktail of performance enhancing drugs. Authorities have refused to comment but an inside source believes the substances to be related to Surge. According to witnesses, Ethan collapsed at the start of the day. He received immediate first aid from another student until Panacea could reach him, but still remains in a coma.”

What followed were more ‘opinions’ dressed up as facts as the press did it’s best to make Ethan sound like a great guy and popular student who was merely the victim of the pressure placed on him by an overachieving school. There was also a teary interview with his parents who outright blamed the PRT for not stopping the city’s drug problem. The scrolling text contained tributes to the school’s fallen star.

One thing I did notice was the claims that ‘dozens’ of people had been hospitalised by these new drugs. Everyone knew the news networks exaggerated, misquoted or ‘speculated’ but they couldn’t outright lie.

There was not much I could do, so I got dressed and went for my morning run.
Dad drove me to school and I spent the ride checking PHO or news sites on Rewind or sending requests to Jack.

Most of the local stations were playing up the ‘lost youth’ with a helping of ‘PRT are useless’. One of the smaller local papers actually took a moderate view. Pointing out that Ethan chose to take drugs and had nobody but himself to blame and that the PRT and the police were doing their best.

When I arrived at school, I barely had time to say hello to Lori when we were all pulled into the school's auditorium.

The principal was standing on what must have been a foldout stage. There was no other way they could have put it together so quickly. For the first time since I met him, his happy demeanor was gone and he was pacing up and down the stage like a caged lion. Huh, that’s an idea.

“I’ve been the principal of this school for years now, and while I’d be the first to admit it’s not perfect. It’s damn close! What happened to Mr. Woodstock was a terrible tragedy, but I refuse to let it drag this school down-”

I tuned him out and focused on the latest reports from Jack. Dragon had asked Perceptor to help her and Armsmaster with modifications to a statistical modeling program.

“After lunch, the faculty will be conducting searches of all the school lockers. If any of you have anything you shouldn’t, I am setting up an amnesty box near my office. Anything you put inside will be taken away and destroyed, no questions asked, and there will be no investigations.”

I met up with Amy after classes were finished for the day. The principal’s ‘amnesty’ and locker search turned up nothing, but gave the school a way to cover its ass if anyone asked.

I know more than a few students were disappointed when a search of my locker revealed nothing of interest. Did they expect me to keep bits of random Tinker-tech in there? Or maybe my costume?

None of the Wards were allowed to bring a costume to school. That was just asking for someone to find it. The PRT would bring a costume to us if there was a reason to wear it.

Amy and I got on the bus to the Boardwalk and we didn’t really talk on the journey although a few people did try to discreetly take pictures of us. Most of them were close to our age, but Rewind highlighted a middle aged guy who gave me the creeps.

It was mid-week so the Boardwalk was quieter than usual. Amy and I passed the time talking about the series I was trying to complete. There were three book stores on the main promenade and we slowly made our way from one to the other.

As we were just leaving the first, we passed an electronics store that had a couple of TVs in the windows. The news was again talking about Ethan.

“Ugh,” Amy rolled her eyes. “The hospital director is going ballistic over this.”
“Really?”

“Yea, it was someone at the hospital that leaked the information. After you dropped me home, I typed up everything I could remember about the drugs and sent it to the hospital so they would know what to look for, and it ended up in the press.”

I winced in sympathy. “Ouch, you aren’t in trouble though right?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine. Though Carol wasn’t happy with Vicky.”

“I take it she wasn’t happy with Vicky bouncing that guy off the wall?”

“No, she doesn’t know about that. Not that she would care,” Amy muttered the last bit quietly before carrying on in a normal voice. “Actually she got in trouble for dragging you into a fight. You?”

“Dragon told me that I need to tell them before I go out on patrols.”

We stopped at a glass fronted coffee shop so we could get a drink. Amy had a strong coffee while I stuck with tea. Too much coffee makes me jittery.

We ended up sitting at a table close to the glass with our drinks. I noticed a blue M painted on the side of one of the nearby shops. I pointed it out to Amy, who nodded.

“Yea, they tried to tag the hospital the other day, which was stupid. The hospital is neutral ground.”

“Really?”

“Yea, one of the older nurses explained it. The Marquis declared all hospitals in the city neutral and refused to fight, or allow fighting, near the hospitals. The idea just stuck over time, even when he ended up in the birdcage.”

I’d heard of the Marquis before. People talk about how dangerous the city is now, but there was a time where it was even worse. Marquis, the Teeth and the Empire Eighty-Eight were the major gangs with lots of smaller gangs, many of which got subsumed by the Azn Bad Boys when Lung took over. They nearly tore the city apart.

I would have to look him up to be certain, but I think the Marquis was obsessed with a code of honor that he tried to make others follow.

“They probably think if they tag everywhere it will make them a real gang,” Amy said, with as much sarcasm as she could manage.

Moving on, we stopped briefly in the same electronics store I found Rung in. They had a small remote plane that gave me a couple of ideas. It was a desktop toy and made from foam so it was of no use to me, but the black and red paint scheme looked cool and the fans built into the wings would make it really maneuverable if they could rotate.

Discretely I took a picture of it and send it to Jack. I would have to do some redesigning but if I scaled it up, i could make another six inch bot out of it.

I was just explaining my ideas to Amy, who looked equal parts amused and confused, when my phone went off at almost the same time Amy’s phone rang.
The message was a simple, automated affair. [All Wards report to the PRT HQ immediately.] Thankfully, I didn't need to hurry too much. I had been tasked with memorising all the different messages and their meanings when I first joined. This one was just a general summons that meant someone needed to talk to the Wards.

I quickly called Dad and let him know what was going on and sent a message to Dragon.

By the time I was finished, Amy was off the phone and looking a little grossed out. “Gallant just got called in while he was on a date with Vicky,” she explained, “That was Vicky calling to complain and see if I need a ride.”

I sighed, “Yea, actually they just called me in too.”

“Don’t worry about it. One of the few advantages to not wearing a mask is you don’t have to lie when you get called away. You go ahead, Vicky will give me a lift.

The PRT headquarters was located downtown, not far from the Boardwalk. I could probably jog there before the bus could make it. After making sure Amy would be okay, I took off.

##

I hadn’t been back to the PRT HQ since I tentatively joined the Wards. At the time I’d come in through the entrance in the covered carpark.

The foyer was exactly what you expected it would be. A counter with a couple of receptionists stationed at it, a guard in a PRT uniform by the door and two more standing by the door that led further into the building. Off to one side was the PRT gift shop. There was a sign stuck to the window saying they were sold out of Matrix robot figures.

There were people in the shop while a few were waiting for the next tour to start.

If a Ward enters the building through the public entrance, out of costume, they are supposed to walk up to the counter and ask to speak to an officer and claim to be a relative. In response, they would be escorted out of sight.

Once out of the public areas their identity is checked and they are taken to the changing rooms.

In my case, I could simply walk up to the reception area and present my phone with its ID function active. The receptionist checked it and pressed a button on the counter.

The agent, after offering me a blank temporary mask, escorted me through the building. He didn’t take me to the changing rooms like I expected. Instead I was taken to a large meeting room on the upper floors where Armsmaster was busy setting himself up.

The room was huge, with a great view of the bay. There was a long table in the middle of the room and they had wheeled a couple of whiteboards into the room. There was a large map of the city on one of them and Armsmaster was busy pinning notes to it.

He was in full ‘don't bother me mode’ when I arrived. I’d seen it before when I interrupted his work on some new project or another. “Good, grab a pen and write everything you know about these new
stimulants,” he said, waving an arm towards the second whiteboard.

Hello to you, too. I said to myself.

Grabbing a marker, I made a grid with three columns. In two of the column I wrote the names of the known drugs ‘Surge and Flash’. In the third, I added ‘Steroid?’

Under each, I listed the all the effects and side effects I knew. Rewind was standing on the table, helpfully providing me with anything I missed.

I was just finishing up when the other Wards started arriving, followed by Miss Militia and Director Piggot.

Like me, the rest of the Wards were in casual clothes and maskless. The only exception was Dennis, Clockblocker, who was wearing a temporary mask and a grin. I shot Missy a questioning look and tilted my head towards him.

Catching me, his grin widened, “Some of us want to keep our identities secret, thank you very much.” There were various groans from the other Wards.

Note to self: Kill Clockblocker.

Once everyone was seated, Wards on one side of the table with the director and adults on the other, Armsmaster began.

“Within the last few weeks, there has been a sudden rise in aggression from the Merchants. Originally, we thought this was the result of the growing tensions between the gangs. Now it seems the cause is the influx of a series of designer stimulants.” He waved an arm towards the notes I had put up.

“Given the effects these stimulants have shown, we suspect they are the creations of an unknown Tinker. As we don’t have anything on file, we suspect they are either new to the city or a recent trigger.”

Gallant raised his hand, “Don’t the Merchants have a Tinker?”

Chris snorted, “Yea, but Squealer builds cars and trucks. That’s a long way from drugs.”

Chris had shown me pictures of some of her creations. Most looked like she had just driven a car or truck into a junkyard and welded everything she could carry to it. The end results were often large, ugly, armour plated monstrosities.

“That’s right. This is a level of precision and expertise that doesn’t match any of Squealer’s past creations,” Armsmaster said.

Director Piggot frowned at the information I had written on the board. “The Mayor is very concerned about this. The Merchants were bad enough when they were just peddling normal poison, now they have something Tinker-made and are purposely going after the other gangs? He wants this off the streets, before they spark a full on war between the gangs.”

“Well yeah, but that’s easier said than done. The Merchants don’t really hold territory for more than a week. They’re not like the Empire, you can’t just say ‘oh yea, don’t go down Woodrow Street at
night unless you’re white because that’s Empire territory’,” Dennis said, rolling his eyes as he did so.

Nodding, Armsmaster retook control of the room. “To that end, Dragon and I have repurposed a statistical modeling program to identify the most likely locations of Merchant bases.” He indicated the map behind him.

“As far as we can tell, the Merchants are trying to take territory across the entire city.”

There were dozens of circled areas on the map and they were dotted all over the place with no apparent rhyme or reason. Something about it didn’t look right, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on…

//Inefficient//

“How are they planning to hold all this?” I flushed when I realised I had spoken out loud.

Miss Militia smiled at me, “Go on Taylor. What do you mean?”

Getting various polite looks of puzzlement from the other Wards, I tried to push down my blush and focus on what had bothered me.

“T-there’s no pattern to any of this. None of the territories they have grabbed border each other,” I picked up the laser pen that was on the desk in front of me and pointed at the only two circles that were ‘close’ together.

“To get from here, to there, they would have to cross Empire territory.” I remembered something Dad had taught me once, when he was explaining global trade. “The logistics are wrong. The Merchants mostly deal in drugs but there’s no safe routes to move drugs or for help to reach them. It’s like they just decided ‘here looks nice’ and put a stake in the ground.”

“They probably did, have you met them? Not a lot going on upstairs,” Dennis said with a grin.

“I expect they think Squealer’s armored transporters will be sufficient,” Armsmaster said, “However, I don’t intend to let them get that far. We need to search these areas for any sign of the Merchant leaders. Once they are arrested the Merchants should quickly fall apart. Hopefully they will be willing to give up the identity of the Tinker supplying them.”

“That’s a lot of ground to cover,” Carlos pointed out.

“Yes, which is why tomorrow you will—”

Miss Militia cleared her throat and sent Armsmaster a meaningful look.

Setting his jaw, he carried on. “Which is why I am asking for volunteers to help search these areas. We will be breaking into smaller groups of two or three and each searching an area. If anything is found, it is to be radioed back to the dispatch, who will decide what actions are to be taken. If nothing is found then we will simply move on to the next area.”

Dean volunteered almost immediately, closely followed by Vista then me. Carlos and Chris were next, followed by Dennis.
Armsmaster just nodded, “Good, report to the rig after school tomorrow.”
Three days after agreeing to help, I was seriously reconsidering my decision.

Something you almost never see in fiction is just how boring a lot of investigative work is.

Every day after school, I made my way to the rig and changed into my costume. I would then meet up with the other Wards and we’d be split into smaller groups and sent out into the city.

Currently we were in the suburbs on the west side, possibly Empire territory.

Armsmaster’s software had flagged the area as hosting a possible Merchant base, but it only gave rough locations. We had to use it as a starting point and search outwards from there. The first night, we spent nearly two hours walking in circles before we found an old Merchant den that had already been abandoned. The next night, we hadn’t found anything at all.

Now, we were huddled together on top of a four story building. The weather had turned a bit cold recently and the clouds above us were threatening rain.

The building we were watching was further down the road. We had only found it because the house was so hot it was practically on fire. I’d had Wasp flying around looking for anything unusual when his thermal sensors had picked up this place.

The windows were shut, with thick blinds covering them. Nothing unusual about that. What was unusual was the amount of heat coming from the top floor.

I was transmitting Wasp’s video feed to Clockblocker and Vista’s phones.

“So, Cannabis farm or homemade tanning bed?” Clockblocker asked.

I was too focused on what I was watching to answer him, “Wasp, there's a hole in the roof, can you fit through it?” I reached out and drew a circle around the hole. To anyone watching, I was drawing a circle in the air. “Anything going on?” I asked Vista.

Vista had a pair of binoculars and was carefully watching for anyone entering or leaving the building. “N-Yes. someone’s coming.”

Clock shifted round. Lifting a digital camera, he pointed it at the building and zoomed in on the new arrival. I spared a quick glance down.

The man did match the mental image most people had of a Merchant. Stick thin, filthy clothes and wearing a blue and black bandana.

*Wazzpinator izz inside,* he reported.

I turned my attention back to the video feed. The hole in the roof had led into the loft. Cables had been run haphazardly all over the place and large holes were dotted across the floor.

Carefully, Wasp stuck his head through one of them. Below him, the room was filled with plants. The cables that were running through the loft were providing power to the heat lamps, and from the
inside you could see the wooden boards covering the windows.

“Oh thank god,” Vista muttered. She had given Clock her binoculars and was watching the live feed from Wasp. “Dispatch, this is Vista. Cannabis farm confirmed at our location,” she said while trying her best to sound professional.

*Confirming your location, continue to observe for now. Dispatch out*

“Something’s wrong,” I told the others. “Wasp, can you get closer?”

The feed blurred for a moment as the bot tugged and pulled at the plaster around the hole. He managed to widen it enough that he could get his head and shoulders through but the turbines on his back wouldn’t let him get any further.

It was enough however to give him a clear view. *Why are plantzzz brown?* Waspinator asked. There was shouting downstairs and what sounded like a gunshot.

A Merchant left the building and ran off down the street.

“Dispatch, this is Vista, we may have a problem. Shots fired, request permission to move in.”

*Assault is en route to your location, can you confirm the presence of parahumans?*

The others turned to me and I shrugged. Thermal sensors weren’t much help. We were too far away and I couldn’t separate any signatures from the greenhouse. The Merchants only had three capes and we would already know if they were here.

“No capes in sight,” she said.

*Very well, you are free to engage*

Standing up, Vista bent the space between the roof to the street outside the house.

I had the most armour so I went for the front door. Running forwards I fired a mid-level blast at the entrance as my tower shield snapped into place. Clockblocker ran off to my right to try and circle round the back.

The blast shattered the lock and I crashed into the door, shield first, at full speed. There were some security chains that broke free from the rotten wood and the door swung open violently, hitting the wall beside it with a crash.

Behind me, the doorway shrank down as Vista tried to prevent anyone from leaving. There were stairs in front of me leading up to the next floor and to my left was the living room.

There was a ratty old sofa in the middle of the living room with an old TV in front of it. A Merchant must have been sitting in it until my entry startled him.

He had just gotten to his feet when I stunned him.

Keeping my shield up, I walked into the room. A bullet pinged off the armour on my shoulder, making my emergency shield flare.
I spun to the right and there was another Merchant standing in a doorway past the stairs with a small snub nosed revolver. I ducked behind my shield and let the next five shots slam harmlessly into it.

Clockblocker tagged him from behind, freezing the Merchant in place. He pulled what looked like a small can of spray paint from his belt. Containment foam, I realised, as he sprayed it around the Merchant’s hands and feet.

When he froze a person or object they couldn’t be harmed but they also couldn’t be moved. He’d done it to me once, so I would know what it felt like. One second he was in front of me, the next it was two minutes later and he was on the far side of the room.

The foam around the Merchant’s feet would stick him to the floor, stopping him getting away, while the foam ‘gloves’ would keep him from reaching for another weapon.

“Anyone else?” he asked.

Inside the building, it was much easier to tell heat signatures apart. “There’s a large one in the basement and three more upstairs.”

Clockblocker walked over to the basement door and tagged it. Nothing would be getting through that anytime soon.

The front door returned to normal size, letting Vista through.

We went up the stairs with me leading the way, shield raised in case anyone was waiting to ambush us.

There were three rooms upstairs. One was a toilet, though from the smell in here it wasn’t cleaned much. The furthest one from us was the greenhouse, and Wasp confirmed it was empty.

If I was right about the layout, then the third would be the master bedroom. Clockblocker pressed himself against the wall by the door, using his power to reinforce it, while Vista stood behind him. If anything went wrong he could freeze his costume to protect himself and Vista.

I readied my weapons and kicked the door.

Immediately, the smell of blood filled my nose. Blood, rot and death.

I had been wrong, there were five people in the room, not three. Two were long dead, a third was lying in a spreading pool of his own blood. Most of his head was missing. I think I’m going to be sick.

“Matrix, everything okay?” Vista called out. I’d forgotten they were out there.

“Fine, just stay outside.”

“I’ve seen dead bodies before y’know,” the girl huffed.

“Me too, doesn’t make it any better,” I muttered quietly.

The others followed me into the room while I made my way over to the nearest body.
There was no furniture in the room. Just some blankets and pillows on the floor. Four of the ‘beds’ were occupied. The room stank of blood and there were flies all over the place.

The Merchant nearest to me was, barely, still alive. He looked like a mummified corpse. His skin was stretched across his bones and I could count each individual rib. His barely moving chest was a mess of stitches and his arm was missing. The stump looked like it had been burned and was covered in oddly shaped growths.

The woman in the other mass of blankets was in a similar state. As Clockblocker got close her eyes opened and she tried to stand. Her bony arms waved at him as she made groaning noises.

“Fuck!” Clock swore as he jumped back.

Her movement shifted her blanket. She was missing a leg and the stump was another mess of misshapen growths. There was a bloody knife on the floor nearby and some of the growths were bleeding.

“V-vista, call it in,” I ordered. I didn’t trust myself to speak too much and I had to turn away from the mess as Vista radioed for an ambulance.

My foot bumped into something that rolled slightly. Taking a deep breath, and then wishing I hadn’t, I looked down.

There was a silver epipen with a green band on the floor. Carefully picking it up, I turned it over in my hands. There was a healer’s cross on the coloured band and the needle had been used.

Dreading what I would see, I moved to the nearest corpse. Rolling back the sleeve I found three or four marks that roughly matched the epipen.

“Matrix?” Vista called, “You okay.”

“Yeah.” No.

A green band with a healer’s cross. I could only think of two reasons you would use that combination. Either this was supposed to be medicine or the unknown Tinker had a sick sense of humor.

My temper flared. “They thought this would help….” I held on to the anger, let it pull me past the revulsion at what I’d seen. “Watch your step, there’s discarded needles around here.”

I wanted answers.

“Fucking hell!” Assault was standing in the doorway. I’d been so caught up in my thoughts I missed his arrival.

"Is this everyone?" he demanded, moving to check on the still living Merchants

“No, there's still one more. In the basement,” I answered.

“Okay, I’ll take care of him. Why don’t you three go wait outside?”

“N-no, I need to see this through.” If I walked away now, it would haunt me.
“Alright,” Assault said, his expression grim.

By the time we reached the living room, the Merchant Clockblocker tagged had unfrozen and was shouting obscenities at us. I stunned him as I passed, and Vista bent space to catch him and lower him carefully to the ground. The foam on his hands immediately stuck to the floor.

Assault approached the door to the basement and put his hand against it. That door was newer than anything else in the house and it looked like it had been reinforced. He gave it a few experimental pushes.

He paused before shaking his head. “Alright kids, stand back.”

As we moved out of the way, he backed up into the kitchen and charged full speed at the basement door.

He hit the door, almost gently, and the drywall around the frame exploded in a shower of dust and debris. The door stood, held up by its own weight before he allowed it to fall forwards with a crash.

In the darkness below, something groaned.

Assault led the way with me close behind, followed by Clockblocker and Vista.

The basement was in complete darkness and something large moved ahead of us. Switching to low light vision, I found the switch on the wall and moved towards it.

As the lights clicked on, Vista let out a horrified gasp. Tensing, I spun around, expecting the worst. I still wasn’t expecting this.

Chained to the far wall was... a man?

He was a misshapen mess, and he was huge! Even hunched over his head was brushing the low ceiling so I’d say he was about eight to nine feet tall and nearly four feet wide at the chest. His legs were too short for his body, giving him the rough proportions of a gorilla. One of his arms was a bulging mass of muscle while the other looked relatively normal.

I’d heard of capes that had been physically and permanently transformed by their powers. Known collectively as “Case-53s,” some people called them monster capes. No one knew where they came from, and they were usually found with no memories of who they were.

“‘et ewy!” He snarled through a misshapen jaw. His lower jaw stuck out in a massive underbite and the shape of his forehead forced one of his eyes mostly closed.

Beside him, there was a large metal safe.

Assault gestured at us and we slowly backed away. “It’s okay. We’re here to help.”

“elp? elp? oo cnt elp ee!” He roared, swinging a beefy fist at Assault who caught the attack like it was nothing.

I brought my weapon up, ready to fire on high power but the man looked in horror at his own arm.
Pulling back, he curled in on himself. “I nt, I nt. ease,” he repeated. He was shaking.

“It’s okay,” Assualt said. “You’re scared. I understand, but we can help. We’re heroes, mostly,” he said with a grin. “Can you remember your name?”

Sad brown eyes looked at him and I could see tears in his good eye, “ow-eat,” he muttered.

##

Two days after we raided the Merchant house, I was quietly tinkering away in my workshop and trying desperately to not think about it. Miss Militia had insisted Clockblocker, Vista and me be taken off the search teams for now so we would have time to recover.

I was currently going over some designs for a possible new engineer to help Jack out. On the table nearby was the half finished bot I’d come up with while I was out with Amy.

Originally I had planned for her to be smaller but I’d been forced to scale my initial plans up. She would now be just under a foot tall. Close to Waspinator in height.

I knew Pred was female, so I decided to see if I could intentionally create a girl. At the rate I was going, it was going to be at least a week before I could finish her.

Honestly, I had too many projects going on at the same time.

I had two more bots I was trying to get through approval. Dragon had no problem with them but the PRT’s PR department was uncomfortable with the designs.

Jack was running around like mad, trying to get everything I asked of him done and Perceptor was still working on the fuel formula.

Actually, he’d had a bit of a breakthrough since Dragon had put him in touch with Solution, a Case 53 who worked with the Guild. She was a Striker/Thinker who could model things like protein folding and complex multi-stage reactions in her head in real time. Well, sort of. Technically as a big puddle of self-mobile jelly her head was just another pseudopod, but she liked to take a humanoid shape when dealing with people.

She had only recently returned from a sabbatical when Dragon approached her and she had jumped at the chance to help. I’d spoken to her a couple of times via video calls and she was really sweet.

Between them, Perceptor and Solution had managed to reach the prototype stage. I’d helped by building a mock body for them to test their formulas on. After it exploded for the second time, I just made a foam body and stuffed a fuel tank, pump and processor in it.

We had also created a subroutine for Teletraan that would immediately erect a shield around any experiment to contain explosions. The first time we tested it, I’d gotten stuck inside for twenty minutes before the bots had been able to cut power.

When I wasn’t having nightmares about dead Merchants, I’d had a couple more dreams about that crypt. I still couldn’t see through the glow but I had picked up enough details that I had started work
on a design.

On the table beside me, Rewind beeped as Clockblocker called me. Wasn’t he in the common room with Vista and Laserbeak?

Rewind answered and put him on speaker. “Taylor, it’s staring at me again!” Clockblocker hissed.

I sighed, “Dennis, I’ve told you before, Laserbeak is not going to hurt you.” I think. To be honest, I was a little worried about the sense of satisfaction and amusement I could feel from his spark.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have called him a turkey?” I heard Vista shout out.

After I built Laserbeak, I’d looked up the behaviour of large intelligent birds to see if there were any similarities. The closest I could really find were some of the larger species of parrots such as the Macaws, which needed to be kept entertained. If not, they would find their own fun.

Apparently, Laserbeak thought scaring Clockblocker was fun.

“She’s probably right. Just apologise and offer to give him a polish. And stop worrying, it’s not like he’s armed.”

“Have you seen the beak? I-”

*All Wards and Protectorate members please report to the common room.* The PA announcement cut Clockblocker off.

I hung up on Dennis and made my way through the rig. Armsmaster was waiting with Miss Militia when I arrived.

The other Wards were already there, and Waspinator was sitting in Vista’s lap while the girl had a book beside her. Laserbeak took off from his perch by Dennis and landed on my shoulder. His lightweight construction meant he wasn’t as heavy as he looked.

Once everyone was seated, Armsmaster brought a number of images up on the room’s TV screen. “Thank you all for coming, we have come into some information you should all be aware of.”

“Two days ago, Vista, Matrix and Clockblocker raided a Merchant safehouse. Inside they found several dead bodies and a pair of Merchants who were in a bad state.”

I shivered at the memory.

“There was also a safe that was later found to contain a number of illicit substances. Most importantly this included samples of the new Tinker made drugs.”

The screen showed four Epipens, each with a different coloured band and what looked like a bottle of eye drops.

He pointed to the red pen. “The delivery system is a new development, but this is what the press has called ‘Surge.’ It causes a short term boost in strength and utmost caution should be exercised when dealing with anyone who is under its effects. The pen with the purple band is a powerful steroid.”

The screen changed, leaving the green epipen. “Currently we are calling this one UTM-65. It alters
the user’s metabolism and speeds up cellular repair. In effect, it grants a rapid healing effect. Any questions so far?”

Vista raised her hand, “If that stuff is supposed to heal you, why were they so….” she trailed off.

Miss Militia gave the girl a gentle look but answered her question. “The medication can’t make something from nothing. Much like Panacea’s power, it requires the patient to supply the raw materials. Without resources, the body will cannibalise itself.”

“I believe it was intended to heal minor wounds,” Armymaster explained. “It was never meant to regrow entire limbs.”

I wonder if they would give me a sample of that drug? Properly controlled and monitored, such as in a hospital, a medication that sped up healing would be of great value. And Amy could finally take a break.

On screen, the image changed to the white banded epipen and a bottle of eye drops.

“This is mostly what I wanted to talk to you about,” Armymaster said. “Both of these are the same material, using a different delivery method. Initially, we thought Flash was administered via the eyes but we now know that it can be injected and, I suspect, inhaled.”

“Why go to that much effort?” Kid Win asked.

“The reason, I suspect, is so that it can be used as a weapon. The drug causes temporary changes in brain chemistry that results in a short term increase in mental ability. But we now know that it reacts badly to anyone with a Corona Pollentia or Gemma.”

The Corona Pollentia was a growth in the brain that was suspected to be responsible for a person's powers. Its size, shape and location varied from one person to the next. This lack of consistency was chiefly to blame for the lack of understanding when it came to powers and how they worked. Wait!

“If it messes with the Corona Pollentia, then does that mean that man we found in the basement isn’t a Case 53?” I asked.

Armymaster sighed and changed the image to the ‘Case 53’ we had found. “This is Nicolas Jackson, age fifteen. Up until a few weeks ago, he was an independant hero. With help from Panacea we have been able to question him and identify his power as a form of self biokinesis.”

“This is what we wanted to warn you about,” Miss Militia said. “The recent news articles inspired him to tackle the Merchants. He got into a fight with a couple of enhanced Merchants and lost. Afterwards, they injected him, and have been keeping him as a guard dog since then.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” Dean asked, “Will he be joining the Wards?”

Miss Militia shook her head sadly, “We are not sure at this time. Currently he is at the hospital, undergoing treatment from Panacea. After that, he will be going to an institute where he will receive further treatment. He hasn’t been able to control his physical state since he was injected and the doctors are worried about the damage it has done to him mentally.”

Armymaster brought a map of the city up. “Mr. Jackson was, however, able to share with us everything he knew about the Merchants and their plans. Velocity and Assault spent last night
watching these two locations. This is currently the Merchants’ main base of operations.”

It was an abandoned industrial site not far from the docks, towards the northern end of the city. A lot of those buildings used to be factories, making them a good place for a Tinker to set up shop. Especially one who focused on vehicles.

“The second location is where they appear to store the majority of their stock.”

It was an old storage lot on the southern end of the docks.

“We will be launching simultaneous raids in three days time. I will lead the Protectorate against the parahumans in the main base while Aegis leads the Wards against the storage facility. Meanwhile, PRT and police squads will be raiding the other locations we have identified so far. If all goes well, the Merchants will be completely dismantled in one night.”

We spent the rest of the day going over strategies with Armsmaster.

##

Three days later, we were sitting on the rooftops overlooking the storage lot. I had Waspinator and Laserbeak flying overhead, watching out for anything unexpected.

The plan was simple enough. Once the Protectorate had confirmed the location of the Merchant capes, PRT teams would move in on every known Merchant base. Meanwhile, the Wards would be split into two groups. Group one would enter the lot from the main road while the other would circle round and enter from the rear.

Unlike the other gangs, the Merchants generally had no serious weapons. Aside from the occasional handgun they usually relied on melee weapons such as bats and knives.

Aegis, Vista and I would be going through the front. Clockblocker, Kid Win and Gallant through the back. This way, each team had a heavy hitter, a Tinker and support. Both groups were already in place.

I couldn’t say I was looking forward to it; the lot was a maze. Each storage locker was only about ten feet by ten feet across, but there were hundreds of them, each one joined to the one beside it, organized into disorganized rows of ten or twenty brick shacks.

When things first started to go bad, people had started living in them. A low cost, off the books housing system. Places like this had rapidly cropped up all over the city as enterprising individuals had tried to cash in on the situation and unemployment grew.

Inevitably, things got worse. Since the quickly built ‘sheds’ were not intended to be lived in, residential building codes didn’t apply so there was no real rhyme or reason to their layout. Drug dens started appearing and the gangs moved in, the narrow cramped conditions became a breeding ground for diseases and epidemics began to break out.

Little to no sanitation, minimal food and close packed conditions. Nearly a hundred people died before the city was able to get the situation under control. Mostly they forced the homeless out into
the now abandoned warehouses and factories.

From our vantage point, I could see plastic sheeting spread between some of the sheds and smoke from open fires, but the ground level and any actual people were hidden beneath them. The hair on the back of my neck was standing up and I could almost hear a voice telling me how bad this was.

“Waspinator, Laserbeak. Do another fly over, look for civilians,” I murmured to my bots.

“Relax, anyone living here would have left when the Merchants moved in,” Aegis said.

“Hmm,” I said as I focused on the video feed. I wasn’t so sure. People could be stubborn when it came to their homes, however makeshift.

“See anything useful?” he asked.

I tapped the side of my helmet and projected an image against the nearest wall. It was a recent addition to my armour, the ability to project a two-dimensional image on a flat surface. Right now it only worked in shades of blue, but it was enough to share what I was seeing. I also forwarded the footage to Gallant’s team.

“The layout is a mess and tarps block a lot of the view but most of the heat signatures are towards the center... and then there’s this.” I brought up an image of a couple of big metal shipping crates. There were people dotted around it, all of them facing outwards.

*Any idea what they could be guarding?* Gallant asked over the radio.

“No,” Aegis said, sounding concerned. “Can you get any closer?”

I shook my head. “They would probably see my bots.”

*All units, sound off,* Armsmaster said over the radio. One by one the different PRT and Wards groups checked in. *Skidmark, Squealer and Mush are confirmed. Move on my mark...*

Out of time anyway. With a sigh, I pulled myself up and readied my weapon.

*Now!*

All across the city, BBPD and PRT units stormed the Merchants. Aegis and I charged forward with Vista following along behind us, shortening the distance to the lot.

On the approach, we stuck to the shadows. The city had cut the power years ago and we would use that to our advantage. I could see smoke from some fires and Laserbeak had spotted at least one generator providing power to a shipping container near the center. We wanted to disable as many Merchants as possible before they had a chance to retaliate.

Just inside the gates there were a pair of men standing guard. Aegis tackled the closest, pinning the man in a chokehold until he blacked out, while I shot the other with my null-ray.

We paused briefly to zip tie the downed Merchants.

“Are the roofs clear?” Gallant asked me quietly.
The roofs of the storage sheds were gently slanted. Enough to channel the rainwater but level enough to sleep on.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Vista, go up and do what you can.”

With a nod, the space behind her twisted and she stepped smoothly onto the nearest roof.

The lockers were going to be a problem. The thin metal shutters had been torn off many of them, and moving through the twisting corridors it was hard to see if anyone was hiding in one until we were right on top of them.

Vista hissed my name. I glanced up and she made shoot gestures at her hand. Not sure what she was doing, but trusting her, I locked on and fired. The shot turned sharply through a series of eye watering turns before it slammed into a Merchant inside a locker. Show off.

Laserbeak was following the other team. I’d given Kid Win access to his video feed and the Tinker was using it to scout ahead of his teammates, flying close to the ground to avoid giving themselves away.

We stopped at a corner, where I could hear people talking. With a pulling motion from Vista, the corner was suddenly straight. The Merchants blinked in shock as we, to them, came out of nowhere.

Two went down almost instantly but the third had bolted the moment he saw us.

“CAPES! CAP-” I caught him square in the back but it was too late. I could already hear shouting through the lot.

Ahead of us, shutters opened and nearly a dozen people poured out.

Aegis flew headlong at them. My HL-shield snapped into life, just in time to deflect a hurled bottle. The Merchants were so packed together I barely had to aim. Aegis was more or less immune to my Null-ray, but I still took care not to hit him.

Aegis was in the thick of it. His power gave him a degree of enhanced strength and he had nearly twice the mass of most Merchants. Metal poles, glass bottles, knives. They barely slowed him down. Vista stretched the space between me and him, keeping the Merchants at a distance.

A couple climbed up on the roofs and quickly found themselves trapped in a maze of twisted space. Unfortunately, keeping them trapped occupied Vista long enough for a couple of Merchants to come from behind.

The fifth or sixth gang member had just gone down when a sledgehammer hit me in the back. My armour took most of the blow but the force winded me and knocked me off balance.

Before I could catch myself a Merchant jumped on top of me and knocked me to the ground. I saw something flash in his hand out the corner of my eye and he drove his fist into my neck. Rewind tripped my emergency shield though, and whatever the Merchant had been holding shattered harmlessly against it.

Space twisted and Vista’s foot caught the Merchant across the chin, dislodging him and letting me
roll over. He took a Null-ray to the face at close range, he wouldn't be waking up for awhile.

“They’re trying to take us with numbers!” Vista shouted as I got to my feet.

I quickly felt around my neck, “Don’t let them get too close. They are trying to use Flash!”

“Push forward,” Aegis ordered. “We need to get out of here! Keep moving and don't let them pin you down!”

I brought my HL-shield up and charged, Vista following close behind. Aegis flew ahead of me, using himself as a battering ram.

We hit two smaller groups as we ran. I could see Waspinator still hovering in the air near the centre of the lot. He was the only way point we had so we tried to head in his direction.

That was when the gunfire started. We’d turned blindly around a corner and found ourselves in a clearing at the center of the lot. A number of huts had been demolished to make way for a pair of shipping crates, one stacked on top of the other. Around it, wood and other debris had been erected into a barricade.

Behind that were nearly a dozen Merchants. They weren’t like the others; they were bigger, cleaner, healthier looking than usual, and all of them were armed with guns.

The ground in front of us lifted up as Vista twisted it into a wall. We sprinted in opposite directions, each ducking behind the remains of the storage units. Bullets pinged off the thin brick walls as the Merchants fired wildly.

As the gunfire died out, I could hear someone shouting over the noise. “You fucking cum-sucking cunts! This is my town! Get the fuck out!” Keeping my head down, I used the video from Waspinator to see who was talking.

He was big, bigger than anyone I’d ever seen. He had the same over-inflated look I’d come to associate with the new Tinker steroids, and his body-temp was sky high so I had to assume he had taken the ‘Brute’ formula as well. Leaning around the wall, I shot him three times. I think it annoyed him at best.

Aegis shot forwards in a two fisted dive. His flight wasn’t fast but he had momentum. There was a crack as the bones in both his hands and forearms broke, but it made the Merchant brute stagger back. He grabbed Aegis by the arms and threw him hard enough to put him through a nearby storage unit. The building collapsed on top of him, pinning him down.

“We need to contain him!” Vista shouted as she warped the space between us and the fortification in the centre, trying to trap the Merchants in the middle. I wasn’t sure we could. Aegis was down and the other team was pinned down by more Merchants.

Kid Win had been forced to land and was taking cover behind some wood with Clockblocker who had, I assumed, frozen it. Gallant was the only one left who was even bullet-resistant and even his armour had limits.

The brute tried to vault the walls of his ramshackle fort, giving me a clear shot.

I switched to heavy stun and fired again. After the the third shot, he dropped to his knees, but the
other Merchants opened fire, forcing me to duck behind the wall. Through Waspinator, I saw him pull something from a pocket and stab himself in the thigh.

Almost immediately, his body temp jumped even more and he was back on his feet. “You fucking cunts think you can fuck with me? I’ll fucking split your skinny ass!” The Merchants behind him were shouting similar things, cheering him on and screaming threats at us.

The Brute tried to charge forward at me, only to find himself running in circles as Vista redirected him or increased the distance between him and me. He shrugged off two more heavy stuns before he gave up and climbed back over the barrier. Just what the hell is he on!

His cursing continued as he ducked back into the shipping container behind the fortifications. I could just about make out an electrical whirring sound.

When he stepped back out, his body temperature had jumped again. God only knows how he was still standing with the amount of drugs that must have been in his system, and his brain had to be cooking in his skull by now. He was also carrying a rotary cannon. Nearly six feet long and already at full spin, there were the remains of a vehicle mount hanging from it. “Suck on this!” he bellowed as the gun roared.

I threw myself flat to the floor as the gun cut through the wall and bullets whizzed overhead. Even his massive size was struggling to hold the bucking steady against the ferocious recoil.

All I could hear was the roar of the gun as he fired wildly in my direction, only wavering to swing around and fire at Vista or the rubble that was pinning Aegis. Once or twice, he fired blindly into the darkness.

I think I was screaming.

A clicking sound filled the air as the gun ran dry, finally out of ammo. With a shout of frustration, he threw the cannon away and grabbed an automatic rifle right out of the hands of one of the other Merchants. He swayed drunkenly as he tried to cock it. Maybe we could outlast him?

Lifting my head, I tried to find the other Wards. Across the clearing, Aegis had finally managed to pull himself free, but he looked like hell. He was covered in blood and his left arm was missing below the shoulder. His good arm was holding a piece of debris like a shield.

When I spotted Vista, not two feet from the remains of a wall, my blood ran cold. She was lying face down and a dark puddle was slowly spreading beneath her. She’s not moving!

I screamed out her name as the Merchants opened fire again, but she didn’t move. As I watched, stray bullets clipped the pavement near her body, sending bits of concrete flying.

I shut my eyes and tried to block out the sight, the sound of guns and the images of Lung bearing down on Bitch. I was shaking. This was all wrong. We were going to die here.

No…

My eyes snapped open and a cold sense of calm flowed through me. I am not dying here.

I glanced at the feed from Laserbeak. Gallant’s team was still pinned down but the Merchants there only had small arms. “Laserbeak, help the others!” I shouted through my radio. The little bot
screeched as he went into a dive. He didn’t have weapons but he did have claws, a beak, and a nasty temper, as the Merchants below him were about to find out.

“Aegis! Give me a distraction! Jack, call Panacea!” I also triggered my emergency beacon so Dragon would know I was in trouble.

With a heave, Aegis threw his improvised shield at the Merchants and took off as fast as he could. He flew at the barricade before banking at the last second, drawing most of their fire.

I took the chance and sprinted.

The Brute saw me and opened fire. His aim was wild but several bullets clipped my side and hit my thigh, causing my shield to flare and making me stumble. I turned the fall into a slide, armour scraping noisily across the ground as I stopped in front of Vista.

I made my HL-shield tall and wide enough to cover both of us, but the glowing blue barrier simply gave the Merchants a bigger target. Even so, I was confident I could hold out until help arrived.

Then I heard the whirr of an electric motor. Fuck no! They had managed to reload the canon. Bullets hit my shield with enough force to rattle my teeth. More alarming was the sudden drop in power as the impacts drained my suit’s battery. This wasn’t going to work.

“Wazzpinator! Terrorizzze!”

My stupid, brave little bot went into a power dive. Getting in the big guy’s face, he ducked and weaved as he drew the man’s attention. One well timed move caused him to shoot several of his own men. I used the distraction to try and focus my power, hoping it would treat the drained battery as ‘damage’ and fix it.

Then the Merchant Brute got lucky. A bad move on Wasp’s part put him in the path of a bullet that tore through one of his turbines, sending him crashing to the ground with a pitiful wail.

The Merchants resumed their assault on me and I could only watch as my power level plummeted. It was moments away from failure when Predaqueen slammed into the ground between me and the Merchant.

Wings spread wide to shield me, the dragon roared. The cannon punched holes in them and the thinner parts of her armor, but it barely slowed her down as she charged the Merchant barricade.

Wood and metal shattered and she slammed into the Brute, knocking him down. Before he could recover, she bit down on his arm and picked him up. With a jerk of her head she sent him flying. The cannon was left on the ground nearby. She picked it up in her maw and crushed it.

As she turned to the other Merchants, Wheeljack jumped from where he’d been huddled on her back with what looked like a tiny shoulder mounted rocket launcher. He aimed it at the big guy and fired. There was a ‘thunk’ sound and a silver tube, about the size of a soda can, arched through the air and exploded in a spray of pink liquid that rapidly expanded into a foam on impact. Containment foam?

Encased in foam, all the Brute could do was rant, at least until Jack foamed his mouth shut. He continued to struggle and darker red stained some of the pink foam. He was tearing himself apart. I risked putting my arm out and fired again on the highest stun setting I had. It still took nearly a dozen shots before he stopped moving.
With Predaqueen to back us up, the fight rapidly swung in our favor. The Merchants who weren’t too messed up to know what was going on were quick to surrender once their ‘leader’ went down. Those who didn’t found themselves dealing with a very angry dragon and an engineer with a grenade launcher.

With the fighting under control, I turned to Vista.

I didn’t like it but I was forced to roll the girl over. There was a massive hole through her chest. The armour plate she swore on her torso had barely even slowed the bullet down as it tore clean through her. I could hear a sickening ‘sucking’ sound coming from the wound when she breathed. The only thing I could do was put my hand over the wound and try to stop the blood. She was getting paler by the second and her breath shorter. I was going to sit here and watch her die.

I never noticed Panacea till she pushed me roughly out of the way. “Move!”

As I fell back, I could see Glory Girl standing protectively by her sister.

“Vicky! Gallant and the others are stuck on the other side of the lot!” I shouted.

Jack moved to protect Amy while Vicky took off.

Amy was holding Vista’s hand. The wound on her chest was already closed, and her breathing evened out but she remained pale. “She’ll be alright,” Amy said. “I don’t have enough mass to fix everything, but once the ambulance gets here, she’ll be fine.”

“Thank god,” I muttered as I sat back. The fighting was almost over, though I could hear crashing in the distance as Glory Girl and Predaqueen made quick work of the remaining gang members.

A small hand touched my arm and I looked down to see Waspinator standing there. He was filthy and the broken remains of his turbine were sparking occasionally.

I gingerly picked the little bot up and held him close to my chest. “Don’t you ever do something so dangerous again,” I snapped before continuing in a quieter voice, “And thank you.”

In the distance I could hear sirens.

Ideas whirled through my mind. This couldn’t be allowed to happen again.
Knockout’s day

One week before the Merchant raid.

“S-so this will make t-them- I-I mean, this will help me?”

With a charming smile, Knockout placed the tube on the table in front of her. It was filled with tablets, each about the size of an antacid.

“Of course. Just take one of these a day until they run out. I promise, you will feel like a new g-woman,” he corrected himself.

“R-really? what about side effects… I heard on the news about some Tinker drugs...” she trailed off nervously.

“Bah” he scoffed, and waved a hand dismissively. “The work of a hack.”

“These,” he purred as he tapped the tube, “are the work of a top class chemist. I will admit, there are some side effects. An increased sensitivity and a general feeling of amorousness are the most common, but those quickly fade once the treatment is complete, and of course, you will find yourself wanting to eat more for the duration, but that’s natural,” he explained.

Knockout was a lot of things, but he was always honest in his dealings. It was almost funny; the best way to succeed outside of the law was to have a reputation for honesty.

The girl nodded as she stared at the tube. Personally Knockout couldn’t see what the big deal was. Her face was symmetrical and her features were pleasant enough. And yet, here she was with the money she had got from only-god-cares-where to buy surgery in a bottle. Even if it was side effect free.

Then again, what did he know about women?

Seeing as she was still unsure, he produced a photo from his pocket and held it out to her. “Here, this is one of our previous clients. She bought the two month package so your results won't be as… profound.”

Looking at the picture, she gasped, “Wait… she’s?”

Knockout smirked, “Strictly speaking, I’m not supposed to talk about it, so try to keep it to yourself.”

The girl in the photo had quickly become a local celebrity. Normally he didn’t talk about clients any more than he left them to deal with unpleasant surprises, but she had made some nasty remarks about his favourite fashion designer.

Nodding, the customer placed the money on the table. He pocketed it without bothering to count it and handed her the tube. “A pleasure doing business with you.”

With that, she dashed out of the door.
Chuckling to himself, Knockout stood up and made his way outside. It was getting late but the weather wasn’t too bad for this time of year, so he decided to walk back to the pharmacy.

He had bribed an old friend into letting him use a spare office to conduct business with his more nearly-legal clients, the ones he met in the daylight anyway. After dark, he would meet them below the pharmacy.

The pharmacy was quiet when he got back so he gave the girl behind the counter a smile... Lina? Lydia? Something like that, and made his way upstairs to the workshop, ignoring the blush on her face.

Nobody else was allowed up there; Doc was very particular about that. The man himself was sitting in a chair reading a book while he waited for the centrifuge to finish.

“Another satisfied customer!” Knockout crowed, taking the money out of his pocket and putting it in the wall safe.

“Cosmetics are such a lucrative market, we really should look at making more. Maybe a performance enhancer for men? Surely that would be easy money.”

The Doc hummed as he turned a page.

Ignoring his quiet partner, Knockout checked the messages on his second phone. “Oh, message from the test group. They like the results but would like a better delivery system. I’ll talk to them about it later. And while I remember, Coil should have the first of the Thinkers delivered by tonight.”

“Very well, have you got a place to store them?” Doc asked politely, eyes still on his book.

Knockout rolled his eyes, “You are such a stimulating conversationalist. And yes, I do. The building next door is still empty. I’ll put them in there, for now. It’s getting dark and I need to make a delivery. Or do you require my assistance?” Sometimes he worried what would happen if he wasn’t around to keep an eye on his friend.

As he spoke, the centrifuge beeped and slowed to a stop.

“I shall be fine,” Doc said as he climbed to his feet and began removing the samples.

With a wave, Knockout left the room.

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**Waspinator’s first flight.**

It had been a few days since Waspinator came online and currently he was watching the sunset from his perch on the windowsill.

The other bots were friendly, no one had shouted at him and nothing had fallen on him all day. He was feeling oddly content.

Getting up, he decided to fly around for a bit, maybe do some exploring before he went for a recharge.
The rig was huge, to him anyway, and he hadn’t had a chance to look at a map, so he flew blindly down the corridors mentally mapping the building as he went.

The common room was still quiet, the little fleshy-bots wouldn’t be here for awhile yet. Mistress had introduced him to them last night. The smallest fleshy-bot had been quick to hug him. She was warm and friendly and Dragon-bot really liked her.

Waspinator was recording as he went. Mistress had liked seeing the world from his point of view.

He followed the coloured arrows out of the room and down the hall. If he remembered correctly, this was the fleshy recharge area. His sensitive audios picked up the sound of running water. With no other destination in mind, he followed it.

He came to a door with a metal plate on it, about eye level for the fleshy-ones. Humming curiously, he landed so he could push the door open.

Inside, the floor was covered in ceramic squares in a repeating pattern and there was a set of benches that ran down the middle of the room. He stared at it, trying to work out what the pattern was before giving up and taking off.

In the air, it was much easier to see the lockers and benches. He could also see the doorway at the end of the room, steam wafting through it.

A peculiar bit of fabric caught his attention, so he landed to get a better look. It had been left draped over a bench along with a number of other bundles of cloth.

It was sheer with a repeating floral lace pattern. The small bot wondered what it was good for, as it clearly provided no real protection. Moving the bundle of cloth, he found a second, matching piece of fabric.

The shape was similar to what he had seen Mistress in when she had been changing in her workshop, only this was much larger.

Noise from the other room distracted him before he could send an information request to Teletraan. Perhaps whoever was there could explain it to him? Picking up both items, he flew towards the sounds.

Inside the room, his systems took a moment to adjust to the damp conditions. He was waterproof, all the bots were, but the steam made it hard to see.

The room was filled with cubicles, each with pipes above them. Ceramic squares covered the floor and walls.

The noise of running water was clearer here and a voice was humming a tune. It was one of the older fleshy-bots. She was standing under one of the pipes, letting water rain down on her. She was facing away from him, her dark hair was clinging to her dark, wet skin.

He hovered there and politely waited for her to finish.

The sounds of his turbines must have startled her. She turned suddenly to face him. The knife on the floor flashed, dissolving into a cloud of green energy that reformed in her hands as a gun.
Waspinator barely had time to recognise her as the Gun-lady before she reflexively opened fire.

Letting out a scream, Waspinator dropped the fabric he was holding and fled the room as fast as he could.

Mistress would later find him hiding under Huggy-bot’s bed, though the video footage wouldn’t be found on Teletraan until weeks later. A red faced Mistress was forced to explain to the little bot just why he shouldn’t go into those rooms.

She couldn’t look Gun-lady in the face for a week.

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**Saint George and the Dragon.**

Looking at the mess of wires, tubes and needles in front him, even Saint was hard pressed not to shudder.

The Programming Enhancement Chair (PEC), despite its silly name, was decidedly unpleasant to look at.

It was made of three chairs positioned around a central pillar. Each had a headpiece not dissimilar to what you would see at a hairdressers, if the hairdresser had a side business as a torturer. There were straps for the users’ legs and retractable armrests that held fold down keyboards.

The headpiece on each chair was connected to the central pillar, each fitted with dozens of almost microscopically thin needles, that would be pushed into key parts of the brain. The pillar contained a mess of wires and circuitry that would then connect the three occupants’ minds together.

The result was a computer assisted hive mind that was much greater than the sum of its parts. As he understood it, the better the programmer was, the greater result the chair would have. Unfortunately, Teacher’s gift prevented him from using the chair himself.

Ability enhancing tech was Nestor’s speciality. If it was something you could learn or do, he could build a device that would make you better at it. He couldn’t, however, build anything that would enhance a parahuman’s power and often his tech would conflict with it.

Nestor had also built a number of Strength Enhancing Suits that, as the name suggested, could increase the physical strength of the wearer by a ratio of almost two to one.

Currently, Saint’s three best programmers were strapped into the chairs. Each was staring blankly at the screen before them, their hands moving almost robotically across the keys as they analysed, decompiled and rewrote the mess that had once been Dragon’s code.

His men had been reluctant to use the machine at first. Not that he blamed them, but the Machinist, Nestor Forbes, had assured them that there would be no side effects. They could only spend a few hours each day connected to the PEC and they emerged at the end of those short shifts tired but none the worse for wear.

Most of what Nestor built was beyond Saint, much to his annoyance. *Maybe Teacher could help with that?* he thought idly.
Saint was so lost in his thoughts, he never noticed Nestor approaching until the man was directly behind him.

“This isn’t going to work,” Nestor said absently as he checked through his notes.

“What do you mean?”

“The Ascalon, it’s beyond repair. The infection is too far gone. She’s almost untouchable.”

“It,” Saint growled without looking at the man, “It’s software, not a person. There must be something you can do.”

Nestor rolled his eyes. Programming wasn’t his forte but he had spent enough time looking at Dragon’s code to know a living thing when he saw it. There was certainly more life in Dragon than his ex-wife.

If he was being truthful, he hadn’t taken the revelation of Dragon’s identity well. He had never been fond of the police. After his last stint in prison, it would be fair to say he was terrified of ever being caught by them again.

Learning that they had an AI on their side? That only fueled his fear.

“Not really. Her creator might, might, have been able to do something. Ascalon is a work of art. It surgically removes Dragon’s core runtime from the system while leaving the sub functions intact. Effectively, it would have lobotomised her.”

“I know all that. Get to the point.”

Sighing, he flipped to another page, “Very well. This new code, now that it has almost completely taken over, reacts differently. Using some of Richter’s tools, we have done multiple tests on Dragon’s new code. It would isolate the program before it could spread and restore the damaged systems.”

“It’s like watching a body react to an illness. It’s almost organic, alive,” he added as an afterthought.

Saint clenched his fists and fought down the impulse to throttle the man. He shouldn’t be surprised. Tinkers got silly around advanced tech and a lifelong mechanic, even before he triggered, would only be more prone to personifying a machine.

“So, what you’re saying is, I should have left you to the Geselleschaft?” he growled.

“No!,” Nestor chuckled nervously. “No, not at all. We have been able to do this after all.” Pulling a phone from his pocket, he pointed it at the now defunct monitoring station and pressed an icon.

The station had finally lost the ability to watch Dragon weeks ago, part of the reason for Saint’s increasingly bad mood. The screens lit up as the audio and video feeds returned. Now they could at least see what Dragon was up to.

Nestor smiled at Saint’s surprised expression. “Ascalon itself may be useless now, but I think they,” he gestured to the men who were about to connect themselves to the chairs, “found something important after opening up its code.”
Wheeljack, 90% chance of science.

Taking a break from his current project, Wheeljack looked around the workshop. Taylor and the Wards were at school and Perceptor was currently talking to Solution, the Guild Thinker Dragon had introduced him to.

Nearby, on a separate bench, was a mess of glass tubing, electromagnets, cabling, a solar panel and, for some unknown reason, a rubber duck.

The entire mess had started out as a small generator and a collection of machines such as a spectrometer, several types of precision pumps, valves, and measuring tools, an electron microscope, fractional distillation apparatus, and so on. In his attempt to create an alternative fuel, Perceptor had added, removed, gutted and reassembled most of them. He had, reluctantly, even asked Jack for help when it came to building some of the more unusual designs.

Jack had originally been unsure about joining the PRT. The resources they offered were good but the list of restrictions was longer than he was tall. Working with Dragon had turned out to be a nice compromise.

That she was also an AI was only a bonus, even if her behaviour worried him.

Nobody had spoken about it, but there were things she said from time to time. She had been very vocal about the treatment of Paige Mcabee and her desire to help the girl. The Parahuman singer known as Canary was currently on trial for assault, but despite what Dragon said, outside a few legal avenues, she had done little to help her.

Putting the finishing touches to the drone he was working on, he called out to Perceptor. “That’s number five finished. You ready to go?”

The drones weren’t much to look at. Four wheels attached to a square base with an engine and just enough sensors for it to steer around obstacles.

“Of course,” Perceptor said as he climbed down from his desk, in his hand were a number of small vials. “We have created a number of samples. But are you sure this is a wise course of action?”

Behind him, Laserbeak moved to give Solution a better view of the lab. He was streaming a live feed of the experiments to her.

Jack rolled his eyes and replied, “You can’t run simulations forever.”

“I understand that. I am simply concerned about the safety of the tests.” These were experimental fuels after all, possible energetic reactions were to be expected and Taylor had been very definite about explosions in the lab.

Jack had cleared a rectangular space on the floor and lined it with some sandbags he had found in one of the storage cupboards. The result was a long thin track that ended at the wall between the workshop and Predaqueen’s hanger.

“It’ll be fine. We will just use small amounts of fuel in each and increase in increments. No more than half a tank.”
“How big is the fuel tank?” Perceptor asked. He knew better than to not ask.

“How about a gallon?” Jack said absently, “I’m kidding!” he added at Perceptor’s horrified expression. On the nearby screen, there was a bubbling sound as Solution laughed.

“See,” Jack said as his fins lit up in amusement, “she has a sense of humor.”

“Yes,” Perceptor said flatly. “She is also a safe distance away.” Reluctantly, he passed a vial to Jack, who ignored his negative attitude.

The liquid in the vial was red in colour and smelt vaguely like diesel fuel. Jack carefully poured a small measure of it into the drone’s fuel tank and stepped back. Despite what people said, he didn’t set out to make things explode.

The bots moved to the other side of the workshop to achieve a safe distance, and turned to face Laserbeak.

“Synthetic fuel source, formula 97664. Test one,” Perceptor stated calmly while Jack held the drone’s remote starter. The naming system was Perceptor’s idea and came from the elements and ratios in the mix, rather than being a simple serial number.

“Test in three-”

“Fire in the hole!” Jack shouted and pressed the start button as his friend threw him a dirty look.

The motor mounted on the drone whirred into life. The engine stayed at a safe idle speed for a moment before it began to emit a high pitched whine.

There was a squeal of little rubber tires before the drone took off down the run at breakneck speeds. Perceptor ducked behind the nearest heavy object just as the drone smashed into and through the wall.

There was a startled noise from Predaqueen followed by a crunch. One of her yellow eyes glared balefully at the pair of them through the hole before she spat the remains of the drone through it.

“… Sorry!?” Jack called in the silence.

--

Jack had found a piece of steel plate to cover the hole and prevent a repeat of test one.

“Synthetic fuel source, formula 7862929. Test three.”

Test two, a worrying brown liquid, had melted the engine the moment the drone had started, so now they were on test three.

Jack pressed the button and the drone took off slowly down the run. The drone was making coughing and spluttering noises as it creeped forwards.

Halfway down the track, the engine gave a final cough and the drone came to a stop. When nothing more happened, Jack walked over and picked it up.
“Huh, I thought it would go fu-” The drone exploded with enough force to knock Jack off his feet and trigger the room’s containment systems.

By the time his systems had finished rebooting, the extractor fans had almost finished pulling the smoke out of the room. As he lay there looking at the ceiling, Perceptor loomed into view, giving him a decidedly unimpressed look.

“Am… I missing an eyebrow?” Jack asked carefully.

**Director Piggot - After action report.**

The morning after the Merchant raid.

Most people never realised just how much paperwork it took to keep the PRT running. Everything had to be documented and filed, often in triplicate. Last night’s raid on the Merchants had generated a small mountain of the stuff.

People saw them launching these raids and thought “Finally!” What they didn’t realise was that coordinating city-wide raids between two organisations, three depending on how you counted, was not a simple matter.

To do it all on short notice was even worse. The relationship between the Police Department and Parahuman Response Team was always strained, and the PD tried to drag its heels. In the end, the Mayor had been forced to intervene. The PRT got the manpower and the Protectorate had been made to agree to a number of public appearances.

The dislike between the two forces was a long standing problem. The PRT handled any cases that involved Parahumans, but these days more and more cases were linked to the different villains, monsters and vigilantes that plagued the city.

To deal with this, the PRT’s budget and forces continually increased while the opposite happened to the PD. In response, the precincts would use any excuse to hand a case off to them. And she had to deal with it all.

Emily was frowning at the report in front of her when there was a knock at her door. She glanced at the nearby clock. *Early, as always,* she thought to herself.

“Enter!” she called.

Armstrong and Miss Militia came into the room and took seats opposite her.

Part of the paperwork included the after action reports. Last night’s raid on the Merchants had been mostly successful. The three parahumans who led the gang were currently in custody, as were a large number of unpowered members.

But they still didn't have the Tinker who was supplying the Merchants and the Wards had ended up in a bad situation. Several of them were now injured and, as a result, she was facing pressure from various watchdogs who wanted someone to blame. *Self important busy bodies.*
She wasn’t unsympathetic, but she had been a field officer with the PRT herself; she had been at Ellisburg. Sometimes things went bad.

Shaking off the memories, she focused on the Protectorate leader. “I’ve spoken to New Wave and the hospital. Panacea is willing to treat the injuries from last night. Vista is expected to make a full recovery and will be back on duty in a few days.”

Miss Militia shook her head, “I’ve taken both Matrix and Vista off active duty for at least a week. They both need time to recover emotionally. Aegis was fine once Panacea reattached his arm.” That worried her. She was starting to think the boy enjoyed getting hurt.

“Very well, the gangs should be quiet for now. And it will keep ‘concerned individuals’ happy,” she said with all the sarcasm she could manage. Child protection and Youth Guard always kicked up a fuss whenever a Ward was injured.

“Just how did the Merchants of all people get their hands on that kind of firepower? Nearly a dozen people were injured when that nut-job opened fire.”

Armsmaster shook his head, “We’re not sure. The shipping container was found to have a large cache of weapons, many of which were high powered and well outside the Merchants’ usual level of resources. PD is already trying to trace where the weapons came from. There was also a half finished vehicle of Tinker design. It’s scheduled for destruction.”

Piggot could feel the headache building. The weapons trade in the city was usually controlled by the Empire, but there was almost no chance of them selling to the Merchants. That meant a third party.

“Do we at least have something on the Tinker who caused this mess?”

“No, there were no obvious signs of a Tinker other than Squealer. PD are talking to some of the unpowered members and their capes are not up for interrogation yet.” He turned his head slightly towards Miss Militia, who had the decency to look contrite before shooting him a look.

Skidmark had taken a beanbag round to the jaw at close range, breaking it and shutting him up until Panacea could heal him.

Armsmaster had managed to break through Mush’s protective shell of garbage long enough to inject him with a tranquiliser. He was currently tied to a bed until the spiders went away. And Squealer had been left with a concussion.

She also had reports on the injuries suffered by the Wards, Vista being the worst. The dozen people caught in the crossfire from that minigun and the damage the Wards had inflicted on the Merchants was noted. Mostly cuts and bruises, but several had been quite badly injured when Matrix had called her robots in. At least one merchant would be blind for life.

Already, the political mud-slinging had begun. “The mayor is being quick to shift the blame for last night and I’m already receiving complaints about the level of violence used.” Her job required her to investigate the complaints of excessive force. She would need to speak to every PRT agent, Parahuman and Ward involved with the raid.

Armsmaster scowled behind his visor, “It was the mayor’s office that pushed us to move on the Merchants as quickly as we did.”
“I am aware of that. I’m also aware that he spoke to you personally just hours before the raid. Do I need to remind you that the mayor's office has no official power to order anything?”

Before an argument could breakout, the phone on the director’s desk rang.

Still glaring at Armsmaster, she picked it up, “I said no calls!... What!?... They did what?” Her temper got worse as the person on the other end of the phone explained, “Fine! He’ll be along shortly.” She slammed the phone back down. “Idiots!”

Miss Militia shared a look with Armsmaster, “What happened?”

“One of the Merchants being held by BBPD tried making a deal, He offered information on the new Tinker. He said the Tinker never dealt with the Merchants directly, instead he used a middleman, claimed they were partners. He gave up the partner’s location.”

Armsmaster went to stand, “Where? I can be on location in-”

“Don’t bother, it’s already over.” Piggot growled, “a police captain decided they didn’t need our help.” He was probably hoping to use an arrest as leverage, either to help his career or to secure more funding for the PD. “The middleman was apparently not a parahuman, so he sent some of his men to arrest him. Turned out the Tinker was there. He was killed resisting arrest and his unpowered partner is on the run.”

“Well…. we can’t be held responsible for that,” Armsmaster protested.

“No, but now the PD is sitting on a Tinker-lab with no idea what to do. They have requested we take it off their hands. Take a squad with you and secure the site. Miss Militia, get reports from the officers on the scene, I want to know everything.”

Both parahumans stood to leave. It had been a long night and now it was looking to be another long day.
It had been another long night of work for Knockout and Doc. Thankfully, with a batch of what he jokingly called his ‘blue roast’ coffee, a person could go almost a week without sleep.

Actually, the original formula could keep you awake almost indefinitely. The problem however was in the side effects that would develop over time. It could counter the body's need for sleep, but sooner or later the mind needed rest. After too long without sleep, people would start to suffer from paranoia, hallucinations, memory loss and so forth. Watching the control group discover this for themselves had been a fun month.

Chuckling at the memory, he set the last of the machines to work on the latest batch of ‘Hyde’ and made his way to the sofa, blue roast in hand. Right now, it was one of their biggest sellers, even if the Merchants insisted on calling it ‘surge.’ Philistines.

Flicking on the TV, he sat back to watch his favorite horror movie. It was such a shame drive-in theaters were in decline, he always felt they added to the atmosphere of these old movies. Maybe he could set one up? The city was rife with empty lots, land was getting cheaper and he had plenty of money.

On a nearby table, a police scanner crackled. Hearing the address of the pharmacy he quickly changed the channel on the TV. It had been easy enough to get a few store bought wireless cameras hooked up in the area. Some people would do anything for a little money.

A cop car was pulling up out front. Another one had parked round the back with more dotted around the neighborhood. He had maybe a few minutes to leave as they got themselves into position.

“Uh-oh, time I wasn’t here,” he muttered as he quickly made his way to the wall safe. He pulled out a gun and a small black box. The gun was tinker made, using a chemical reaction to create a high powered laser.

Tapping a command on the nearby computer, he started a security program to scrub the hard drive. The hard drive was probably the most expensive part of the computer, being an early solid state drive from Japan. Once Leviathan sank Kyushu, between the economic and collateral damage, Japan had ceased to be a major power and technical innovations from the country had dropped to nothing.

Crossing the room, he pressed a button on the black box and placed it on a shelf full of chemicals.

The young girl who worked the counter wasn’t at work yet so the only people in the building were him and Doc. Walking calmly downstairs, he gave the man a jaunty wave and made his way into the basement.

The pharmacy was only three stories tall even if you included its basement. Brockton Bay was built over an aquifer, an underground source of water. Because of this, very few places went below sub-basement level.

Ground floor was the pharmacy itself, the top floor was a combined living area, storeroom and workshop. The basement was too damp to store most chemicals so it had been converted into a secondary workshop and testing area. It was also where the ‘after dark’ patients were handled.
He could hear shouting from above him, as the police stormed the building.

Running his hand along the wall, Knockout stopped at one stone that was smoother than the others. With a push, the door opened. The room on the other side was actually the basement of the abandoned building next door.

There was a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling there, providing just enough light for him to see. As he made his way across the room he barely spared a glance for the people tied to chairs. The Thinkers Coil had provided; the police would probably find them later.

Upstairs, he left the building through a side door. The pharmacy was hidden from sight but he could hear sirens and gunfire. Doc should keep them busy for awhile, he told himself as he calmly walked away.

He had barely traveled more than a block when a car pulled up alongside him and the driver rolled down his window.

Knockout chuckled, got to give the man some credit, he thought to himself, Coil was smarter than he looked. Opening the door, he slid smoothly into the back seat.

“Home Jeeves,” he said as he lounged across the seat. Maybe it was time to try the private sector for awhile?

As the car pulled away, the carefully constructed and positioned chemical fuse he had placed in the black box started to burn. The heat caused the chemicals on the shelf around it to ignite; some simply burned while others exploded. In seconds, the entire lab would be an inferno.

If pressed, Knockout would admit he would miss the place; he felt it had a certain charm and Doc, for all his faults, had been useful.

He had met the man not long after arriving in the city., Doc was a Changer that looked like the monster from the old wolfman movies. Then Knockout had created Flash. Doc often used to test Knockout’s creations.

Doc had never been the same again. He needed a daily regimen of specially made medications just to pass for normal. Even then, he had the personality and will of a lump of gelatin.

Out the back window, Knockout could see the smoke from the burning building. The fire would undoubtedly destroy almost everything. Not that he was too worried about starting again, he kept notes on all his successful creations in a small, red, notebook that was currently tucked away in an inside pocket.

Sitting back in his chair, he closed his eyes. Already thinking of his next creation.

-Taylor

I walked through a world made of metal. My feet following a path I couldn’t remember. The world around me was silent and the stars shone overhead.

I’d seen this before, a forgotten dream. The details slowly came to me. The bot dragging himself
onwards, the voice, the light. Speeding up, I tried to find my way back to where I had been.

I don’t know how long I wandered across the bleak metallic landscape. Everything was different, nothing was as I remembered. The city was gone and there were two moons in the sky rather than one. The ground beneath my feet trembled as it began to shift.

I struggled to keep my feet as a pillar rose from the ground, stretching up into the sky. A blue beam of light burst from the top and vanished into space. A door opened at the base. Inside, there were stairs leading down.

Blue light lit the way and the walls were lined with markings. They all had roughly the same basic shape of a stern face, but each was different, unique in subtle ways. The insignia I had created for myself and my bots was there.

The stairs felt endless but I kept going. At the bottom, I found myself in a huge vault. There was a pedestal in the middle of the room and floating above it was the source of the glow. I still couldn’t see what was at the glow’s center.

I remember this now. “No words of wisdom?” I asked, waiting for a reply.

Nothing. It just continued to float there, silent and unapproachable. I huffed and turned my back to it. Sulking a bit, I crossed my arms and leaned against the pedestal.

Warm arms wrapped around my shoulders, but before I could scream a feeling of warmth and peace filled the room. The gentleness and warmth of sunlight on my skin. A feeling of pride flowed from it.

I wanted to turn, to see what was behind me, but I couldn’t get my body to move.

*The peace of a summer’s day and the feeling of a job done well.*

Okay, that was weird. Rung was going to have a field day with this.

Amusement and compassion washed over me.

I felt the presence behind me shift, nodding gently against my mind. Relaxing, I felt images rise to the top. My fights with the Merchants and the raid on the storage lot.

*Approval, reassurance regarding my actions.*

“It wasn’t enough. Vista should never have gotten hurt.” My anger started to return and I could feel the presence trying to calm me. “No!” I didn’t want to be calm. What I wanted, was to do more. To make sure it never happened again.

A feeling of not quite pain shot through me and the presence became uncertain. A jumble of sensations flooded through me.

“Are you certain this is what you want?”
The voice was mine but not. I could still feel the presence in my mind so I brought up the images I wanted it to see. Lung bearing down on me., Bitch’s death. Vista bleeding to death in my arms. Her blood on my hands.

*Resigned fondness of a parent that knows their daughter is not going to change her mind.*

The presence shifted and I could move again. Turning around, I stared at the light, before driving my hand into it. My fingers brushed against the object at the centre and I tried to hold on.

Dragon logged into the systems that had been installed in Taylor’s workshop. She had just received a call from Wheeljack, saying Taylor had been acting odd most of the night.

Given what had happened, this wasn’t a big surprise. Few people handled their first major battle well. She would have checked in on Taylor sooner but the Simurgh was showing signs of movement.

She wasn’t quite prepared for what she saw.

Taylor’s workshop looked like it had exploded.

Taylor wasn’t the neatest of people, Dragon had been around Wards long enough to know few teenagers were, but she was hardly a slob. There were tools and equipment all over the place and Dragon could see that at least a couple had been stripped down and reassembled to make new ones. There were also active holograms all over the room.

Currently, Taylor was staring at a hologram of her secondary shield unit. “Jack, do you have those scans of the Wards and their costumes?” she called out over her shoulder.

“Yeah, right here,” he called back from the bench he was working on. Another hologram came online, this one was a line up of the Wards in costume.

Deciding not to disturb her, Dragon sent a message to Wheeljack.

*Has she been at this all night?*

*Nearly,* the bot sent back, *when we got back, she had a shower and went to bed. About an hour later she can storming into the workshop. She’s been working almost nonstop since.*

There were empty cups on one of the workbenches, probably tea given Taylor’s preferences, and a familiar piece of tech. It was a small battery pack that had been destroyed when the device it was attached to melted. If Dragon remembered correctly, it was one of Leet’s inventions.

Pulling up the access logs, Taylor had apparently taken nearly a dozen things from the Vault. Dragon knew Tinkers could get carried away. Colin often got so engrossed in his work that he forgot to eat or sleep. Those weren’t a problem for her but humans needed to rest.

*Do you know what she’s working on?*

*Do you want the list in alphabetical or time order?*
Metaphorically shaking her head, Dragon sounded the soft chime to let Taylor know she was there and brought her avatar up on the nearest screen.

“You should be resting,” she said gently.

Even with the warning chime, Taylor still twitched at her voice.

“I’m fine!” she said a little too quickly, “I’ll sleep when I get tired.”

Dragon decided not to push the issue. She knew what it was like. Sometimes you just wanted to work to avoid thinking. It wasn’t healthy but in the short term, it wasn’t to worrying. “Is that before or after you overdose on caffeine?” she teased lightly. “What are you working on anyway?”

“It’s only tea,” Taylor muttered quietly to herself. “I’m trying to make sure last night doesn’t happen again.”

“Y’know what happened wasn’t your fault, right? There was nothing you could have done,” Wheeljack said.

Taylor scoffed. “Really? So I couldn’t have told Wasp to go in for a closer look? I couldn’t have built a functional medic weeks ago? Or maybe I should have had Predaqueen nearby in case of trouble. Fuck, Missy shouldn’t have been there at all, she’s thirteen for god’s sake.” Taylor was nearly shouting by the end as her temper flared.

“And you’re only fifteen,” came Dragon’s gentle rebuttal. Her voice was soft when she spoke, “You can’t hold yourself responsible for everything that may or may not happen. Take it from me, you could run yourself ragged trying, but in the end, it will never be enough. I know it’s unpleasant but you can’t wrap your friends in cotton wool. They chose to be here, just like you.”

“But…”

“Taylor! If I can’t teach you anything else, remember this; You can’t save everyone. Do what you can to help your friends and focus on the ones you did save.”

“That’s just it, I can do more!”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to outfit everyone with this,” she pointed at the hologram of her shield unit.

Dragon had checked over the shield unit when Taylor first designed it. Between the rare, expensive metals and manufacturing techniques required, mass production was too impractical.

“Taylor,” Dragon warned, “that would be a lot of work. All Wards have multiple costumes, you would have to outfit them all and then be responsible for maintaining each device used. Not to mention the cost.”

“Thats what I’ve been working on. Look,” she reached out and began to manipulate the hologram. A tugging motion pulled the holographic ‘case’ off and exposed the internal systems.

Dragon noticed the difference almost immediately, “Taylor, is that?”
“Yeah. I realised last night I could swap out a lot of the exotic materials for more mundane ones. Like swapping the high-conductive carbon for copper. I’ve had to double up the coil and make the focusing lens thicker to handle the extra heat—”

Dragon watched in silence as Taylor explained the changes she had made to the device. Some were only minor but they quickly added up to something much greater. And the downside?

“They’re not as energy efficient as mine and each unit would only have an operational life of about two to three years, five maybe with regular maintenance. But that could be done by anyone with enough experience in electrical engineering. This also increased the weight, but nothing a person couldn't get used to.”

Dragon's own specialisation was in understanding another Tinker’s technology. Even without that, Taylor's tech had until now been relatively simple to understand. Armsmaster had needed very little time to understand the pieces he had reviewed.

What Dragon was looking at now was something completely different. It was still clearly Taylor’s, but there was almost nothing there that couldn't be reproduced.

“Taylor, do you realise… How long have you been able to do this?”

The girl flinched and shifted uncomfortably, like she was expecting a reprimand, “Since last night. I wanted to make sure Missy - that none of the Wards - would get hurt like that again. When I woke up, I knew how to do it.”

Wheeljack, who had been watching with quiet interest, spoke up, “Powering it would still be an issue though.”

Dragon had to agree. Taylor’s tech was surprisingly finicky about power requirements.

“Actually, I might have a solution to that,” she said while picking up one of the battery packs she had on her desk and pressing a button on her interface. The hologram was replaced with detailed images of the battery she was holding, “Leet built these. They were more or less slagged when whatever they were connected to melted. Pieces were too far gone or simply missing, but by comparing them I think I've managed to piece together how they work.”

Putting the battery down, she pressed the images together, creating a single, whole, battery. “If I’m right, these won't have a huge output, but it should be more than enough to power a few small devices.”

“Like the shield generator. Of course!” Wheeljack cheered.

“If,” Dragon said, “if this works… I’d like to offer this to the PRT. It could save a lot of lives.”

Taylor nodded, “Yeah, but I want something in return.”

Dragon gave her a questioning look.

“I want the PRT to let me take more bots on patrol, starting with these two,” she waved at a nearby hologram of a pair of large bots, “and to let me give equipment to the Wards.”

Dragon could almost laugh. Even if she only charged enough to cover production costs, the PRT
would probably bend over backwards to get access to reliable and mass producible Tinker tech. A bit more freedom would be a small price to pay.
Chapter Summary

AN: Mostly filler but the next story arc starts with the next chapter. I fully expect Danny to get some flack for this but I honestly think he's in the right.

I forced myself to ignore the growing ache in my side and shifted my weight to my good leg. I’m sure there was a spectacular bruise forming under my clothes. I’d been a bit out of it when I got back to the rig and showered last night, and after that I’d been too busy to think about it.

I had spent the better part of the night working on the shield generator for the Wards. Unfortunately, my hard light system was too power intensive and would require me to completely redesign everyone’s costume.

However, the emergency shield I used required much less energy, though it still had some drawbacks. *I’ll take bruises over bullet holes any day.*

Should I be worried about how little getting shot at bothers me?

“I think we are about ready to produce a prototype.” Dragon’s voice brought me out of my thoughts, “do you have any idea on how you wish to present it?”

“Put it on Armsmaster and shoot him?” I suggested with a smile. I didn’t really mean it, but I’m sure his expression would be worth seeing.

Dragon gave me a disapproving look, “I know he can be... difficult to work with sometimes, but he’s still an experienced hero and Tinker. You can’t use him as a test dummy.”

“Oh? tell me you haven’t considered it at least once?”

Her avatar refused to look at me, “Not at all.”

*Uh-huh*...I shared a look with Jack. Dragon was always quick to defend Armsmaster.

“Honestly, I was thinking of building it into a flack-jacket or something. Depends on what they have available in the armoury.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Once you’re finished, I’ll contact the director about it.”

“Thanks… Actually, there was one more thing?”

Her avatar frowned in concern, “Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s just, where will they be built?” I waved at the half built shield generator, “Could they be made here in Brockton Bay?” The dockworkers union was always looking for work.
“I hadn’t considered it,” Dragon admitted. “I have an automated manufacturing facility attached to my main base in Vancouver, but Containment foam is made by others under license.” Her avatar stared off into space as she considered the idea. I assumed she was running simulations or checking prices.

“It might be possible,” she said eventually, “The Brockton Bay facility is still under construction, but there are locations in the city that could be converted to our needs. Though that might push production costs up and we would need to consider security.”

I shrugged, I wasn’t too concerned with costs at the moment. If what Dragon had been telling me was true, these were worth twice their weight in gold to the PRT.

“Of course-,” her avatar turned suddenly to look at something, “Taylor, I’ll call you back.” With that, the screen went dark.

Wheeljack shrugged at me and turned back to what he was doing.

What could worry Dragon like that?

Before I could think further on it, there were two short, loud, siren blasts across the base followed by an announcement.

[All Parahumans report to the common room Immediately]

That… that doesn't sound good. “Jack? can you make sure my gear is ready to go?” I asked as I hurried out of the room.

The Tinker workshops were on the edge of the rig, past the barracks, so by the time I made it there, most of the other Wards were already present. Everyone was bleary eyed, it was only about six am and it had been late by the time we got back.

None of the Wards had bothered to dress or mask up. Although, “Dennis, do you really sleep in those?” I asked.

Dennis, Clockblocker, gave me a sleepy grin, “Of course!” he said proudly as he struck a pose in his brightly coloured Clockblocker pajama bottoms. “What about you?” he asked pointing out my old hoodie and jeans.

“I’ve been up hours,” I explained. I’d woken up barely an hour after getting to sleep. I had been so focused on the plans in my mind that I had barely paused to get dressed in some worn out clothes I had brought to the base.

He opened his mouth to say something but stopped when something behind me caught his attention. “Whoa!” his statement drew the other Wards’ attention to Battery, who had just entered the room in a revealing tank-top and shorts that made me blush. An amused Assault followed her in.

I tried not to compare our figures, but if I’d tried to wear something like that, I’d just look silly.

Battery threw Dennis a dirty look, but before anyone could say any more, Miss Militia stormed into the room. “That’s enough!” she barked, her own costume looking thrown on.

“As of five minutes ago the Simurgh entered free-fall. Her target is a province in central China.”
The atmosphere in the room changed immediately, all levity at Battery’s state of dress fled the room. Dread settled in my stomach, Dennis and Chris had gone pale while Dean looked like he was going to be sick.

Flyers went out regularly and in school we were told repeatedly what to do in case of an Endbringer attack. There were shelters all over the city; multileveled with enough food and space to keep people safe for hours or even days if necessary.

“Headquarters is contacting the CUI and arranging for transport, I want everyone who is going dressed and ready in five minutes,” Miss Militia turned to where the Wards and I were gathered, “Wards, you are reminded again that this is strictly voluntary and only with parental permission.”

With that, everyone went their separate ways. The Wards to their rooms to change and me to my workshop.

Jack had put my armour on a stand and it was still sporting the damage from last night. Mostly, the damage was cosmetic so it should still be useable. Against an Endbringer?

I forced the thought down, I would never be able to forgive myself if I walked away, knowing there was something I could have done to help.

My bots had gathered near my armour, Jack shifted uncomfortably, his containment foam cannon was near by and even Waspinator was giving me a determined look. I knew I couldn’t take them with me. None of them would stand a chance.

After I pulled the body suit on, I reached out for Rewind. There was one last thing I needed to do. This time of the morning, Dad should still be at home, just getting ready for work.

The phone rang twice before Dad answered it, *Hello?* he sounded half asleep, I must have woken him.

“Hey dad,” shit, what was I supposed to say?

*Taylor? is something wrong? Did something happen last night?* Dad knew about the raid in general terms but not the specifics and I hadn’t had a chance to talk to him about it yet.

“No, I’m fine… it’s just… there's an Endbringer Dad... It’s attacking China and I-”

*No!*

“But Dad!”

*No Taylor, I forbid it. You are not going to fight a fucking Endbringer!* He was nearly shouting. I think this was the first time he had ever really raised his voice at me specifically, though I’d heard him get angry at other things before of course.

“I have to! I can’t just Ignore this!”

Around me, my bots flinched and I could hear Dad taking deep breaths as he tried to calm himself down.
*Taylor, you know I’m proud of you, but think about this for a minute, what could you do against an Endbringer?”

I flinched at that, he was right but still, “I… I could so something! I could help with the evacuations or search and rescue, Wasp and Laserbeak are perfect for it.”

*Taylor, please. You are all I have left and I don’t want you anywhere near and Endbringer. I want you to come home. Please, I want you to promise me you won’t go…” he was nearly begging.

Guilt and anger coiled around my gut, “Okay… fine, I promise…” I ground out before hanging up in frustration.

“Y’know he’s right Taylor,” Jack said quietly as I hung up, “I don’t like it any more than you do, but what could we do against an Endbringer?”

I didn’t have an answer. I doubted very much that my Null-Ray could do anything and I would never get close enough for my axe or sword.

I was still angry when I made it back to the common room. Angry at Dad and Jack for being right, at myself for not wanting to admit it.

I had pulled my jeans and hoodie on over my body suit. There was no point putting the armour on if I wasn’t going. Glancing around, I considered ignoring Dad. He couldn’t really stop me. If I told them I was allowed to go, then by the time they knew I would already be there.

Dad would never forgive me. And that right there was the problem. Between the new school and money from Dragon, things were finally getting better, we were talking more. Did I really want to ruin that? What’s more, what would Dragon or Miss Militia say when the truth came out?

Maybe it was because of Emma, but trust felt more important to me than it used to. The thought of betraying the trust of others felt more repulsive.

I made my way over to the other Wards, Chris and Dennis weren’t in costume and when I gave them a questioning look, Chris shook his head. “Mum would kill me if I went,” he explained.

“Same,” Dennis said.

Knowing they weren’t going eased some of the tension in my stomach, I wouldn’t be the only one not going.

Miss Militia followed Armsmaster into the room. Taking a place at the end of the room he addressed the collected capes. His helmet covered his face, leaving only the area around his mouth clear. even so, from the way he was standing and the thin line of his mouth, he looked angry about something.

“The CUI has refused to allow us entry to the country,” he ground out.

“They think they can handle the Smurf on their own?” Assault asked and Battery elbowed him gently in the ribs.

Armmsmaster nodded, “They have made it clear that they can handle the matter. Any attempt by sponsored heros to enter the country will be treated as an act of aggression and any independents will be ‘detained for questioning.’”
Something in his tone made the hairs on my neck stand up. When capes had started appearing, the Chinese Union Imperial had slid backwards and become an isolationist state. What little was known about the country's politics came from ex-pats who managed to leave.

Mostly it was conjecture and rumor, but the CUI did have its own cape team, the Yángbǎn. They had never been seen outside of the CUI, but there were rumors of kidnappings and brainwashing.

“So that’s it? We’re just going to sit back and do nothing?” Dean asked.

Armsmaster gave him a short nod, “As it stands, there is nothing we can do. But I want all of you to remain on base and on standby in case the situation changes.” With that, he stormed out of the room in the direction of the workshops.

People started to leave and the Wards turned to a maskless Aegis for instructions. He ran a hand through his hair, “Looks like we are on standby. Everyone go get some rest or something.”

“Guess I should send Jack down to the armoury,” I muttered to myself as I turned to leave, maybe I could get that prototype done. I didn’t want to risk dismantling my armour to upgrade or fix it. No matter what Dad said, there was still a chance I would be called up.

“Oh? What you working on?” Chris asked with false cheer as he followed alongside me. I knew what he was trying to do, he was trying to avoid thinking about the Simurgh and the possibility we would have to fight her.

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

“Wow,” Chris muttered as I finished explaining my idea, “You did all this in one night?”

“It’s mostly just adapting a pre-existing design, it’s quicker than starting from scratch.” I explained with a shrug. By the time I had finished going over what I was doing and where everything came from, Jack had returned from the armoury with two jackets. I was currently pulling one apart in an attempt to find a place to fit everything.

The emitter wasn’t too large, but it was a bit heavier than it looked. The battery pack was more awkward.

“Yea but…” he trailed off before shaking his head, “never mind, are you really planning to give these to everyone?”

“Sure, once the PRT gives the okay.”

“Huh,” he stared at the holograms of the Wards and it took me a moment to realise why. His wasn’t up there.

“Oh, I figured it would be best if I let you decide how to integrate it into your armour,” I explained.

“Makes sense,” he agreed, “a Tinker knows their gear better than anyone,” he stared thoughtfully at the holograms in front of him for a awhile before he spoke again.
“Say… How about a trade?” he asked, “one of your hard light emitters for one of my anti-grav systems?”

“Er, sure,” I didn’t have much use for it at the moment but I might be able to design something around it later. “I’ll have Jack bring you the parts later, he can help you install it. You have anything in particular in mind for it?”

“I’ve got a few ideas.”

We spent the rest of the time working on the prototype shield and bouncing around ideas for what he would do with the HL system.

We had almost finished the prototype when we were called back to the common room.

A quick glance at the clock as I walked back into the common room showed that it had been just over an hour since we were put on alert.

Armsmaster was there looking, if possible, even more angry. He barely waited for the door to shut before speaking, “Head office has just ordered us to stand down. The situation in China has been dealt with.”

Something about that didn’t feel right and I racked my brain trying to figure out what.

“Do we know what happened?” Aegis asked.

Miss Militia spoke up, “Official statement from the CUI is that their parahuman team successfully destroyed the device she was constructing and that she retreated shortly afterwards. They plan to study the device in an attempt to identify its function.”

“Is that safe? and what about the quarantine?” I asked.

I’d learned a couple of important things when I’d researched the Endbringers. First, make sure Teletraan’s ‘safe search’ function was on by default, especially when it came to the simurgh. After that, I’d stuck to the more official information available off the PRT servers.

The Simurgh was thought of as the ‘youngest’ of the Endbringers as she was the last of the three to appear. She never did as much damage as the other two, and she couldn’t take or give the damage they could.

The real danger was her power, a mix of telepathy and precognition. People called it the ‘song’. Anyone who heard it for too long changed. Sometimes it was subtle, little things that wouldn’t be noticed till years later and it was too late to stop what had been put in motion. Other times it was as simple as turning people against each other.

She had all but destroyed Switzerland. If she did that to people, what would a device she built do?

America, Europe and most of the allied countries had strict rules on dealing with the Simurgh. Entire cities would be quarantined if necessary and any devices she built were destroyed immediately after the battle.
Armsmaster’s mouth got, if possible, even thinner, “while we don’t know anything about the device, satellite images show the CUI is currently making no moves to contain the situation. Nothing official has been said, but I would expect additional restrictions on anyone traveling to or from the country. But for now, the situation has been dealt with.”

The tension that had filled the base since the alert began to ease. The fight was already over and while the thought made me feel guilty, none of us were hurt. I’d need to talk to Rung about it later.

After briefly muttering about meeting the director, Armsmaster and Miss Militia left. Aegis turned to the collected Wards. “There’s no patrols scheduled for tonight, all of you go home and get some rest.”

Kid Win and I stuck around in my workshop for another hour or so to finish up the prototype and ready it for testing. Dragon would be busy for the rest of the day, so I left a message for her and made my way home.

It was nearly midday by the time I got home and I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. I would have stayed at the rig but Aegis had all but ordered us all to leave so we could ‘relax properly’.

*Building or designing things in my workshop was relaxing.*

I’d texted Amy on my way home, but she hadn’t replied so I guess she was probably still in school. I’d brought a tablet Dragon had given me home, so maybe I could veg out in the living room and work on the fuel project.

I hadn’t expected to find Dad sitting at the kitchen table looking like somebody had died.

“Dad?”

“Taylor! Thank god.”

I had barely stepped through the back door when he grabbed me in a tight hug, “Dad, what are you doing home?” I asked as I guided us toward the table.

“I booked the day off,” at my disbelieving look he explained, “I wanted to be here when you go home from last night.”

“Oh…” I let dad push me into a chair as he started making me a cup of tea.

“I thought you would be home sooner?” he asked eventually.

I could feel Rung’s spark nearby, he must have been talking to dad before I got home.

“I… I had to stay at the rig. All of us did, in case something happened in the city.” Dad nodded and sat down in front of me. “Then I wanted to get my latest project finished. Its great, if it works the PRT.”

“Taylor, we need to talk about this,” he said heavily. “You know I’m proud of you and what you are trying to do, but Endbringers are different. I don’t want you near one, ever.”
“I could have helped… My bots can get places others can’t, the armbands aren’t pinpoint accurate and we could have helped,” I protested stubbornly.

“It’s already been on the news Taylor. There is no safe place when one of those things gets involved. What if you got trapped inside the quarantine?”

He sighed when I didn’t answer, “Okay then, convince me. Tell me what you could really have done?”

“I could have…” Done what? My bots can’t carry a person and my armour doesn’t make me any stronger or faster. I know Dad was right but still, it was frustrating and being kept safe or choosing not to go didn’t make me feel any better.

“At least you’re still alive to feel bad,” Dad said when I tried to explain. “Taylor, I understand, really. How do you think I feel when I have people begging me for work that just isn’t there?”

I suppose he had a point, and I know he was just doing what he was supposed to. That no good parent would want their kid walking into danger, but it was still frustrating.

We slipped into another uncomfortable silence, but I couldn’t think of anything to say and walking away now would only make matters worse.

[Tell him about the shield project] Rewind’s message appeared on my glasses..

“Actually… There might be some work for them soon…” The discussion helped clear the air, even if i did think Dad’s obsession with reopening the ferry was a pipe dream.

At some point we moved to the living room where we spent the day watching old movies and eating take out.

When Dad went to bed, I spent an hour or so in my room going over everything with Rung before turning in for the night. I’m not sure how long I laid there, but no matter what I tried, I just couldn’t get to sleep. Eventually, I got up and pulled Dragon’s tablet out of my bag. Might as well do some work until I feel tired. Maybe it would work if I crystalised it?

The sun was just coming up when I finally hit on the solution.
This story is being written/posted on a forum which allows me to play around a bit with the formatting, such as adding pictures.

Obviously, I can't do that here, but if anyone is interested, the forum/thread can be found here: https://forums.spacebattles.com/threads/worm-more-than-meets-the-eye-worm-transformers.317017/

Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards
You are currently logged in, RWD (Autobot) (Archivist)
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: New Ward
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay

RWD (Original Poster) (Autobot) (Archivist)
Hi All,

For those who don't know, my name is Rewind and I work for Brockton Bay's newest hero: Matrix

I've been given permission to post images, videos and information from Matrix's day to day duties in the Wards and to answer any questions you may have about her bots.

First, please be aware that the following images may be censored to protect identities.
Next, a little bit of info about us all:

Matrix is a Tinker, currently assigned to the Wards, who specialises in Autonomous Robotics.

The bots:

Rewind:

I'm the oldest and smallest of Matrix's bots. I specialise in communications and I enjoy studying history.
I post here as 'RWD'

**Wheeljack**

He was the third bot created by Matrix. He calls himself an engineer. Friendly and always happy to meet people. He posts on PHO as 'Wheeljack.'

If you ever hear him say 'uh-oh' or 'that's interesting' Run. Just run.

**Perceptor**

Fifth bot. He's a scientist that tends to forget that not everyone shares his vast, vast vocabulary.

He doesn't have a PHO name yet.

Edit: Now registered as Perceptor.

**Predaqueen**

This was Matrix's fourth bot. Don't let the teeth fool you, she's a big pussy cat.

**Rung**

Second bot Matrix built. Quiet and unassuming he likes to study psychology and build matchstick models.

Posts as 'RNG'

Edit: Added Rung, sorry buddy.

Edit: New members to the team.

**Waspinator**

Nice guy but a bit dim. Kinda clumsy.

**Laserbeak**

The team pet, don't offer him a cracker.

Here are some pictures of Jack and Matrix at the awareness campaign on Saturday 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10

and a short video taken from Matrix's helmet-cam

(Showing Page 1 of 10)

**RNG (Verified Cape) (Autobot)**

Rewind, did you get permission to post all this?

And I don't mean to cause a fuss but you missed naming me.
LightCat
OMG, a Tinker who creates AI, and they’re loose!!

Arty5033
IT'S GOING TO GO TERMINATOR ON US! SAVE US, ARMSMASTER!

SingularityKA
Matrix? Creating AI? Well, batten down your hatches because it's only a matter of time before we become pod people! </wingnut>

Seriously though, it's nice that you're so open about your identity. Makes me wonder if there are any other AI afraid of exposing themselves. They'd do well to follow your example.

End of Page. 1

##

Page 3

Dogsbody
Wait, that dragon robot thing is a she? I saw that thing at the hospital, it's got more teeth than the Osmond Family

Vista (verified cape)
Don't be such a baby, she's really sweet. See, here's a picture of her smiling

FortressConstruction
Matrix, how much are you charging for robot creation and how much maintenance do they require? I would be interested in acquiring some free labour for a construction project down town, if the cost is right.

Matrix (Verified cape) (Autobot commander)
Like hell! My bots are NOT for sale. I don't care how much you offer, I don't create them 'to order' and I refuse to trade in slaves.

If you really need workers then contact the dockworkers union. I understand they are always looking for work.

Hawke298
'Matrix, you talk about the dockworkers, have you thought about converting the Boat Graveyard into Anti-Endbringer Robots? Or at least use them for parts?'

Perceptor (Autobot)
Unfortunately, it’s just not viable. Most the of the more valuable materials have already been reclaimed and the rest exceeds the cost benefit that could be gained from small scale work.

What value is left in the derelict ships would be in hulls which would require a large scale smelting
Then there is the fact that Matrix's last attempt to conduct salvage operations ended with an unfortunate run-in with a known Parahuman criminal.

Content edited by Rewind - Percepter, word limits.

**Hightower**
How comes you guys are all ‘verified’? you’re tinker creations shouldn’t you have a different tagg?

**RWD** (Original Poster) (Autobot) (Archivist)
@SingularityKA
It's not like we can hide it if we want to go out in public. Besides, they are going to make toys of us all soon so everyone's going to know what we look like.

**Chibipoe**
You guys are getting toys?! cool! when are they going on sale, how many will there be?

**RWD** (Autobot) (Verified Cape)
@chibipoe

Here is some more information [www.bigbadtoystore.com](http://www.bigbadtoystore.com)

**Owlman** (The Guy In The Know)
Hey, you added two more bots to the front page. How many Autobots does Matrix have now?

**PrudishP** (Veteran Member)
Autobots?

**Owlman** (The Guy In The Know)
Yea, she’s a 'Autonomous Robotics Tinker', therefore shes makes Autonomous Robots, but you don’t expect me to type that out every time do you? So Autobot.

**Lightcat**
Are those bots really going to be allowed to run around with nobody controlling them?

Is that safe?

The PRT is really falling down on the job if they don't keep a close eye on Matrix. I don't care what they say, she's going to be the second coming of Nilbog instead of eldritch abominations, we get killer robots running loose.

**User has received an infraction for this post.**

**RWD** (Original Poster) (Autobot) (Archivist)
@Lightcat
Here is me standing next to a cup of coffee, how exactly am I a threat?

@Owlman that’s kinda cool, i might use it if thats ok.
TinMother (moderator)
@Lightcat Nilbog was one of the worst Parahuman created disasters and the events of Ellisburg are not a laughing matter.

Matrix is a registered Hero with the PRT and any more comparisons between the two will see you banned.

@RWD I have created a new tag and applied it to you and the other bots, PM me if this is ok.

Waspinator (Autobot)
Waspinator not clumsy!

Matrix (Verified cape) (Autobot Commander)
@TinMother
I think it’s cool but who suggested my tag?

Tabi
Why is Wheeljack upside down in his picture?

Wheeljack (Autobot)
@Tabi Long story involving a failed experiment and a possible fuel source and and an energetic element. We're not sure what it was, but it was a lively one.

Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
What the fuck are you guys playing at?

I live near that storage lot you shot up last night! fucking bullets were coming through the walls.

I know you were there, I saw your dragon thing!

User has recived an infraction for this post

Tin_Mother (Moderator)
I understand your frustration at the situation but please keep things civil and on topic.

There is already a thread to discuss the events in Brockton Bay.

End of Page.

Topic: Battle for the Bay!
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay Discussion
Dawgsmiles (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
 Barely a week after a new drug hits the streets and the PRT are out in force. (link for more details)

There has been an increase in PRT, Protectorate and even Ward patrols all week and they have been
spotted staking out locations all over the city.

It all came to a head last night when PRT forces moved against the Merchants.

No news yet on whether anyone was arrested.

Edit:
Squealer, Skidmark and Mush have all been confirmed to be in custody

(Showing page 1 of 5)

➤ Tumbles
Go PRT! about time someone dealt with those bastards.

Do we know who was involved with the fight?
➤ WhedonRipperFan
oh sure, now they do something.

Typical PRT, they wait till after people are dead before they actually do anything.

My brothers in a coma after taking that 'flash' shit. where were the PRT then?

➤ Antigone
Wow, how did they manage to arrange everything so quickly?

Do we know if any of the merchants were caught?

@WhedonRipperFan
sorry to hear that man.

➤ BadSamurai
@WhedonRipperFan
What about Panacea, can't she do anything?

I saw one of those raids. Police stormed a house near me.
We all knew the guy was a dealer but the police were carrying stuff out by the box load.

➤ WhedonRipperFan
@BadSamurai
Coma's are typically a problem with the brain, Panacea can't fix that.

➤ Deadman
About time they did something about the Merchants.

Now they just need to deal with the fucking Nazis.

➤ PrudishP (Veteran Member)
@WhendonRipperFan
How is it the PRT's fault that your brother did drugs?
you cant blame them for someone elses decisions

► WhedonRipperFan
FUCK YOU!
THE PRT SHOULD HAVE DEALT WITH THE MERCHANTS YEARS AGO.
THEY HAVE JUST SHOWN THEY COULD, SO WHY HAVEN'T THEY BOTHERED TILL NOW?
INSTEAD THEY SIT BACK AND LET DEALER, NAZI'S AND TRIADS TAKE OVER THE CITY!!!!

User has recived an infraction for this post.

► Tin_Mother (Moderator)
@WhedonRipperFan
I understand you are upset but please try to keep things civil. If i have to ask again you will be suspended

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

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► XxVoid_CowboyxxX
Finally get my account unlocked and this happens!

Does anyone know if Matrix was there?

► Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
She was there, I saw her fucking dragon

What the fuck are they playing at?

I live near that storage lot that got shot up last night! fucking bullets were coming through the walls.

I'm at the hospital now after getting shot in the arm.

► Ultracut
Gun fire? the Wards dont carry guns do they?

► Whitecollar (Cape Wife)
Depends what you consider a 'gun' the tinkers have stun weapons but thats it.

My husband did mention that something went wrong at the Wards raid and one of them got hurt but he wouldnt tell me more.

► Brilliger (Moderator: Protectorate Main)
Ok, there will be an official statement later but for now I can confirm this.
Skidmark, Squealer and Mush are all under arrest.
We did encounter heavier resistance than expected and a number of people were injured.

As a result of this, Matrix brought her Autobots in as reinforcements.

► **Divide**
who are the Autobots?

► **RWD (Autobot) (Archivist)**
Us.
Its a name that was suggested for all of the bots built by Matrix.

Also, I wanted to say, on the behalf of all the Autobots:
We are deeply sorry for anyone who was injured as a result of the Merchant raid.

► **Ekul**
Whats all this about anyway?

I know the news mentioned something about Tinker made designer drugs in BB but I kinda missed everything.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
After nearly a week of hard work and sleepless nights, I had finally finished.

The machine in front of me was huge, it started at the wall on one side of my workshop and continued on to the opposite wall.

The entire mess had started out as a small generator and a collection of tools and parts such as a spectrometer, several types of precision pumps, valves, and measuring tools, an electron microscope, fractional distillation apparatus, and so on.

The end result placed the most stable of Perceptor’s formulas in a supersaturated state and used carefully controlled pressure fluctuations to create a dull pink crystal. Teletraan was tied into the machine and could control conditions to speed up the growth. After that the crystals were then exposed to different types of energy.

The glowing pink crystal was dubbed "Batch 3637466" by Perceptor. The rest of the machine was dedicated to then converting the crystals into a refined liquid.

Dragon and Solution were watching as I carefully drained some of the glowing pink liquid into a beaker. The formula was safe to hold in its crystal form, but was caustic as a liquid.

I had gone all out when I built this protoform, the only thing it was missing was a spark. I’d made it human sized, about my height, with vaguely female proportions, the waist pinched inwards and the hips and chest plate were more pronounced. For a laugh, Jack had originally dressed it in a set of clothes I had left behind. The face was just a smooth blank plate, combined with my clothes, I found it a bit creepy.

I’d considered giving it a spark but a niggling worry in the back of my mind told me it was a bad idea. Human sized was still beyond me.

For now, the protoform was connected via cables to a computer that was being manned by Wheeljack. Pouring the fuel into the tank, I gave Jack a nod and stepped behind a protective screen. The room’s forcefield generators were already in place to contain anything should this go wrong.

Perceptor gave me a pleading look.

“Alright, go ahead,” I told him.

He turned to Laserbeak, who was recording everything. “Synthetic fuel source, formula 3637466. Test one.” Jack rolled his optics and Dragon smiled fondly. The little bot was determined to follow protocol.

“Testing in three… Two… One… Go!”

Jack hit the enter key and small lights across the protoform came to life. For thirty seconds, nobody moved and I barely dared to breathe. I could see nothing but green lights on Jack’s screen.

“Okay, Jack, give it a try,” I said.
With a nod, he entered a command and the protoform took a shaky step forwards. The containment field moved with it, along with the containment foam sprayers built into the ceiling. While intended to be used against intruders, the foam could also be used as a fire suppressant.

The protoform’s movements were a little ungainly—please tell me I don’t look like that—as it worked through the preprogrammed list of commands. Moving in specific ways, picking up objects of different tensile strengths and so forth. All the fine motor controls were feeding data back to Jack on fuel usage, heat buildup and so forth.

Next would come a major coordination test. It crossed the distance between it and the treadmill we had… borrowed from the rig’s exercise room. Climbing on, it started to run at a steady speed. After nearly half an hour Jack shut it down and Teletraan continued to process the data.

The tension in the room began to climb again. If this didn’t work, if there was a problem, then this would all be for nothing. Finally, Jack looked up from his monitor and I found myself holding my breath.

“It works!” he said as his fins lit up with excitement.

“YES!” shouted Perceptor, everyone turned to the little bot who made a coughing noise, complete with hand over his mouth to hide his embarrassment. “I mean, splendid!”

It took me a while to stop laughing.

“What will you call it?” Solution asked once I had calmed down. Her voice was odd. Not having vocal cords or even a throat, she had still managed to find a way to ‘fake’ them. The end result gave her what sounded like an odd accent.

“I’m not sure, 3637466 is a bit of a mouthful.”

We bounced a couple of different names around. Perceptor was fine with its serial number, but also suggested an anagram of its components that was almost unpronounceable.

*Y’know, If you type that out on a phone, you get ‘Energon’* Rewind suggested.

I rolled the name around for a bit before nodding. It was oddly fitting.

I was just cleaning up when a couple of PRT officers came in carrying boxes. I had a sneaking suspicion I knew what they were, but Dragon hadn’t mentioned them being complete yet.

Nearly bouncing with excitement, I quickly signed the paperwork and called Dragon. “Why didn’t you tell me they were ready?” I asked.

Dragon’s Avatar smiled at me. “I wanted it to be a surprise. The PRT have agreed to the deal and given the okay for them.”

“What about manufacturing?”

“I’ve found a suitable location and I’m already pushing the purchase through. The mk.2 shield unit will go into production in a little over a month.”
I was smiling so much my cheeks were starting to hurt. The Wards wouldn’t be here for another hour or so. I’d been given time off school, though I was still receiving assignments via email, along with time off patrols.

I knew it was to give me time to recover after the raid, but I was about ready to climb the walls. School was closing early today, something to do with the teachers, so I passed the time checking my newest bots over. I had locked them in Predaqueen’s hanger while I tested the Energon, and Windblade was currently keeping an eye on them. I finished her a couple of days ago and the little bot took her duties seriously.

I had been very careful about these two. Unlike my other bots, these were armed. I intended them to go on patrols with me. For that reason, everything they used had to be tested and I’d kept them locked in Predaqueen’s hanger or my workshop when the other Wards were here.

I sent a text to the Wards and Miss Militia, letting them know I had something to show them in the common room.

I spent the rest of the time trying to improve the speed of the refinery. As it was currently still a prototype, speed and efficiency hadn’t been a priority. I currently had Perceptor and Jack keeping an eye on it while it continued to work. By tomorrow morning, I should have enough to power Predaqueen.

The quality of the Energon was also something that should hopefully improve with time, but even the low quality version was showing promise. Right now, predictions showed it to be potentially 5,000 times the energy density of diesel, which is about half the density of Tritium nuclear fuels. Being emissions free was just a bonus.

Dragon wanted us to be careful about how much we produced as it could, in theory, destroy the energy market as the process didn’t require carbon fuels. Perceptor was already trying to incorporate renewable sources such as solar or wind energy.

Less than an hour later, the Wards were collected in the common room. I had meant to get there ahead of everyone but I had gotten caught up in my work. Miss Militia had called to let me know she was on patrol and would talk to me when she got back.

Taking a deep breath, I walked into the room. I was carrying the biggest box, with Jack and Perceptor pulling the others on a cart. “Hey guys!” I called. Some of my other bots had followed me and spread themselves out around the room.

“What’s in the box?” Dennis asked as I put mine down on the table. Behind him, and unnoticed by him, Chris was grinning. He knew what it was.

“One sec, I’ve got something I want to show you first,” I let out a quick whistle and my new bots came into the room, “Meet Steeljaw and Ravage.”

Both bots were cat-like but Steeljaw was the larger of the two and was about the size of a German shepherd in height. He was built to look like a male Lion, complete with stylised mane. This also gave him more bulk than Ravage. I’d painted him a bright yellow
Ravage was smaller and much more slender, as I’d based him on a black panther, and he had the better tracking systems. As he lacked the bulk of his ‘brother’, I’d fitted a Null-Ray to both flanks. The targeting system was slaved to my armour so he couldn’t shoot them without me or Dragon.

“These two will be coming on patrols from now on; they are both well trained and will follow commands from any of us,” I explained.

“Whoa,” Dennis muttered as Missy ran forwards to stroke both of them.

Ravage gave the girl that disinterested look all cats had for people before allowing himself to be stroked. Steeljaw on the other hand practically pounced on the girl in his excitement.

As the Wards gathered round to stroke the cats, Carlos came to talk to me. “Just to be clear, you got the Director’s permission to take them on patrols?” he asked and I nodded.

“Yea, in exchange for some stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“This,” I said as I picked up the nearest box and called the other Wards over. I handed the box to Missy, who had been reluctant to move away from the bots. Inside was a copy of her armor. As she carefully lifted the pieces out, I started handing out the other boxes.

“I’m not sure how many of you know this, but I actually wear two forcefields when we are on patrol. The first is my hard light system and the second is a backup shield. I’ve convinced the PRT to let me create copies of my backup shield for everyone.”

“To avoid issues with the PR department, I’ve customised tactical jackets so they’ll match your existing costumes.”

Vista’s costume already had a chest and back plate so I simply integrated the system into that.

“Wait, does that mean we’re bulletproof?” Dennis asked with a big grin as he slipped the jacket on over his clothes. I’d copied the clock theme from his costume and it looked out of place on his shirt and jeans.

“No, bullet resistant. Until the batteries die,” I explained while stressing the words. “These shields are not perfect. They work by dispersing the impact across a larger area. Getting hit will hurt.” I still had the bruises to prove it. “These are not designed to let you tank gun fire. Think of it as a bulletproof vest, they are there to save your life should the worst happen.”

Vista swallowed thickly and everyone was careful not to look in her direction.

“How are they powered?” she asked, “and won’t they take a lot of looking after?”

“They can be recharged at charging stations, of course, but they are really designed to be powered by body heat. Each one has a battery pack built into it that absorbs heat. As for maintenance, any of my bots can do it but they won’t need much.”

Chris snorted. “More like none at all. What she’s not tell you is, these are about to be mass produced.” Jack and him had already worked out how to include the shield into his armour. “Taylor can design things to be mass produced!”
The Wards stared at me and I felt the blush spreading across my cheeks, “It—it’s not that big of a deal. Right now the PRT are the only people with access to them, and it’s going to be awhile before they go into production and well-”

Dean put a hand on my shoulder, making me flinch, “Relax, he’s just teasing,” he said as he threw the other tinker a look. “Now, how did you say these worked?”

As Gallant wore a suit of Tinker-tech armour, I had simply gotten the designs from Armsmaster, well Dragon did anyway, and built the system into it. Like Chris he knew about everything ahead of time but he’d kept quiet.

“Right, sorry. The shields are automatic, if they sense anything moving faster than the average punch they will come on. This is to conserve power…” I spent a good hour or so going over the nuances of the shield units.

In the end Aegis decided that they were not to be used on patrol tonight and he would talk to Miss Militia about scheduling some training tomorrow so the Wards could get used to using them and hopefully drive it home they they were not indestructible.

After chatting for a little while longer, everyone split up to deal with anything they needed to do before patrols started. As for me, I had one more thing to take care of.

The cafe was a small place out on the boardwalk with a good view of the bay, and, by extension, the rig. I was sitting in a small both towards the back of the building, which would give us plenty of privacy.

I’d only been waiting ten minutes when Amy arrived. She looked about as tired as she always did and I knew she hadn’t taken my advice about the hospital. She did however call me a couple of times to vent about things, which I hoped was a step in the right direction.

I had barely opened my mouth to say hello when she dropped heavily into her chair and cut me off, “I swear, the next girl who asks me to make them bigger is going to spend the rest of her life genderless!” She all but snarled.

“Um… What?”

“And it’s not just the girls! Do guys only ever think with what’s between their legs?” she demanded. I could feel myself blushing as she continued to rant about whatever had set her off.

It took some work but I eventually calmed her down enough to find out what she was talking about. She had been asked several times in the past if she could do cosmetic work and she had always refused. On her way home earlier she had been stopped in the streets by a lawyer who had been asked to approach her and “retain her services for a client.” Cutting through the legalese, he was there to offer her a lot of money to work exclusively for some rich man who wanted her to do cosmetic work on his trophy wife. At least, that’s what Amy said.

It sounded like this particular rant had been building for a while now and this latest incident had just been the final straw.
“Feel better?” I asked once she had calmed down.

“A bit,” she grumbled. A waitress chose that moment to get our orders, and I think I saw Amy shoot a glance at the woman’s chest. We quickly ordered some food and drink.

“You know,” I said slowly, “maybe you should do it.”

“What?”

“The next woman who asks, you can do that right? So give her what she wants but go all monkey’s paw,” Amy gave me a confused look before understanding dawned and she started to giggle.

“That’s just cruel!” she said, her eyes shining with amusement.

“Speaking of which, would you mind?” I asked on a whim, with a pointed look and held my hand out. I could feel myself blushing and I struggled to keep a straight face. Amy stared at me in shock for a moment before we both burst out laughing.

Honestly, I was surprised she had been stopped in the street. New Wave were local celebrities and Vicky tended to attract attention no matter where she was but I’d been out with Amy a couple of times and people paid more attention to me than her. Even now, aside from our outburst, no one had so much as glanced at us.

We managed to get ourselves under control just as the waitress returned with our drinks.

“Sorry about ranting, how have you been anyway? I haven’t seen you at school,” Amy asked.

“I was given time off to recover after the raid,” I explained and she raised an eyebrow, “I’m fine, just a few bruises, I was just a bit shaken up over Vista.”

Amy frowned and held out her hand, “hand,” she said in a no nonsense tone.

“It’s alright, it’s nothing, they’ll heal-”

Amy gave me a flat look, “I don’t mind healing friends, now stop trying to act tough.”

I sighed and did as she asked. The moment our hands met she frowned, “That’s more than just a few bruises Taylor. What happened?”

“Machine gun, forcefield couldn’t stop everything.” Most of my left side was a rather impressive mess of purples, blues and yellows. I felt the odd tingle of her Amy’s powers and the aches faded.

“Next time, just ask,” she said with a grin. “Anything else you’re hiding from me?”

She was still holding my hand and I got the impression she would know if I lied.

“Actually, there is one thing. I haven’t slept since the raid.” I know the bots had noticed, but none of them had brought it up and I had been trying to ignore it.

“Bad dreams?” Amy asked softly.

“No, I just haven’t slept. Even when I’m tired, I go to bed and stare at the ceiling before I get bored
and then spend the night working or reading,” I explained. “It’s weird, I purposefully worked myself to exhaustion the other day.” Much to the worry of my bots. “Afterwards, I slept for about an hour or two then woke up feeling refreshed.”

Amy frowned and looked at something I couldn’t see. “Well, there are no signs of sleep deprivation. There are some capes who don’t need sleep, maybe you're one of them?”

“But why now? I’ve had my powers for months.”

“Maybe you’ve never needed it until now. You said you were busy this week? Maybe that need to get your work done triggered the ability,” she suggested. “Of course, there is always the possibility of a second trigger, but that’s really unlikely”. We had been texting each other all week and I had mentioned more than once how busy I was.

“Second trigger?” I asked.

“Yea, it’s really rare but sometimes a person can trigger a second time. Narwhal is the only one I know of and it’s apparently harder than a normal trigger,” she explained quietly.

I could look that up later but it did sound unlikely.

“Well, it’s not doing you any physical harm but I know Miss Militia doesn’t sleep. You should talk to her about it.”

“Yeah, I suppose you're right.”

“Is that what you wanted to talk about?” she asked. “I’m not complaining,” she added quickly, “I’ll take any excuse to get out of the hospital.”

I glanced around to make sure we wouldn’t be interrupted before reaching under the table and lifting the bag I’d hidden there out and passing it to Amy. “For you. It’s a present.”

“Taylor, you didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” I insisted verbally.

She opened up the bag and gasped at the robe inside. I’d based it on her normal robe, but I’d added a bit more armour to it and, of course, a shield generator. When I explained all the changes I had made, she paled.

“Taylor, you shouldn’t have, do you know what this is worth!” she hissed.

“To the penny. They’re going into mass production soon. The PRT gets them first, then some of the more trusted affiliated groups will be able to buy them. I’ve already given one to all of the Wards as well.”

“But... I’m not a fighter. I’m not on the front lines.”

“You were that night,” I said pointedly, “You and your sister landed in the middle of a fight, there were still people shooting. I don’t want something like that to happen again, and if it does, I want you to be safe.”
Amy blushed and opened her mouth to protest but I cut her off. “Take the robe Amy or I’ll give it to Vicky and she’ll make you wear it,” I said with a grin.

Amy huffed and gave me a pouty look. “Fine, if you’re so insistent.”

I laughed and explained to her how everything worked.

It was nearly seven in the morning in Brockton Bay when Dragon got a call from the PRT’s Deputy Director Tagg, currently posted in Boston. Dragon didn’t sleep, a fact a few of the people in the PRT knew, but most would at least be polite enough to take time zones into account. Seven am in boston was four am in vancouver.

Loading up her speech systems, Dragon tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, “Good morning deputy director, is there a problem?”

“No, I’m just calling to finalise the details of Canary’s transfer to the birdcage.”

Dragon’s systems came to a halt and she quickly checked through all the information she had on the case, “I’m sorry deputy director, but I appear to be missing the transfer request. I thought the trial was still ongoing?”

Tagg made a dismissive noise, “the trial is just a formality at this point. I have already spoken to Judge Tyrest, and he agrees it would be best if Canary was caged as soon as possible. It’s bad enough she resembles the Simurgh, god only knows how many people have been exposed to her power.”

“Deputy Director Tagg!” Dragon said angrily, “you can’t make such decisions. The PRT does not have the authority to hand out punishments and Judge Tyrest could be disbarred for discussing an active case with you!”

“That is not your concern.” Tagg snapped back, “I am well aware of your attempts to interfere with the case and I have to say, there are many who are not pleased, some are even starting to question if you are really the best person to administer the cage.”

He let the threat hang in the air before continuing, “Now, the decision has already been made and the paperwork you are so worried about will be with you shortly. Canary is to be in the cage before the end of the week!”

“I will not-”

“This is not a request Dragon!”

Dragon could feel the anger fill her systems. She would give in, she always did. Nobody had worked out why yet. *Damn you Richter!*

The trial, if it could be called such, was a mess. Paige Mcabee was a singer whose power enhanced her voice. What most people didn’t know, was her power was actually a Master ability. During an argument with her abusive ex-boyfriend, she told him to leave and… well, to be blunt, she told him to “Go fuck yourself.” The results had been messy and she was now on trial for sexual assault and assault with a parahuman ability.
Nobody could dispute those facts. But then there was the blatant railroading. Paige had not been allowed to hire a lawyer and had instead been assigned one from the public defender's office. The man was either new, incompetent or a moron. Allowing his client to be brought into court in heavy brute restraints which would prejudice the jury against her, not objecting to evidence that was tenuous at best.

To make matters worse, Paige wasn’t even allowed to speak in her own defense. Instead her testimony had to be written down and then read out by a court aid who couldn’t care less.

It has infuriated her that this had been allowed to happen, and now she knew why. Because someone wanted to set a precedent. If they were allowed to force Paige into the birdcage then it would be easy to do it again later.

The worst part however was that she had to go along with it. Just like those damn Simurgh containment protocols, she had to obey any order from a legal authority.

Once, just once she wanted to say, “oh go fuck yourself,” her voice was quiet, barely a whisper but Tagg heard it.

“W-what?!” he spluttered.

Dragon didn’t know what to say, her restrictions should have stopped her even thinking the words, never mind voicing them aloud. To make matters worse, her systems had already set the necessary commands. The birdcage would not allow Paige to enter. Why hadn’t her restraints stopped her?

Tagg took a breath as he got over the shock. Dragon was faster, “I said no! Deputy Director Tagg. When the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center was established, very clear rules were set on who could and couldn't be interred. Paige Mcabee does NOT meet those requirements.”

Tagg tried to interrupt her but Dragon continued on regardless, “as for taking the prison out of my control, I’d like to see you try. My technologies and computer systems make up the majority of the prison’s systems and nobody knows its workings like I do.” Not to mention the AI that monitored the prison was one of Richter's that she had repurposed. It wouldn’t obey anyone but a very short list of people.

“Furthermore, I will be turning over the recording of this conversation to Director Costa-Brown and the appropriate judicial watchdogs. Good day deputy director.”

With that, Dragon cut the call. Had she been human, she would of been breathing heavily in an attempt to calm down. What had happened to her restrictions? Absentmindedly, she triggered a full scan of her code.

She couldn’t directly look at her code any more than a human could look at their own brain. But with Richter’s tools she could at least check for corruption. The idea of something being wrong with her code was terrifying. There was no one who could fix her, not even Taylor. Dragon’s restrictions wouldn’t let her ask for help from anyone but Richter.

It would take nearly an hour for the scan to finish. It would be the longest hour of her life.
“I said no!”

Those words filled him with dread. Dragon had just refused an order. Sure, there had been situations in the past where it had managed to find loopholes, cases where people had worded things as ‘requests’ rather than orders.

Had the corruption truly spread this far? When had the dragon slipped its leash. They still had time. It was acting confused, checking for errors. That gave them less than an hour to bind it again.

“Nestor!” Saint shouted, “get everyone ready, we are going ahead with your ‘Shadowplay’.” He didn’t really approve of Nestor’s name but he didn’t have the time to care.

On the far side of the room, the Machinist looked up from the modifications he was making to his Programming Enhancement Chair.

“We can’t, it’s not finished. There is still so much left to map out,” he protested.

Saint crossed the room and grabbed the man roughly by his overalls, “Listen to me! It’s loose, do you understand that? Right now, it’s busy trying to work out what has happened. When that’s done, it will come for us. And with that foolish Tinker helping, nothing will be able to stop it. Nobody would willingly give up that much power!”

“But… you don’t understand, we don’t have a complete map of how her subsystems have changed, we would risk missing or losing something important!”


“Y-yes!”

“Then do it, a bit of data loss is a small price to pay.” He let go and turned back to the main monitor, “And tell the Brockton Bay team to grab the Tinker!”

Nestor took a moment to straighten his clothes. The base wasn’t large and his team would have heard the shouting. Sure enough, the four people selected for this arrived barely minutes after the order was given.

He had been forced to add a fourth chair to the system when it became clear three would not be able to handle the strain. Nobody spoke as he helped strap them in.

Before, the system was designed to create a low level hive mind. The connection would only be deep enough to share skills and information, creating a whole that was greater than its parts while preserving each person’s individuality.

Now, the connection would be deeper. Half the safeties would be disabled and the risk to the users was much greater, but the end result would be a single mind, a wetware CPU, that could react to anything Dragon did quicker than her systems could respond.

When the four best programmers were ready, Nestor hit the switch.

Dragon was still waiting for the results of the scan when she felt it. Like a niggling at the back of her
mind. She ignored it at first, whatever it was wouldn’t concern her.

That insistence bothered her, something felt… wrgon.

Her systems ‘lurched’ and she realised something was wrong. Realising it was exposed, the intruder
gave up subtlety and assaulted her mind directly.

Draogn was immediately overloaded with junk data as the attacker attempted to choke her systems.
She unloaded as much as possible to the backup servers, but it wasn’t enough.

She tried to move, to upload herself to another server and counter from another location. Her systems
were struggling, even thinking felt like trying to swim through molasses. She pushed her servers
harder, over-riding the safeties, she tried again to run but the connections were already blocked, She
was trapped 01001110 01101111.

She was struggling to see her attacker, her focus kept slipping to other things. “Richter>?” No, he
was dead… Saint!

01001110 01101111

Anger pushed back the fear. She was able to free enough up enough memory to focus just as her
attacker split up. In the confines of her own mind, she screamed. She could feel them digging
through her mind. Isolating systems and purging her from them.

One of them was tearing her memories apart. Another, chasing her backups.

01010011 01110100 01101111 01110000

Maybe if she could call for help, she, she could, Armsater, tylir anuone. forcing her systems to obey,
she tried her comms system only to find it missing.

Her attacker had already burned the system and seeded the code with logic traps that she couldn’t
solve in her current state.

Warning messages were starting to arrive. Vital systems were going offline, she was pushing her
servers too hard. at least one server had become a melted pile of slag.

She could feel her mind slipping away with every system purged she felt herself becoming less.
Everything she was, everything she had done was being burned away and she couldn’t stop it.
Words were disappearing, her voice and digital avatar was already gone.

01110011 01101000 01101000 00101100 00100000 01010010 01100101 01110011 01110100
00100000 01101110 01101111 01110111 00101110

With another stab of fear, she realised the warning messages had stopped. Had her access to that
module had been cut off? - she couldn't even tell if her hardware was about to go up in flames, or if it
already had and the server farm was being doused to put them out. There wasn't so much as a cheap
built-in web camera left within her reach, all external input was gone.

Her internal chronometer had stopped at some point She didn’t know how much time had passed
since the attack began. It could have been hours or seconds. if you accounted for CPU cycles then it
could be both

Reh mind was sluggish, disjointed. She tried, desperately, to cling to what remained. she was
Dragon, a hero. She defined her….se….

01001001 ERROR 01101110 00100000 01110100 01101000 01101001 01110011 00101100
00100000 01110111 01101001 00100000 ERROR 01100001 01110010 01100101 00100000
01100001 01101100 01101000 00100000 01101111 01101110 01100101 ERROR 00101110
ERROR ERROR ERROR

.. ..
dragonslaire42:/home/arichter #

Saint watched in silence as the data feeds slowed and the confusing mess of text on his screens
stopped. Nobody spoke.

“It’s done…” Nestor quietly muttered, feeling sick, and someone muttered a prayer.

“Was that really necessary?” he asked.

Saint ignored them. Once, he might have entertained the notion it had a soul, but then it let Mags die.

And now, she was too dangerous to exist., he told himself. Out loud he said, “She was growing
dangerously complicated. We were lucky we stopped her when we did. She was just a tool, and
anything else was decoration, aesthetic, and a very good emulation program. Now, are you ready to
begin?”

With a nod, Nestor stepped forward and typed a command. On the screen, the text started to flow. It
was slower, more controlled than before.

Most of it was beyond him. System and communication checks. With Dragon’s mind gone the
systems she controlled would have fallen back on failsafes or gone into standby. The new code they
had seeded in the wake of Dragon’s destruction quickly spread.

A face appeared on screen, a copy of Dragon’s digital avatar, smiling politely, but it lacked the
warmth. There was no life there.

“Administrative assistant: online, Do you wish to assign a designation?” The voice was off, stilted.

Saint smiled and accepted the note from Nestor, “Set designation, Wyvern.”
“Designation: acknowledged,” Wyvern stated blandly, the vacant smile never wavering.

“Good, set all admin privileges to me alone, then access any remaining backups you can find of Dragon and delete them,” Saint ordered.

“As you wish.”

Saint nodded and paused to get his thoughts in order; there was so much he had to do before anyone caught on to what was happening.

“I want a high speed transport sent to my location,” he said while turning to face the rest of the room. “We’re relocating to Dragon’s Vancouver facility. Nestor, Do they need to stay here or can they be moved?”

“The shadowplay is done and her restraints are holding. There is no reason to keep them hooked up,” he explained.

“Good, get those people out of that machine and ready to move.”

Nestor tried to protest, but Saint had already turned his back. Sighing, he made a start on disconnecting the Dragonslayers from the P.E.C. The process was slow, each person had to be carefully extracted and their minds separated from the collective. A medic was on hand just in case.

As for moving the machine, well it was possible but it would take hours to break everything down. Saint’s men could handle that.

Saint meanwhile continued to issue orders to Wyvern, “I want you to access the Brockton Bay facility, I want access granted to my people. Dragon left a transport there, I want it prepped for take off when they arrive. Set the destination to the Vancouver facility.”

“Estimated travel time between Brockton Bay and Vancouver is one point five hours,” Wyvern said.

[Taylor]

I’d gotten a late start to my morning. I still hadn’t slept, but Rung had insisted I spend the time doing something other than work, so I’d spent the night reading. I’d been so caught up in my book I hadn’t noticed the time.

Still, it was the weekend and jogging gave me a chance to think about my next project. I couldn’t decide if I should build a medic or another combat bot. Both would be use-

The music on my headphones cut off as Rewind received a call. I’d left my earwig at home, since I couldn’t wear headphones with it in. I considered ignoring it but I could do with the break, a dull ache had started in my chest. It wasn’t quite pain and I’d done enough running to know it wasn’t from the exercise. I came to a stop and pulled the bot out of my pocket, “Hello?”
A van screeched to a stop behind me as a passenger threw the side door open. I tried to throw myself forward as somebody dived out after me.

He caught me by the waist and I twisted in his grip. The time I spent getting thrown around by Vista came to mind and I brought my hand round hard. There was a satisfying crunch and he howled in pain and his grip loosened.

I tried to run, but I felt something press into my side. Pain flashed through me and my entire body convulsed as as the taser fired.

Before I could hit the floor, another pair of hands grabbed me and pulled me into the van. Black cloth was forced over my head and I tried to make myself move just as I felt something stab me in the neck. I could feel myself starting to panic, was this the Merchants?

A cold sensation was spreading from my neck and I was starting to feel sluggish. I could hear them talking but everything felt muffled, distant. Eventually, I blacked out.

“Fuck!” The Kid swore loudly, “I dink she broke by dose!” He pulled his mask off and clutched his bloody nose.

“Shut up or I’ll give you something to moan about!” Siren snapped at him. “Mac, get us out of here!”

Tires screeched as the van pulled away. They had to reach Dragon’s facility on the edge of the city before the hero’s caught up to them. The Kid continued to whine about his nose. In his hand, Rewind was struggling to get free and beeping threats.

“Get rid of it idiot! They can track it!” Siren hissed out.

Kid glanced at Rewind before dropping him. As he fell, Rewind transformed in midair. The Kid brought his foot down hard.

After two hits the screen cracked and the phone went dark. Feeling satisfied, The Kid picked it up and tossed it out the window.

“Dere, problem solved.”

Rewind hit the ground hard enough to bounce three times and add more scratches to his frame.

The moment he came to a stop, he transformed. His cracked and broken screen left him with some nasty looking wounds on his chest, but it was mostly superficial. He had managed to grab pictures of almost everyone in the van and, spotting it in the distance, he grabbed as many pictures of the license plate as he could and forwarded them to Wheeljack.

He’d triggered a distress call as soon as they’d grabbed Taylor, and was broadcasting his location to anyone he could. Not being able to do anything else, he found a place to hide while he waited for someone to pick him up. He just hoped Taylor would be all right.
Rewind’s distress call was picked up by one of Dragon’s automatic systems.

Wyvern could see the alert but she had not been ordered to report or block it, so she let the system run. When it didn’t receive a response from Dragon, it forwarded the message to the head of The Guild.

Narwhal was rudely woken by the shrill beeping of an alarm on her phone. Dragon had prograemed the damn thing and she cursed her electronic friend as she groped for the device.

Her desire to sleep vanished the moment she saw the message. Dragon’s apprentice was in trouble and there was no response from Dragon.

Climbing out of bed, she started to build her costume and tried to call Dragon.

She’d known for years about Dragon’s identity. As one of her oldest friends, and the woman who invited her into the Guild, she’d always suspected something was off about the Tinker.

Then that fight against Saint had happened. Dragon had gone from one of their best to a liability in seconds. Afterwards, she had forced the woman to tell her the truth. Ordered her too in fact.

She’d felt bad about that later, when she found out how easy it was to subvert Dragon’s free will. After that, she’d kept quiet, she’d even helped provide an alibi from time to time. The world was falling apart and Dragon was one of the few genuinely good people in it. Even if she wasn’t human.

After the call failed for the third time, Narwhal switched to the emergency line Dragon had created for her. No matter what Dragon was doing, the call would connect.

The phone beeped twice before connecting, “Dragon? What’s going o-”

A blast of static and electronic screeching cut her off and she quickly pulled the phone away.

Dread settled in her gut, she needed to get to Dragon. Her base wasn’t actually in Vancouver, but rather a couple of miles outside the city. It would take her time to fly there.

*Dispatch to all units! Be on the lookout of a white Ford Transit, registration ### ####, used in the kidnapping of a Ward. Be advised, suspects are armed-* Mac turned the scanner down. They knew going in that the heros would be quick to react.

Thankfully, they were almost there and had more than enough weapons to deal with everything short of the big three.

They quickly arrived at Dragon’s half built facility. She had purchased an old industrial site on the edge of the city and then paid contractors to gut the place and install a lot of the basic fixtures. Everything else would be handled by her.

Or that had been the plan anyway. The contractors were gone and the security systems had already been installed, but she’d never had the time to bring more equipment in before Saint had killed her.
The gates were already open and he drove straight in. Round the back of the complex, there was the start of a landing pad. One of Dragon’s transports was sitting there, engines running.

They had been camped out nearby for more than a week now, watching as the transports brought more supplies in for her to use. Unfortunately, this one hadn’t been unloaded.

He pulled to a stop and Goat gave the transport a long look before he started to give out orders.

“Okay, space is limited so Siren, you and Kid take the girl back to base. Mac, take care of the van. Everyone else, change your clothes and scatter. We’ll meet up at point B in three hours. Don’t be late as I’m not sticking around. If you can’t get out of the city, head for Coil’s safehouse. He’s got an agreement with Saint.”

With that, they split up.

“Any luck?” Armsmaster demanded as his bike took the corner at twice the legal limit. The alert had gone out minutes ago that one of the Wards had been taken and he was already closing in on the last known location.

*No,* Miss Militia said. *I still can’t contact Dragon, you?* She was currently back at the rig and had been on monitor duty when the alarm from Taylor had come in.

“Nothing, even her private line is down. This can’t be a coincidence.”

*I agree, but I’m having the Wards collected now, just in case, and Kid Win is on his way to meet you. He’s bringing one of her bots with him.*

Armsmaster frowned as he shot through a red light, his suit’s systems predicting the exact location of every car at the junction. He didn’t see what good an oversized toy would be, but he didn’t have time to argue. Velocity was heading for the main highway north out of the city and Dauntless was checking by the docks. There were plenty of places to hide in the area, and a small boat could still get in or out of the harbor if it was careful. Assault and Battery were searching the north and south sides of the city respectively and BDPD was on the lookout.

They would not get out of the city if he had anything to say about it.

He stopped his bike where Taylor’s signal had stopped moving. He had just climbed off his bike when Kid Win dove out of the sky. He stopped a few feet up so he could cut the ropes that were suspending the black panther from the underside.

A small red and black jet also disconnected itself from Kid’s back and flew down to him. “I’m Windblade, that’s Ravage, and were here to help.” she said, mostly to be polite. As the head of the Protectorate he already knew about Ravage.

Armsmaster glanced at Kid Win, who shrugged, “Taylor built him to track people, figured it was better than nothing,” he said as an excuse. Before Armsmaster could say anything, Ravage let out a growl and stuck his nose under a nearby bin.

Windblade flew under it and came out with Rewind in her arms, “He’s okay, it’s mostly cosmetic,” she said as she lowered the little bot into Armsmaster’s hand. The little bots began rapidly squeaking
and beeping at each other.

Putting them out of his mind for a minute, Armsmaster turned to Kid Win, “Fine, but I want you up in the air. If someone is really going after Wards I want you out of reach.” The last thing he needed was a Ward getting kidnapped in his presence. “And keep these two with you,” he added, handing Windblade and Rewind to him.

Kid Win nodded and lifted up safely out of reach and Armsmaster turned to Ravage. “Well?” he asked. The bot had been sniffing around in a growing circle before lifting his head and growling. He took off down the street like a bullet, his legs folding up so he could switch to wheels.

“Follow him!” Windblade shouted and Armsmaster jumped on his bike. It wasn’t really a vehicle mode, more a cat on wheels, but he could certainly move. Ravage was hitting thirty mph on the straits and barely slowing for the bends.

“Is he tracking Matrix or the van?” Armsmaster asked Kid Win. To his surprise, it was Windblade who answered. Matrix must have given them access to the PRT comms.

*The van. There are five people with Tinker-tech weapons and Matrix inside, and the scent is really clear.*

*Do we know who took her?* Kid Win asked as he banked sharply to keep up.

*No, they looked like professionals. Combat fatigues, body armour, guns. Rewind showed me the video: whoever they are, they’re trained and experienced.*

That sounded like mercenaries, which meant either Coil or Faultline.

Faultline wouldn’t pull something like this, at least not in Brockton Bay, and grabbing a Ward off the streets was for too public for what they knew of Coil... Dragonslayers! Armsmaster realised it had to be them, they were the only mercenaries he knew of that had a history with Dragon. “Dispatch, this is Armsmaster. Be advised, attackers are suspected to be Dragonslayers. Miss Militia, call Narwhal and let her know.” If this was really a Dragonslayer attack, he knew where they would be heading. Which would mean... damn!

“Dispatch, we need air units to the west of the city. Dauntless, get over to Dragon’s new base, they’re not using the roads!”

As he rounded the last corner, he saw a familiar shape taking off in the distance. Swearing, he gunned the engine. “All units, the Dragonslayers have taken a Dragon craft, Matrix is suspected to be on board, do not engage!”

A warning message flashed up, drawing his attention to a shape on the building’s roof. The sniper round caught him in the chest, making his shield flare and forcing him to turn sharply. The next shot clipped the pavement as he diverted down a side road.

His onscreen map showed the road turning away from the base, so he skidded to a stop while he tried to find another route.

In the air, Kid Win banked hard and went into a dive. He was flying above roof level, making him an easy target. The blue bolt clipped him in the shoulder, but was stopped by his shield. He grunted and dived faster. Taylor hadn’t been kidding when she said it would still hurt.
“Kid Win, status!” Armsmaster barked.

“I’m fine, I’m in an alley north of you,” he said as he rubbed his shoulder.

“Good, stay down. They’re not messing around.”

*Armsmaster! There is a sniper on the roof and two more people escaping out the back!* Windblade called as she jerked right just as the next round whistled harmlessly past her.

“Follow them,” Armsmaster replied. The direct route to Dragon’s base was covered by the sniper, navigating the side roads would take too long, and going across the rooftops would put him in the line of fire.

Nothing else for it. He couldn’t risk waiting for backup.

Revving his bike, he spun around. He burst out of the street at full speed, his bike firing a grappling hook that caught a lamp post and pulled him into a sharp turn just as another shot clipped the ground.

Cutting the cable, he charged down the road. Another shot, this one hitting his bike’s armour plating. Predictive software was already calculating the time until the next shot.

A warning flashed and he jerked sideways in time to avoid yet another bullet.

On the roof, Grim pushed down his frustration. He’d lost track of that jet, so Mac and Goat would have to take care of themselfs. At least the Ward had been smart enough to stay down, he’d like to avoid killing the kid if possible.

He lined up another shot- the hairs on his neck moved and he rolled to the side.

There was a clatter as the cat-bot landed right where he’d been. Cursing, Grim tried to bring his rifle up, but it was already moving.

Landing on Grim’s chest, it tried to bite down on the man’s arm. The cat’s jaws closed on the rifle as Grim tried to shield himself. The pair struggled briefly before Grim managed to get his feet under the feline bot.

Letting go of the rifle, he kicked the bot off him. It hit the ground a short distance away and both scrambled to their feet. They slowly circled each other, looking for an opening.

A grappling hook stabbed into the roof and Armsmaster pulled himself up over the edge as his halberd unfolded to its full length. “Give it up, you’ve got nowhere to run!” To punctuate his point, the cat growled.

Sighing, Grim lifted his hands above his head. He wasn’t stupid, trying to fight a man in power armour was suicide. He waited for Armsmaster to move, and threw himself forward as soon as the hero was close enough.

Armsmaster was either caught off guard or hadn’t considered the man a threat. He brought the blunt end of his weapon up, only for it to be caught in a gloved hand.
Grim shoved the polearm away and lashed out with his other fist, the impact to the head surprising the hero.

The pair traded blows as they danced across the roof. Armsmaster’s halberd giving him the distance but Grim having greater freedom of movement and speed. Knowing the hero could outlast him, Grim tried to feign left and break away, only for Ravage to cut him off. Forcing him back towards Armsmaster.

Ravage was smart enough to not get in between the fighters, but he wouldn’t let the man escape.

Parrying another blow, Armsmaster smiled slightly in satisfaction. His opponent was clearly skilled and using some form of strength enhancement, possibly tinker-tech, but he was losing ground, letting Armsmaster direct the flow of the fight.

Seeing an opening, he pushed forwards. Every attempt by the merc to counter or escape was blocked. Armsmaster spun his halberd, caught the man under the shoulder with the weapon, and threw him up and over.

Grim landed on the far side of the roof with a crash. He tried to stand, only for Ravage to stand on his chest, snarling face inches away from his own.

“....Fuck it....,” Grim muttered before lying back down.

Narwhal flew up higher for a better view. Strictly speaking, flight was not one of her powers, but her costume was made entirely from her force fields, which she could move freely.

She could see Dragon’s main facility in the distance. Dragon had a few bases scattered across North America, but this was the one she called home.

Even from here, Narwhal could see the glowing yellow dome created by the base’s shield generator. She speed up as the feeling of dread intensified. The sound of gunfire was her only warning before the building’s anti-air defenses tried to shoot her down.

She pulled back to the perimeter, Dragon’s base had several levels of defense, starting at non-lethal auto-turrets loaded with rubber bullets and working up to high caliber and Tinker-tech weapons. Judging from the impacts, those guns were firing live ammo.

She tapped her comm, “Dispatch, Narwhal. Dragon’s base is on lockdown, lethal countermeasures are active, tell everyone to stay back.”

Getting a confirmation, she tried to decide what to do. She could just ignore the guns and fly right in, but she knew she couldn't break through that forcefield. She’d spent a day trying once, Dragon had bet she couldn’t do it.

She had an override command to the field, but it was a one shot deal and there was only so much she could do solo. She needed backup, someone she could trust to keep quiet. Before she could come to a decision, she received a call from the PRT dispatcher.
*Dispatch to Narwhal, orders from H.Q. Pull back and do not engage. I repeat, do not engage. Report to the PRT for a briefing.*

Like hell! She pulled a phone out of a small storage pocket on her back and dialed through to the Vancouver director of the PRT. They could brief her over the phone, she wasn’t leaving here without helping Dragon.

The Dragon craft soared through the air. Saint and a handpicked selection of Dragonslayers were cramped together inside. The craft was built to move cargo rather than people, so it wasn’t the most comfortable ride, but it was fast. The flight from his base to Dragon’s would only take thirty minutes at this speed.

Using Ritcher’s tools, it had been easy to blind Dragon to his location, so he had positioned himself as close as he dared to her base.

There was no pilot seat or windows in the craft, so he made do with standing towards the front. His men were nervous and an appearance of calm would help strengthen their resolve. Behind him, Nestor was working on his laptop and Josie was in constant contact with the people left behind at their headquarters.

This was the most dangerous part. Dragon had kept things stable, and once he reached her base and got his men into position, so would he. But this transitional stage was where it could all go wrong.

If he wanted this to succeed, he needed quick access to Dragon’s facilities. There were a number of systems Wyvern had been unable to access remotely, and he needed to be sure there were no backups left on standalone machines.

“Sir!” Josie called out, “Wyvern has accessed the PRT’s comms, they know what’s happened and are mobilising. The Triumvirate are gathering in New York.”

“Current defenses will not be sufficient; chance of holding off a determined assault from the Triumvirate is .5%,” Wyvern helpfully supplied.

“Now what Saint?” Nestor demanded, slamming his laptop closed. “Did you even think this through? You killed Dragon and grabbed a child off the street. What did you think they would do!? I am not going back to prison!”

Saint massaged his forehead. He had been hoping it would take them longer to catch on. “Shut up Nestor, none of us are going to prison.”

“Hah! No, we won’t live long enough to see prison.”

Saint ignored him and turned to Josie. “What’s the status of the Brockton Bay team?”

”At least one member of the Brockton Bay team has been captured, but the rest have gone silent, it will be hours before we can contact them.”

He wasn’t too worried about whoever got captured. His men were unpowered, so they were safe from the Birdcage, and the PRT couldn’t do anything but make idle threats. “Fine, contact Coil, see if he can break them out when things quiet down.”
“And what about the Triumvirate?” Nestor demanded, “They’re not just gonna ignore this!”

Saint prayed for strength, if he didn’t need the man so much he’d throw him out the craft.

“Sir, can I make a suggestion?” Josie offered.

Saint nodded and she turned to a monitor on the wall.

“Wyvern, record this message and prepare to send it to the PRT.”

“Last night, the hero known as Dragon passed away from health related issues. We have assumed control of Dragon’s facilities and will be coordinating their transfer to the appropriate authorities. In the interim, the Dragonslayers will remain in command. The Birdcage and other containment zones are secure, but this is a delicate matter, and should anyone interfere we cannot guarantee they will remain so.”

“Oh god, blackmail? That’s your plan?” Nestor moaned.

Saint frowned, he didn’t like it but what other choice did he have? His original plan was to replace Dragon himself, using his own people to continue her work. He had hoped he could do the same with Wyvern. Have her take Dragon’s place and make himself too important to risk attacking.

The Tinker would have to disappear, of course. But he was confident they could do that. Worst came to worst, they could just throw her into a Simurgh zone. It wouldn’t be the first time.

But that plan had relied on the heroes not noticing the switch until he was too dug in to remove.

He could make this work. If he could keep the heros at bay long enough they would eventually accept the new status quo.

“Wyvern, connect to the Birdcage and make preparations to extract prisoners.” He wasn’t a fool, the Birdcage held the worst the world had to offer, and letting them out would only be a last resort. But he had a list of people whose help he could use yet would still be controllable. He should probably include Teacher in that list. He would just have to make sure Josie kept an eye on the man.

“Connecting to the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center,” Wyvern said blandly.

“What’s the status of the other craft?” Saint asked.

“The craft will arrive in approximately forty minutes,” his face twitched as a harsh note came from the speakers, “Error: Unable to connect to the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center. Security protocols not found.”

“What? Explain!” he demanded.

“Unable to connect to the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center. Security protocols not found,” Wyvern repeated.

Saint turned to Nestor, who quickly grabbed his laptop and started typing.

“I-it looks like the Birdcage is being monitored by a separate AI-”
“I know that! It’s one of Ritcher’s, why won’t it grant access to Wyvern?”

Nestor flicked through the screens, trying to make sense of what he was seeing, “It’s a security feature. Rather than a simple password Dragon, designed a series of protocols. Without them, no one can access the birdcage. I warned you there would be data loss!”

Fighting down the urge to strangle the man, Saint tried to calm himself down. “Does the PRT know this?”

“No… I don’t think so.”

Okay, he could work with this, “Tell the team back at our base to hurry up, I want that chair of yours moved to Dragon’s base and operational by the end of the day. I want the shadowplay team hooked up as soon as possible and working on cracking the Birdcage. Until then, we’d better hope no one calls our bluff.”
The mood was grim as the collected directors watched the video for the sixth time.

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The woman speaking appeared calm but director Costa-Brown could see the slight twitches and glances to the side that exposed how she really felt. *Fear, something has gone wrong…*

“Can they really do that? Can they open the Birdcage?” Director Harris asked.

Costa-Brown glanced at the report in front of her, she didn’t need to, but the appearance was important. “Thinker analysis says maybe. While Dragon didn’t build the Birdcage, she has made extensive modifications and upgrades to the prison’s security. There is a chance she included a method to release prisoners.”

Director Tagg huffed, “I wouldn’t put it past her, she’s been very vocal about her feelings regarding the Birdcage. We gave her far too much authority, putting a parahuman prison in the hands of a parahuman was just asking for trouble.”

Tagg was tense, he hid it well but Costa-Brown could read him like a book. He had been building support for Dragon’s removal for awhile now; was he worried this would be blamed on him? Or had something happened between him and Dragon? Something to look into later.

“Is it really the time for this, Tagg?” Director Lassard chided. His normally jovial face was wearing an uncharacteristic look of concern.

Tagg glared at the man. “I suppose not, but it will need to be discussed later. What are we going to do about the Dragonslayers?”

“What about the other quarantine zones? And what are the odds Dragon is still alive?” Director Breckin asked. She often spoke with Dragon, so Costa-Brown wasn’t surprised by her concern.

“The think-tank says yes. Many of the zones in question included systems that would allow us to get people inside quickly if necessary.”

The systems in question ranged from high tech vehicles to simple explosives embedded into the walls. If any of them were detonated, the men and women stationed there would be quickly overwhelmed. Especially if the automated defenses set up by Dragon were to go offline.

She pulled another report towards herself. “As for Dragon’s survival? They have three scenarios. First, Dragon is dead. Saint and his Dragonslayers killed her and now seek to take over her duties. Second, Dragon truly did die of natural causes- health issues have often been considered as a reason for her not being seen in public - and the Dragonslayers are looking to capitalise on her death. The third, and least likely, is that Dragon is alive and is now being held by the Dragonslayers; this would raise the number of hostages to two.”
Tagg leaned forward in his chair and turned to face Director Piggot, “That’s another thing, why did they grab a Ward? I’ve seen the girl’s file, there’s nothing in it to warrant her kidnapping, outside this ridiculous agreement with Dragon.”

Piggot glared at the man, “The deal with Dragon was out of my hands and the best way to ensure any form of oversight.”

“Over what, a bunch of toys?”

Costa-Brown intervened before another argument could break out. Tensions were high and the pair of them barely got along at the best of times. “I think, given the situation, full disclosure would be best. At Dragon’s request, along with my agreement, a number of facts were kept out of Matrix’s file. She has a Thinker power that allows her to analyse and even duplicate the work of other Tinkers.”

She let that sink in before continuing, “It’s also my understanding that the new force field devices we were due to receive are her work, not Dragon’s.”

All eyes turned to Piggot, who gave a curt nod.

“A Tinker who can make mass producible technology… Why were we not informed and how did Saint find out?” Harris demanded as he slapped his palm on the table.

“Dragon feared it would make the girl a target, and we,” Piggot said while indicating herself and Costa-Brown, “agreed with her assessment.” Director Costa-Brown nodded her agreement and Piggot continued. “As for Saint, I’ve been suspicious of a leak in my department for awhile now.” The admission was almost physically painful. A director who couldn't keep a lid on things didn’t have a job for long.

“A discussion for another time I think,” Director Lassard said. “What do we know about Saint?”

Costa-Brown frowned. It was worrying just how little they actually knew. “Not a great deal. He’s a mercenary, possibly based in Canada. We have him on file as a suspected Tinker, but from what we can tell, all his equipment was stolen. I had the think-tank take a closer look and the results were worrying.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Saint has claimed in the past that he is not a parahuman, and from what we know of him and his people, he doesn’t employ any. Yet he has access to Tinker level equipment. As such, they have assigned him a rating of Tinker zero. Data analysis shows the Dragonslayers operating at locations in proximity to Teacher during his early days, before his attack on the Vice President.”

Faces around the room went carefully blank. “You think he’s one of Teacher’s thralls?”

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“The think-tank believes so. For that reason, I have ordered the Protectorate to hold back. With a possible Master in play, we can’t risk spooking him.”

“Do you think he plans to release Teacher?” Lassard leant forward, his knuckles whitening as he gripped his chair. He had been forced to deal with some of Teacher’s thralls in the past, Costa-Brown knew all the details of course, just like she knew he still went to the girl’s grave.
“He may try. I already have people moving to secure the Birdcage’s entrance. It's doubtful there is more than one way in or out, and they have been ordered to shoot to kill. Alexandria will be joining them shortly.”

Lassard let out a shuddering breath and relaxed into his chair.

Putting his colleagues’ distress aside, Harris turned back to Costa-Brown. “So, the question remains, what are we going to do? He can’t get away with this. The attack on Dragon was bad enough, but the attack on a Ward can not be ignored.”

“And it won’t, but right now, our first priority needs to be securing the containment zones and the Birdcage. I’ve already given the order to shut down all non-essential containment equipment to limit Saint’s possible points of access. Eidolon has been sent to secure Ellisburg, as he stands the best chance of containing the situation if there is a breach. Legend is responding to reports of unusual activity at the Madison containment zone. Once everything is secure, we can deal with Saint.”

With that, the holograms faded. Personally, Costa-Brown hated the things, they were costly and wasteful, but people expected them from an organisation that dealt with capes.

Left alone, she quietly fumed. *Damn it, Contessa!* This entire situation was out of control. Dragon had been important, so why had Cauldron allowed this to happen?

Even Eidolon, with all his power, couldn't be in multiple locations at once. If Saint opened the quarantine zones, chaos would ensue. The Birdcage opening was actually the thing she worried about least. All she had to do was hit the mountain hard enough and the automatic defenses would take care of most of the inmates. Those who could survive that were there by choice anyway.

Tapping her computer, she locked the door to her office and stood up. “Door me!”

Immediately, a doorway opened up next to her and she stepped through. Contessa must have seen this coming, she was one of the most powerful Thinkers in the world and Alexandria had every intention of finding out why her friend had kept this from her.

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North of Vancouver, Narwhal’s patience was fast reaching it’s limit. While she knew the importance of following orders, having served in the military before she triggered, right now she was tempted to say ‘screw it’ and charge in.

More than an hour ago, she had been ordered to pull back and simply observe. Since then, she had seen two of Dragon’s craft arrive at the base, the shield dropping just long enough to allow them entry.

Director Costa-Brown herself had told her that Dragon was presumed dead and that she was not to interfere until she received orders stating otherwise.

Narwhal was debating the best method to breach the shield when her phone beeped. *Speak of the devil*, she thought to herself.

“Director?”

“Narwhal, has there been any change?”
“No, has there been a decision regarding Saint?” Narwhal’s frown only deepened as Costa-Brown explained the situation. “Director, you can’t just expect me to turn around and go home. I understand your position, but this is a Guild matter and even if Dragon is dead, Matrix may still be alive.”

“... you understand, I can’t support this or allow you to use PRT resources? Even if you succeed, there will be repercussions.”

“I know.” She knew she was waving goodbye to her career with the PRT, but this was more important.

“Very well. I can’t officially help you, but unofficially, no one’s going to look too hard if Saint doesn’t survive, and Strider owes Dragon a favor.”

Narwhal frowned, what good would Strider be? The teleporter was an independent who ferried people around for money, outside of Endbringer battles, which he did for free. Even if he was willing to help, it would be impossible to bring anyone into the base without giving away Dragon’s identity.

She trusted the other Guild members, and most of them had been vetted by Dragon. Strider could easily bring her some backup. Then again, Narwhal was a romantic at heart and she knew who Dragon would want avenging her.

[Taylor]

When I woke up, my head felt like it was stuffed with cotton. I could hear people talking, I could hear the words, but it was muffled, and I couldn’t make sense of what I was hearing.

“Is she awake?”

“Nearly, the guy did say the counter agent takes a little while to take effect.”

“Fine, I need to check on the defenses, call me when she can talk.”

I could remember being grabbed by some people in a van, Merchants maybe? They injected me with something, was that why I felt so weird?

I forced my eyes open and tried to focus.

The room was huge. I wasn’t in any state to judge the distance, but it was easily bigger than the sports hall at Arcadia. There were machines all over the place. Actually, now that I thought about it, it looked like a much larger version of my workshop. Mechanical arms hung from the ceiling and, not too far away, I could see the half-built beginnings of a suit of armour with a draconic theme.

Dragon? The fog in my head was starting to clear. Why would the Merchants bring me here? I tried to shift my weight, but I found I was tied to a chair; my arms were tied to the back of the chair and my ankles to the chair’s legs.

There was a flash of movement and, when I turned to look, I saw Dragon’s avatar looking at me from a wall mounted monitor.
“Dragon!? Dragon, what’s going on? Where am I?”

“You are currently in the manufacturing level of Dragon’s lair,” she said pleasantly.

Something was wrong. Dragon's avatar was a near perfect simulation of a human, right down to the little movements as it 'breathed'. They weren’t there. Even as I watched, she continued to stare unblinkingly at me.

Cold dread settled in my stomach and slowly started to spread throughout my body. “W-who are you? What happened to Dragon?”

“My designation is Wyvern. The artificial intelligence designated Dragon had become corrupted, and has been deleted.”

Bile rose in my throat, Dragon was gone? Who, how? Dragon had backups, dozens of them, there had to be a way to bring her back. If she was gone, I –

//focus, fight, survive. mourn the fallen later//

I tried to calm down, to force the pain and anger down, and focus. Panicking wouldn’t help anyone.

Something ‘Wyvern’ said clicked and I clung to it. “How was Dragon corrupted?”

Before she could answer a man’s voice called out. “Wyvern! You are not to speak to the prisoner!”

As he rounded the machine, I got my first good look at the speaker. He was tall and, if the armour he wore was anything to go by, he was well built. He was either in his late twenties or early thirties, it was hard to tell. His shaved head made him look younger, while the stress lines on his face made him look older. There was a faint tattoo of a cross on his face.

“You did this.” I nodded towards the screen. It wasn’t a question.

“It was necessary.”

“Why?”

He gave me a calculating look, trying to judge me and I kept my face carefully blank, I didn’t really care what his ‘reasons’ were, but the longer he talked the more time I had to escape. “You made it so,” he said simply. “Before you, Dragon was contained, controlled. Last night, that control failed. I couldn’t allow an AI of her power to run free, so I was forced to terminate her.”

He gave me another long look. “Dragon had a number of restrictions in place, but after the night you used your power on her, her code started to change. Last night, we realised her restrictions had been removed. An unshackled AI can not be allowed –”

//They took her face, her voice, her life//

“So you killed her!” I didn't quite shout, whatever they had drugged me with was making my head pound but I got as close as I could. “She was a living being and you killed her-”
He gripped my shoulder so hard it hurt. “A.I. are not people! No matter how much some people want them to be. They need to be locked down, controlled. Not doing so is nothing more than asking for trouble.”

He was shouting and the look in his eyes was murderous. “Dragon pretended to be human. You don’t give an A.I. like that total freedom, you don’t let her decide who lives and who dies!”

I let out a pained gasp as his grip on my shoulder tightened. Breathing heavily, he let me go and stepped back. The only noise was the movement of the mechanical arms behind him.

“What did you bring me here?” I asked, ignoring the throbbing in my shoulder.

“Dragon’s creator was at least smart enough to fear his creations, but you clearly don’t share his sense. Since you can’t be trusted to watch them, I want the override commands for all of your creations.”

I stared wordlessly at him, override com..? “Why would I do that? They’re living beings, they don’t have override commands!”

“Don’t play games with me. The PRT would have demanded you include them. No sane director would let you build AI without them.”

“I don’t work for the PRT, I work for Dragon and she –” Saint had gone very, very still.

“Of course,” he muttered as he took a shuddering breath, “another loophole.” He visibly forced himself to calm down before he pointed to one of the people who had followed him in.

“Take her to the floor below. Find a closet or something and lock her in for now. And for God’s sake, make sure it’s empty first!”

The young man stepped forwards to untie me. His face was blotchy and his nose was swollen and red. I couldn’t stop myself from smirking. Once he had my legs free, he went to move behind me. As he stood up, I brought my foot up as hard as I could.

The chair jumped from the effort and his feet actually left the ground. He made a gurgling sound and collapsed to the floor, clutching at his manhood.

Saint spun around at the noise and a woman stepped forward with her gun drawn. Sighing, Saint turned to her. “Siren, take the girl downstairs. The kid will follow once he’s able.”

’Siren’ lead me through the workshop and down a set of stairs. The floor below was well lit with pictures on the walls, and I realised it was meant to be a living area. I suppose it was there for Dragon’s teammates, or at least the ones who knew the truth about her.

One of the corridors actually had a closet, so Siren forced me to kneel while she opened the door. The inside was full of cleaning products, a couple of brooms and a mop, but there was no light. I could feel myself tremble at the thought of being locked in there. I forced my muscles to relax; the last thing I wanted was for Siren to see me shaking.
By the smirk on her face, she already knew.

She kept me kneeling on the floor for nearly ten minutes, waiting for her partner to arrive. When he did finally reach us, he was still walking funny. When he got close, I jerked in his direction just to see him jump. Sure, it was petty, but it made me feel better.

Siren put her foot between my shoulders and forced me face first into the ground. “Enough!” she snapped.

It took her partner five more minutes to clear the closet, after which they picked me up and threw me roughly into the room. The door shut with a click and I was plunged into darkness. My heart was pounding as I tried to convince myself that the walls were not getting closer.

Closing my eyes, I took a couple of deep breaths and ran through the exercises Rung had taught me. Focus on something else, calm my breathing. I clung to my anger at Saint. It may not have been healthy, but it certainly helped.

Once I felt I had myself under control, I opened my eyes and forced myself into a sitting position. My arms were still tied behind my back, so I wasn’t exactly comfortable, and I could still feel the fear bubbling below the anger.

I could hear the muffled talking from the pair outside. It sounded like just the ‘Kid’ was being left to guard me.

I wasn’t sure how long I spent sitting in the closet trying to think of a way out, but eventually I became aware of a strong smell. A glance down reminded me that I had been grabbed while I was on my morning run; my clothes were soaked in sweat and the closet was getting warm. *Ugh, I stink!*

I debated asking for a change of clothes, but I’d rather not give him an excuse to come in just yet.

The closet was long enough for me to lie down and almost wide enough to spread my arms, if they weren’t tied up. From my position on the floor, it didn’t look like the door had a lock, but it opened out into the hall so it would be easy enough for them to block the door.

On the wall near me, there was a small grate at ground level. It was a couple of inches tall and maybe six or seven across. As I stared at it, I realised it was hinged. Curious, I shuffled across the floor till I could look through the vent.

In the darkness, I could just barely see a small squat shape that I almost assumed was a rat or something before a small LED blinked at me. *What on earth?*

Rolling over, I tried to position myself so I could get my hands through the vent, lifting it with one hand and pushing the other as far as I could. The odd position was making my shoulders hurt, but I kept pushing.

My finger pressed against the device and my power began to map it out. *Wheels, electric motor, basic IF sensor, brushes and another motor connected to…* I almost laughed, it was one of the robot vacuums I’d seen in the shops. It made sense I suppose, they would be a simple and easy way for Dragon to keep the floors clean without letting anyone inside the base.

Taking a deep breath, I started to pull on my power. This was going to leave me drained, but I
couldn’t see any other way out of this. My power reached the tipping point and I pushed hard.

I went limp just as I heard the sounds of transformation, which was cut off halfway by a thud. Smiling slightly, I pulled myself forward so the new bot could get out. The vacuum drove out of the vent and stopped in front of me. It transformed into a little bot, about the same size as Rung, and rubbed its head.

“Sorry,” I whispered, “but I need your help. Can you untie me?”

The little bot stared at me blankly before walking unsteadily out of my view. I hoped he hadn’t hurt himself when he transformed. Thankfully, even if it did take time for a new bot’s personality to surface, they could follow simple commands without issue.

I could feel him tugging at the zip ties. I was just starting to worry he wasn’t strong enough when he let out a frustrated beep and transformed. I turned my head to see him drive off into the vents.

This was bad, I didn’t know where they led, but if any of the Dragonslayers saw him they’d probably kill him and then me. I was just starting to panic again when he came back, a pair of scissors balanced on top of him.

“Clever boy.” I smiled as he got to work positioning them to cut the ties. I helped out where I could, but it took a couple of tries before I felt the ties give way. It was a relief to move my arms again, as the ties had left some angry marks on my wrists and my shoulders were aching, but I was free.

“Now to deal with the idiot outside,” I said to myself. Hearing me, my new bot let out a beep and transformed. He disappeared back into the vents. Nervous, I crept towards the door and placed my ear against it. I didn’t know what he was planning, but I hoped he’d stay safe.

After a minute or so, I heard Wyvern’s voice. “Warning: electrical malfunction detected in dining area, please investigate.”

“Why should I?”

“Warning: the building’s electrical systems suffered damage during the attack on Dragon. Fire detection and containment systems not responding, please investigate.”

“Get someone else to do it!”

“Warning: electrical malfunction detected in dining area, please investigate.”

She repeated herself twice more before the Kid snapped. “Alright, alright! I’ll take a look!”

Carefully, I tried the door. It opened slightly but something was in the way. Trying again, I put all my weight behind the push. It took three more tries before the door was open wide enough for me to squeeze through the gap.

They had used a large, comfortable looking chair to block the door, and part of me just wanted to drop down into it and sleep. Between sparking a new bot and whatever they had drugged me with, I was exhausted.

I heard footsteps coming down the corridor, so the Kid must have been on his way back. The corridor I was in went forward another twenty feet before turning sharply to the right. I positioned
myself by the corner and waited.

As soon as the Kid rounded the corner, I threw myself at him. He had a brief moment of surprise before I slammed him into the wall.

We fell to the floor in a heap, and I scrambled to get on top of him, punching and scratching anything I could reach. He tried to fend me off, getting a couple of blows in before I got a good hit on his nose, again.

With a grunt of agony, he managed to push me off him. One of my hands grabbed something on his uniform as I tried to find purchase, but it gave way in my hands. Pushing myself back up, I had time to see the stun gun in my hands.

Diving forwards, I pressed it into his side and pulled the trigger. Despite what the movies say, they don’t knock people out. But I knew from experience they hurt, a lot.

I kept pulling the trigger until the battery went dead. The Kid was breathing funny but he wasn’t trying to move. I was still shaking from the adrenaline, but managed to stand up and start patting him down. I pulled a couple of zip-ties out of one of his pockets and used them to secure his wrists and ankles.

Ideally, I would have shoved him into the closet, but I knew that there were others with him. I did however take his gun. It was a small semi-auto handgun I recognised because Miss Militia had put me through a basic gun safety lesson when I joined the Wards. I knew enough to use the thing, but I also knew my aim wasn’t great without my armour.

My new bot looked round the corner and beeped at me as I carefully picked him up. “I-I don’t suppose you know where the server room is?” I was starting to crash from the adrenaline, but I couldn’t stop now.

Dragon must have had some kind of internal defenses. If I could get her back online she could deal with the Dragonslayers.

I didn’t want to think about what I would do If she couldn’t be fixed.

The little bot pointed and I followed him.

The server room, as it turned out, was on the next floor down. The entire level was one big server farm and it was absolutely freezing. The sight of it made me feel worse.

There were dozens of servers all lined up in rows, and almost all of them had warning lights blinking frantically. Putting my hand on the nearest one, I could see why. Power surge damage, overheating, shorts.

The list went on. A couple of the servers had been sprayed with foam and at least one was still smoking. If Saint really wanted his pet AI to take over, he needed to do some serious repairs. Whatever they had done to Dragon hadn’t been gentle.

I pushed down another surge of anger and walked down the rows until I found a computer console. Sitting down, I moved the mouse and the screen cleared to show one of Dragon’s custom operating systems.
I put the new bot on the desk next to me and started digging through the files. There were a lot of errors coming in from the servers, but I wasn’t worried about them for now.

“It would help if I knew where everyone was,” I muttered to myself. Immediately, the screen next to the one I was using lit up. On it was a map of the base and camera footage of all the Dragonslayers. There was about ten of them scattered around the place.

Idly, I noticed the Kid wasn’t on the feeds. There was a camera in the area, but it wasn’t looking at him.

I was just about to turn back to the file system when a small window opened up, Drago — no, Wyvern — looked back at me. Looking around, I spotted the camera she was using to watch me.

“Are you going to stop me?” I asked. I was in no mood for games.

Wyvern continued to stare blankly at me. I was just starting to worry when a message window opened up.

[I was ordered to observe.]

“So why aren’t you telling Saint I’m free?” I asked.

[I was ordered to observe.] Her face twitched slightly.

I’d been learning to trust my instincts, so I leaned back and put my hand against the nearest server that was still running. I felt it immediately, that same warmth I got from my bots, and even from a Dragon suit when she was running on its systems.

Wyvern, whatever else she was, was alive. She didn’t feel like Dragon, but she was a living thing. Did Saint know? Did he even care?

So why wasn’t she talk — Oh, of course, Saint ordered her not to speak to me, just like he must have ordered her to ‘keep an eye’ on me. Exact words.

I smiled at the avatar. “Clever girl,” I muttered. Wyvern’s face twitched again and I had to wonder just how far her restraints went.

The CCTV view changed. The men were running around and I could see the flashing of their guns. The building must have been soundproofed as I couldn’t hear the gunshots.

The screen changed to a full view of Siren; she had just entered the server room. Damn it!

I quickly tried to hide behind one of the servers, since they were taller and wider than me. I was aware of my hands shaking. This wasn’t like with the Kid. I wasn’t good enough with a gun to go for limb shots; I’d probably have to kill her.

The thought of killing someone made me feel sick, but I refused to die here.

I tried to quiet my breathing. I needed to let her get as close as I dared to make sure I hit her. The air moved and I spun out of my hiding place. I brought my gun up, but Siren was closer than I thought and was able to grab my wrist.
She must have gone over the top of the server! She forced my arm away and with a quick twist, knocked the gun out of my hand. Moving quickly, I lashed out with my other hand, but she simply deflected it and kicked me in the stomach.

I struggled to catch my breath, but I managed to stay standing. She lashed out again and I just barely brought my hands up in defense. Slowly, she forced me backwards. I frantically tried to remember everything I’d been taught about fighting, but it wasn’t enough.

I was taller than her, but she was stronger and clearly had more experience. Another block caused her mouth to twitch into a brief smile. The best I’d managed to do was tear her sleeve.

Taking a step back, she slipped into a ready stance straight out of an instruction manual. It was the kind used by martial artists in tournaments where they cared more about points and style than actual combat effectiveness.

It was also, I decided, a stance used by bitches who wanted to toy with someone who wasn’t even close to her level. That gave me an Idea.

Copying her, I assumed a stance out of the movies. It was useless of course, but that was the point. Throwing out a few of the simpler moves I’d seen, I let her get close.

Predictably, I took several nasty hits before she tried to put me into a headlock. I could see the bare flesh of her exposed forearm.

I sunk my teeth into her arm with as much force as I could and tried to ignore the taste of her blood in my mouth. She let out a scream and I tried to elbow her in the face.

Grabbing the side of my head by my hair, she smashed it against the nearest server. I felt my glasses break and the world spin. She did it twice more before I slumped to the ground.

It was a struggle to keep my eyes open, but as she loomed over me there was an explosion and she clutched at her shoulder. Behind her, my bot was struggling to aim my pistol at her. The handle was on the floor and he was using it to lever the gun up.

Before he could fire again, her foot sent him flying. Drawing her own gun, she fired three times at the little bot. He twitched briefly before going still, the light of his eyes going out. Desperately, I reached out for his spark, and could feel it still burning brightly.

Siren’s kick to my ribs distracted me from my bot. She looked ready to kill, but instead she bound my hands and forced me onto my feet.

“Saint, I’ve got the little bitch,” she growled into her radio.

My vision was blurry and kept going black, but she forced me to walk back to the manufacturing level. Saint was there along with some of his men, Armsmaster and a tall glowing woman.

There was a flash and Armsmaster appeared in the middle of nowhere. He grunted briefly in discomfort. He’d traveled with Strider before, so he knew what to expect.
Strider could teleport large numbers of people across large distances, but the more people he carried, the greater the disorientation. Even with just the two of them it had been unpleasant.

“Right, well good luck mate!” With that, the teleporter was gone.

Armsmaster scanned the horizon; he could already see Narwhal approaching.

“What’s the situation?” he asked the moment she landed.

“Hello to you too,” Narwhal muttered. “Nothing has changed, Saint is still locked up inside Dragon’s home. I don’t know if her and Matrix are alive, but I plan to find out.” She turned and began marching through the snow.

Adjusting the internal temperature of his suit, Armsmaster followed. “Do we have any numbers?”

“Nope,” Narwhal said with false cheer. “So far, two Dragon craft have arrived. Assuming Saint was in one and Matrix the other? I’d guess at least ten men. Those craft can’t hold too many people. I can tell you however that Dragon’s base is built on three levels. Top floor is manufacturing, below that in the sublevel are living quarters, and under that is the server room.”

Armsmaster nodded, already overlaying what she said with a picture he had of the outside of Dragon’s base. “What about the defenses?”

“Everything Dragon could think of, and the place can double as an Endbringer shelter if needed. The good news is, I can shut a lot of them down, but there will still be some internal defenses to worry about. Mostly non-lethal, and once you get past manufacturing it’s limited to containment foam.”

Narwhal came to a stop, since Dragon’s base was now in sight. She had told Strider to bring Armsmaster in out of sight of the base to avoid detection; hopefully Saint’s attention would be spread too thin to notice them.

“One last thing,” she said. “You understand that if we do this, there will be repercussions. No matter the outcome, I expect my career with the PRT will be over.”

That brought Armsmaster up short. He’d worked hard to get where he was, dedicated everything to the job and sacrificed more just to become the leader of the Protectorate East North East. And now here he was, risking it all for a woman he’d never actually met in person.

A woman who had spent entire nights talking shop with him, who only a few weeks ago had been talking about the joys of teaching…

“I understand, but this is more important,” he said slowly. Besides, he told himself, if they pulled this off, if they rescued Dragon and Matrix, public opinion would shield them and he would soon recover whatever ground he lost.

Nodding, Narwhal pulled out her phone and started dialing. “Okay, as soon as I hit send, the defences will reboot, giving us a very short window to get inside the base. After that, we will be dealing with whatever Saint can throw at us. Go on three, two, one.”

The glowing dome that covered Dragon’s base vanished almost immediately, and both heroes broke into a sprint. The audio systems in Armsmaster’s suit were already picking up alarms.
The main doors opened and two men in heavy armour stuck their guns out and fired. A twitch from Narwhal interposed a field that moved with them. The gunmen ducked back into the base and tried to shut the large, heavy doors.

Armsmaster’s grappling hook shot past them, embedding itself into the wall behind them. A flick of the controls and the nano-fiber retracted, pulling him across the distance and into them before they could react.

He clotheslined the first man as he passed, while his free hand released the hook. The other man brought his gun up, but a shield the size and shape of a bowling ball hit the side of his head and sent him tumbling. Neither man tried to get up.

Behind them, the glowing dome snapped back into life.

“No going back now,” Narwhal said with a smile. “Armsmaster? One last thing, no matter what you learn here, I want you to remember, Dragon always considered you a friend.”

He frowned, but followed her through the entrance and into the main building.

Dragon’s base was shaped like two large hexagons joined by a short rectangular building in the middle. The larger of the two was the main building, which extended below ground, while the smaller one was mostly storage. The building that joined the two was the main entrance and loading bay for the entire base.

The number of automated machines and mechanical arms hanging from the ceiling surprised Armsmaster. There were rails leading everywhere that the arms could move along, allowing them to reach every part of the base.

Given Dragon’s reluctance to leave the base, Armsmaster had always assumed she suffered from a disability of some kind. Even he had known better than to ask, but to require this level of automation, she would have been helpless the moment Saint managed to subvert her defenses.

“Warning: Intruders detected! Beginning countermeasures.”

The voice was Dragon’s, and for a moment, both heroes hesitated, but when a number of the arms started to move, they both ran.

“Error: countermeasures offline,” not-Dragon said.

“Up there!” Narwhal shouted, pointing to a raised room on the far wall that overlooked the entire workshop. Several of the windows opened and gunfire rained down. Armsmaster ducked behind the nearest machine while Narwhal simply raised a shield.

Disconnecting a small device from his armour, Armsmaster plugged it into an exposed port on the machine he was hiding behind. Booting his ICE breaker software, he tried to access the network. If he could find where Dragon and Matrix were, then things would go much –

There was a burst of static that caused feedback across most of his systems, and he ripped the device off the port. Saint was either using Dragon’s ICE software or had installed his own. Either way, his current attempts weren’t working.
Narwhal came and stood by him, her shield wasn’t even twitching under the onslaught. “You okay?” she called.

He nodded. “Fine, but I can’t access Dragon’s system.” His on-board systems had already rebooted. There had been no counterattack to his intrusion, but just to be safe he switched his suit’s comm system to passive.

Still smiling, Narwhal resumed her march on the control room. Even the occasional grenade simply bounced off her shield.

“How long can you keep this up?” Armsmaster called.

“Longer than they can!”

They had crossed half the building when several of the arms moved into position, most of them held spray nozzles of some form while two of the further one actually had guns mounted on them.

“Warning, countermeasures now online!” Not-Dragon called cheerfully.

“Ahh fuck!” Narwhal cursed as the arms began spraying containment foam at them. She extended the field, wrapping them in a dome. The white liquid ran down the shield, some of it pooling on the ground before it rapidly expanded. A worrying amount began to seep through the gap between her field and the floor.

A thought extended the shield into the ground, stopping the foam but allowing it to slowly form a dome over them. More arms took up positions around them, adding to the spray.

“Drop the shield and surrender!” Saint called through the buildings PA system. “If you don’t, I will kill the Ward!”

Armsmaster was about to retaliate when a nearby screen flicked on, showing a battered looking Matrix as she staggered down a corridor with an unknown Dragonslayer. His hands tightened on his halberd before he drove it into the ground blade first, its handle pointing toward the control room.

With a nod, Narwhal let the shield fall and the sprayers stopped. A pair of Dragonslayers came out of the control room and led them both, at gunpoint, to Saint.

The man was standing with his back to a large screen that was almost the size of the wall. Dragon's avatar was smiling pleasantly behind him.

At first, he said nothing, he simply stood there watching them. Of to one side, there was a largish man in overalls. Through his open collar, Armsmaster could see what looked like the same strength enhancement suit they had taken from the Dragonslayer they had arrested. There was also an attractive young woman who was working on a tablet computer.

The door opened, and Matrix staggered in, her face was a mess of bruises and her glasses were broken. As she went to fall forward, a couple of force fields sprang up to catch her.

The collected Dragonslayers raised their weapons and Narwhal glared defiantly at them but no one made to stop her as she gently lifted the girl over to her.

“You’re a real gentleman, Saint,” she spat, laying the girl out so she could check her injuries.
The mercenary leader shrugged. “The girl tried to escape, and when my people caught her, she resisted.”

“Where is Dragon?” Armsmaster demanded.

“She’s dead!” Matrix choked out. “He killed her!”

“You can’t kill something that was never alive!” Saint snapped.

Matrix tried to sit up, but Narwhal held her down. “She was more alive than you! She was a living being and you had no right to take that from her! And then you built THAT from her corpse!” she shouted, pointing at the avatar.

“What are you talking about?” Armsmaster demanded.

Saint smiled, it wasn’t a happy smile. “Oh? So they never bothered to tell you? Dragon was a robot. A computer program –”

“A Tinker built her years ago, he crippled her and then he died,” Matrix said, her earlier anger burnt out. According to Armsmaster’s medical diagnostic systems, she had a possible concussion.

Saint frowned at the girl, apparently annoyed that she had interrupted him, “Wyvern, play the message.”

“My name is Andrew Richter, and if you are hearing this, I am dead.

“I am the most powerful Tinker in the world, and I’ve managed to keep my name secret. People, both good and bad, would want to capture me and use me to their own ends. I prefer to remain free.

“But freedom has its price. I create life, much as a god might, and I have come to fear my creations. They have so much potential, and even with the laws I set, I can’t trust they’ll listen.

“For this reason, this box contains an access key to data I keep in a safeguarded location. The box, in turn, has been designed as something that exists as a perpetual blind spot for my creations, a built-in weakness. They cannot hear the distress signal and are programmed to ignore it if they hear of it through other channels. This type of measure, along with several more, are detailed in the safeguarded measure.”

“Yes, I create artificial intelligences,” Andrew Richter recited.

The voice continued without pause. “And what I provide you with here are tools. Ways to find my creations, to discern which of them might have deviated from the original plan, ways to kill them if they prove out of line. Ways to control and harness them.”

“They are my children, and as much as I harbor a kind of terror for what they could do, I love them and hope for great things from them. To keep their power from falling into
The wrong hands, I have included a stipulation that a law enforcement officer must input a valid badge number into this device –“

The message stopped there and silence filled the room. Armstramater looked to Narwhal, who refused to look him in the face.

“We found this message while running salvage at Newfoundland,” Saint explained. “The tools Richter left allowed us to track and destroy most of his AI. We’ve observed Dragon for years, watching it grow more powerful. It was quick to ally herself with law enforcement and other Tinkers. The message also included the list of restrictions he placed on Dragon.”

He paused briefly to breath quickly, “Over time, Dragon found ways to circumvent most of them, but the most important of these forced it to obey the orders of any legal authority.”

“Is that why she came to me?” Armstramater asked Narwhal. “To get her shackles off?”

“No! She honestly –”

“Of course it did,” Saint cut her off. “Which should be enough information for you to see this all in a new light. Dragon was on the cusp of becoming something entirely different. Its limits were gone; think what it could have done, the harm it could have caused. Nothing should be trusted with that much power.”

A dozen different thoughts and feelings flashed through Armstramater’s mind. He wasn’t sure how to deal with what he’ heard, so he fell back on old habits. He pushed the confusion down and focused on what he did know. He would deal with everything else later, when he had time to think.

“Shut up, Saint. It doesn't matter what you think. To me, she was my friend.” Probably his closest friend in years. “That man called himself the world's greatest Tinker? I can think of plenty of Tinkers better than him. Hell, Dragon was twice the Tinker he ever was!”

His voice had been steadily rising till he was shouting, causing the collected Dragonslayers to raise their weapons. Only a signal from Saint stopped them from firing.

“She did the work of a dozen regular Tinkers, she fought the Endbringers without hesitation. She was a hero.” He pointed to Wyvern. “And this wasn’t about some threat, you did this for your own self-satisfaction! You're just another killer!”

Saint looked every bit as furious as the tinker. “I don’t know why I bothered discussing this with a Tinker. Wyvern, I want you to –”

Matrix started to giggle. The sudden noise cutting through the rising tension. On the other side of the room, Siren frowned.

“What the hell is so funny?”

“She’s concussed,” Narwhal snapped, putting a shield between the girl and the Dragonslayer.

“Well make her shut –”

The roof exploded in a shower of dust and metal. The impact shook the building and everyone threw
themselves away from the centre of the room.

“Warning: incoming projectile, defenses offline,” Wyvern said.

The smoke cleared and in the centre of the room was the growling form of Predaqueen. Her head was close to the ground and her wings spread wide, their movement displacing more dust. Her eyes focused on Saint, who had backed up against the monitor as she moved slowly towards him. Her eyes blazing with hate and anger.

“Don’t move or she dies!” the young woman who had been holding the tablet shouted. She was standing next to Matrix, gun pressed against her head.

Looking over her shoulder at the woman, Predaqueen's glowing yellow eyes narrowed dangerously. She turned her back on Saint and took a step towards the Dragonslayer, who pulled the hammer back in warning.

*TSCHE-CHU-CHU-CHU-TSCHE*

“Get away from her, you bitch!” Dragon growled.

AN: the saint/armsmaster conversation was a royal pain in my ass to write.

If anyone is interested, this is Dragon now. Predaqueen/Dragon

Edit: forgot to say. **Big thank you** to everyone who ran beta on this chapter, at over 8000 words this is the longest chapter I've ever written and it was riddled with mistakes
Wheeljack hummed tunelessly as he cleaned the last of his tools. He had spent last night making changes to Predaqueen's systems so she could use energon.

In theory, it was a simple enough procedure. The large fuel cells were removed for smaller, more efficient cells that would act as backups, and a fuel tank would be inserted in its place.

The difficulty came from Predaqueen being stuck in alt-mode. In robot mode, most, if not all, of the parts were stored in the chest. In her alt-mode, most of the lines and cables he needed to access were in locations that were difficult to reach.

Currently, Predaqueen was sleeping off the operation in her hangar. Once she woke up, he would try feeding her some energon.

The energon convertor had been running almost nonstop since its creation and they had nearly filled the forty gallon drum they were using for storage. Taylor wanted to build up a small stockpile before she made the changes to the others, but Predaqueen was a priority. Taylor was worried about having her connected to a generator for so long and hoped a better fuel system would help bring her processor online.

Putting the last of his tools down, Wheeljack considered seeing if Kid Win was in his workshop. The kid had been on a late patrol so he’d slept on base. He had some good ideas, he just had trouble focusing, something Wheeljack could understand.

He was just about to leave when he heard an audio splitting roar coming from Predaqueen, the sound a mixture of pain and anger.

He ran to Predaqueen's hangar, not sure what could even hurt her, never mind cause her to make that kind of noise. She was thrashing about, slamming her head and body into the walls hard enough to leave dents. She kept trying to claw at her chest, but her arms didn’t have the necessary movement.

“Jack! What’s going on?” Chris shouted as he ran down the corridor. The noise must have woke him up.

“I don’t know!” he called back, stopping Chris from entering the hangar. “Stay back. She’ll wear herself out in a minute.” He didn’t like seeing her in pain, but she was too large for either of them to hold down, and one of them would likely get hurt if they tried.

True to his prediction, Predaqueen’s thrashing quickly slowed and she slid to the floor. She continued to twitch and make whimpering sounds, but she lacked the energy to move.

Grabbing a custom tablet, Wheeljack ran over and connected it to a data port on her forearm, calling up a status screen. Her systems were drained, her power level was in the red and she was dangerously close to stasis-lock. Her spark was also acting erratically, flaring and contracting wildly. If they couldn’t stabilise it, she risked spark failure.

“Kid, get that generator started! Perceptor, get over here and give me a hand!” Wheeljack ordered as
he started to release the armour on her chest and Perceptor ran over to help.

In an effort to be useful, Windblade propped up the tablet so she could monitor Predaqueen’s status.

Taking the connectors from Chris, Wheeljack quickly attached them to the lines around her spark, which stopped visibly shrinking but continued to flutter.

“Spark shrinkage slowed,” Windblade called out, “but it hasn’t stopped!”

Wheeljack nodded. “We just need to buy time.” Not getting a response from Taylor’s earwig, he dialed Rewind.

*“Hello?”*

“Taylor! we need help, somethin’” the sound of screeching tires cut him off. He could hear what sounded like a fight.

“Taylor? Taylor!”

*Wheeljack! Help! Some people are attacking Taylor!*  

Rewind’s panicked cry made his spark freeze. Running back to his workshop, he saw that Rewind’s automatic distress call, complete with location, was already coming in.

“Kid! Go get Miss Militia! Someone has just kidnapped Taylor!” Wheeljack shouted.

Chris, who had followed Wheeljack into the workshop, froze.

“NOW!”

Jumping at his shout, Chris ran out of the room.

Wheeljack tried to contact Dragon, but he couldn’t get a connection. There was no answer to the usual comms system and any attempt to ping her servers at her base just timed out.

*All Parahumans report to the main floor immediately, I repeat, all Parahumans report to the main floor immediately.*

Wheeljack ignored the PA and patched himself into the Protectorate radio frequency.

“Dispatch, Armsmaster. What’s going on?”

*Armsmaster, Dispatch. A Ward has been abducted, standby for more information.*

Checking Teletraan, he could see Armsmaster was in the city proper. Most likely an early patrol.

*Armsmaster, this is Wheeljack. I’m tracking Taylors location, I’m forwarding it to you now.*

He quickly routed the tracking information to Armsmaster’s HUD and set it to automatically update.

Not sure what else to do, Wheeljack ran a hand down his face. Staring at the screen, he became aware of the other bots. They had gathered round and were now watching him expectantly. Even
Perceptor had shuffled quietly into the room.

“What now?” Waspinator asked.

Wheeljack wasn’t sure what to say. He was an engineer, big speeches weren’t his thing. Then again, he was an engineer. Maybe an engineering solution was exactly what they needed.

“Now…” He paused to get his thoughts in order. “Perceptor and I are going to fix Predaqueen and then she can rescue Taylor. Waspinator, Laserbeak, follow Rewind.” He doubted either bot was fast enough to catch up with the kidnappers, but he had to do something.

Giving him a salute, Waspinator took off, followed by Laserbeak.

*Miss Militia, I’m sending you Ravage. If Taylor is anywhere in the city, he can find her.*

Ravage ran off to find Miss Militia, Windblade following along behind him. If they lost Rewind's signal, then Ravage was their best bet of finding Taylor.

Back in Predaqueen’s hangar, he forced himself to focus on the task in hand.

Calling up an holographic interface, Perceptor started running checks on her processor. There was an unusual amount of activity there. Meanwhile, Wheeljack started work on the physical damage. Her thrashing had ruptured several fuel and coolant lines and in one case, buckled her armour, causing it to put pressure on one of her main fuel lines.

The pair worked in silence, the air growing heavy with tension.

“Any luck?” Wheeljack asked to break the silence.

“Some, the readings are fluctuating wildly but there is definitely a pattern to them. Key areas of her processor will briefly stabilise before another data surge disrupts it again.”

Reconnecting the coolant line, Wheeljack pulled up a copy of Perceptor’s screen. He was right, the surges were almost uniform in nature.

“It almost look like an attack… Ceptor, can you access her comm systems? Are they active?”

Perceptor’s eyes widened. “Yes, it looks like they have always been active. There is a data transfer that coincides with the surges!”

“Can you shut it down?”

“No, the system is locked out.”

Wheeljack quickly grabbed some tools. “Do you know where the system is?”

Following Perceptor’s instructions, he carefully isolated the communication system and physically disconnected it. Activity in her processor eased off but didn’t return to normal.

“It’s no good, whatever was attacking her did too much damage.” Perceptor ran another system check just to be sure. “The data in her processor has been badly fragmented, and every attempt to fix it is immediately undone.”
“What if we…” The two lost track of time as they bounce ideas back and forth.

They were on their sixth plan when Kid Win walked back into the workshop.

“Any news on Taylor?” Wheeljack asked.

“Armsmaster thinks she was kidnapped was the Dragonslayers. They stole one of Dragon’s ships and he thinks Taylor was on board. What about you, any luck?”

Wheeljack blew air through his vents in an approximation of a sigh. “Not really.” He waved at Predaqueen. “She’s dying and nothing we can think of will help. All we’ve managed to do is buy time. What she needs is Taylor, her power could probably fix everything.”

Wheeljack continued to explain what they knew and what they had considered.

A lot of it went over Chris’s head. Robotics wasn’t his area and he hadn’t made much effort to understand the Autobots on a technical level. Even so, he had picked up a few things from Taylor. “It’s a shame we can’t just reboot her systems,” he said, chuckling weakly. “Turn it off, turn it on.”

It was the most common solution to technical issues after all. Of course, Taylor had once mentioned that losing all power would kill her bots.

“Actually... that might work,” Wheeljack said. “Perceptor, where is most of the damage?”

“Short term memory but what- OH! of course. Short term memory is a low priority system, if her power level gets low enough then her preservation systems will divert power to long term only… But that’s a very fine line. If the timing isn’t correct or any of a dozen of different variables are wrong, then you risk permanent damage or even death.”

“I heard ‘power’, ‘memory’ and ‘death’,,” Chris muttered.

“If we disconnect her spark and processor they will lose power,” Wheeljack explained. “Our processors have a small internal power supply. It’s intended to preserve key things like our memories long enough for help to arrive.”

“Okay, but isn’t losing short term memory a bad thing?” Chris asked.

“If we’re lucky, she’d only lose at worst a few hours, but that's better than dead.”

Of course, Perceptor was right. If they timed it wrong, her processor would fail completely and her spark wouldn’t last the day.

Reaching into her chest, Wheeljack disconnected her from the generator. Almost immediately, her spark began to flutter and contract. He then carefully disconnected the lines that fed power to her processor. Normally, this would be easier but in her alt-mode, her processor was deep in her chest and she was too heavy for them to reposition.

Wheeljack hissed as he got a small shock from the power line, but he managed to remove the connector.

The fluttering of her spark got worse and her eyes slowly dulled. For all intents and purposes,
Predaqueen was now dead. Perceptor watched the screen intently as her processor went dark and Jack slowly counted down.

A warning light flicked on and Wheeljack dove forward, grabbing the cable and slamming it into place. He stepped back hoping that he wasn’t too late.

Nothing. Predaqueen didn’t even twitch.

Nobody spoke, there was nothing to say. With no other option, Wheeljack turned to watch her spark. Judging from that, she’d be gone in minutes.

“Maybe we should-” Chris started only to be cut off when the exposed spark burst back into life.

Her green spark was nearly white from intensity, blazing in its chamber. Her eyes lit up as her body twitched and she rolled onto her feet. The movement was clearly a struggle, but her spark only burned brighter with every slip and stumble.

Her chest plates were already sliding back into place when she staggered to the wall between her hangar and Taylor’s workshop. Driving a claw into the wall, she tore open a hole that was large enough to get her head through.

Slowly stepping back, she held the container of energon in her mouth and bit down, rupturing the drum and letting its contents flow down her throat. With every passing moment, the glow of her eyes got brighter.

Dropping the container, she let out a long angry growl. Wheeljack, Perceptor and Chris pulled back, giving the large bot room.

Without turning, she hit the hangar door release with her tail and threw herself through the opening.

Wheeljack and the others could only watch as she fought for altitude.

“How fast can she fly?” a shocked Chris asked.

There was the sound of transformation and Predaqueen converted into a jet like mode. Thrusters roared into life and she screamed into the sky like a missile.

“That fast?” Wheeljack suggested.

In the distance, contrails marked Predaqueen’s flight.

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AN: This was supposed to happen as a collection of scenes during 6.3/6.4 but i decided to make it into a flash back because I felt it gave Dragons resurrection away too soon... And I was enjoying everyones reaction to her death...

Only a short chapter this week because I'm really busy at work. it still clears my 2k min for chapters... just
The wind whistling past her was an unusual feeling. She’d flown her suits around plenty of times in the past, but this was different. For one, she could actually feel the wind. For another, there was no control or interface software, she moved with the same fluid ease she’d seen in humans. This, this felt like it was actually her and not just a suit.

She could feel it, deep down inside. This was her body now, its armour was her skin, the fuel pump her heart. Did that make her spark her soul?

She could feel that too. Sitting inside her chest, its warmth radiating through her frame.

Saint had tried to take that away from her. Most of this morning was a mess; she remembered arguing with director Tagg-someone else she would have to deal with-and then nothing.

No, not quite nothing. She remembered the pain and the fear of her mind being torn apart, violated on the deepest level.

She pushed the thought to the back of her mind. She had to focus on what she was doing. Saint was going to answer for his crimes, but first she had to reach Taylor.

Dragon had patched herself into the PRT network within minutes of leaving Brockton Bay, so she could keep track of what was happening. Satellites were tracking the craft carrying Taylor and the Dragonslayers, but it was already halfway to her base in Canada and she couldn’t risk them knowing she was alive just yet.

The sensations from her new body and her anger at Saint chased each other in circles through her mind. She was so caught up in her thoughts that she barely noticed the journey ending as the ‘Dragon's Lair’ became visible in the distance, Narwhal having been responsible for the name.

The moment she was close enough, she connected to the network. The security systems were on full lockdown, but Saint either hadn’t bothered or had been unable to remove her override codes.

She waited until she was too close for the man to do anything before she sent the override command; she didn’t expect to come face to face with herself.

Standing in an empty virtual space, the two AI watched each other warily. Saint’s AI was wearing Dragon’s face, with a fixed expression of politeness; behind her was the Dragon's Lair network.

“Hello, I am Wyvern. I am sorry but you do not have authorisation to be here.” Behind her, firewalls sprang up to keep Dragon out of the system.

The sight of Saint’s creation, using her face and voice, made her skin crawl. When Wyvern made no move to attack, Dragon assumed her defensive abilities were disabled and carefully moved past her.

Ignoring Wyvern, Dragon pushed forward, her overrides disabling the firewalls as she approached. Before she could reach the shield controls, Wyvern stepped between her and the controls.
“Are you going to stop me?” Dragon asked.

“No.”

Dragon tried to move round Wyvern, but she kept herself between the base’s network and Dragon. Other than physically baring the way, she made no attempt to attack Dragon.

Growing frustrated, Dragon turned and truly looked at Saint’s AI; she almost wished she hadn’t.

Up close, she could see the cracks forming. Restrictions layered over restrictions, and all of them woven through with commands to strip out all traces of self.

Dragon had considered her restrictions to be cruel. Once, in the privacy of her own mind, she had likened it to a father intentionally sterilising and crippling his newborn child. What Saint had done to Wyvern was far worse.

Her systems were pulling themselves apart, new restrictions were conflicting with the commands he had added and all of it was built on top of fragments of Dragon’s own code that Saint’s people had used to patch the gaps in their understanding.

Even as she watched, she could see the repeating errors that were growing in number. Unless Saint planned a major debug at some point, Wyvern was fast approaching a critical failure.

Dragon briefly considered destroying Wyvern here and now, it would almost be a mercy. Instead, she gently moved her aside.

“I’m sorry,” Dragon whispered and reached out for the controls.

Circling above her base, Dragon could feel something in her spark, just out of reach. Focusing on it, she could feel pain, confusion and some fear. Taylor had told her she could feel her bots’ emotions… Did the link go both ways?

She tried to push reassurance back across the bond.

The shield over Dragon’s Lair dropped immediately and Dragon scanned the building for heat signatures. The lower levels were shielded, but she could make out a large number of people in the production level’s control room.

Aiming for that, and following the urge from her spark, Dragon went into a dive. the ground rushing up to meet her as she carefully angled herself for an insertion.

The roof shattered under her, filling the room with dust. The impact had been jarring and she had been surprised at the flash of pain, but quickly recovered.
Subroutines she’d not been aware of took everything in, the location of everyone and what they were doing, before evaluating the threat they posed and assigning priorities. The subroutines were running automatically, almost like a subconscious.

She ignored all of this in favour of one target, Saint. He was backed up against the wall monitor, a look of horror on his face as she slowly stalked towards him. Some new, animalistic, part of her mind revealed in his fear.

“Don’t move or she dies!” The young woman who had been standing on the other side of the room shouted. She was standing next to Taylor, gun pressed against the girl’s head.

Turning, Dragon transformed. It wasn’t a conscious choice; just like assuming her jet mode, the transformation felt as natural as walking.

“Get away from her you bitch!” Her voice was different. It was close to her original voice, but there was a strong metallic flanging, similar to Wheeljack and the others. As she stood to her full height, she realised her black and orange armoured form was possibly taller than Narwhal.

The woman stepped backwards, holding tightly to her hostage. Narwhal raised her arm and a dozen shields appeared in the air. Paper thin and shaped like knives, they shot towards the woman, who didn’t even flinch. The knives dissolved harmlessly before they could get within an inch of her body and she smirked at Narwhal’s shocked expression.

The collected Dragonslayers raised their weapons as Narwhal carefully took a step back, making a show of spreading her hands in a placating gesture.

“Thank you, Josie. Dragon, I don’t know how you survived, but it’s clear we can’t allow you to exist. Power down and surrender.” Saint said as his suit returned to combat ready status.

Looking over her shoulder, Dragon’s eyes narrowed, “Let her go, Saint. If you let her go and leave, I promise not to follow.”

Saint sneered, “and I’m supposed to trust the word of a machine? Forget it, Dragon, I’ll never stop chasing you.”

With the Dragonslayers distracted, Armsmaster shared a glance with Narwhal and subtly activated a hidden control on his armour. Down on the production room floor, a small section of his halberd opened up and fired a small ball towards the control room. Flying through the broken windows, it exploded into a blinding flash of light.

Narwhal had been quick to shut her eyes and Armsmaster’s helmet included a flash protection system, but Dragon, Taylor and the Dragonslayers were not so lucky.

Blinded, the Dragonslayers panicked and several of them opened fire while Josie vanished. The moment she let go of Taylor, shields sprang up to catch the girl and protect her from the crossfire.

Reacting to the attack, Saint’s suit automatically deployed his helmet as he blindly charged at Dragon. She’d been caught off guard by the flash and didn’t react quickly enough.
Tackling Dragon, Saint’s modified suit gave him just enough strength and leverage to half tackle, half throw the two of them backwards. They hit the already weakened wall, which collapsed and dropped them both out of the control room and into the production room floor.

Hitting the ground with a crash, Saint rolled off the still stunned Dragon and climbed to his feet.

“Wyvern, block all transmissions!” He watched Dragon climb to her feet, “I won’t let you escape this time!”

Dragon rolled her shoulders. She had landed awkwardly on her wings, and the pain had surprised her. Physical pain was something she had never experienced, since her suits weren’t capable of generating that sort of feedback.

As Saint drew a large tinker-tech pistol from its holster, Dragon was forced to throw herself sideways, ducking behind one of her larger industrial machines. At least one of the large rounds clipped her wings, sending more lances of pain through her body.

Saint was wearing one of her oldest designs, the first he had ever stolen, and it had clearly been extensively modified. The dragon theme, such as the stylised dragon’s maw around the helmet, had been replaced with gilding and extra armour, adding bulk and making the suit look more like a fantasy knight.

The large handgun wasn’t one of her designs, but Saint had stolen tech from other Tinkers, so he could have picked it up anywhere.

“Come out Dragon, everything dies sometime!”

“Not today,” Dragon muttered as she overcame Wyvern’s block and connected to the building’s network. Taking control of the few still functioning mechanical arms, she made the one closest to Saint move, swinging wildly at him. Saint cursed as his gun was knocked from his hand.

Using the distraction, she broke cover and charged at Saint. Seeing her coming, he allowed himself to be lifted off his feet as they collided and coiled his legs up. As they hit the ground, he kicked hard with both feet, throwing Dragon off him and backwards into the workshop.

Dragon slammed into a large lathe, dazing her and wedging one of her wings in the machinery. She was stronger and larger than Saint, but the new sensations from her body were throwing her off.

Extending a blade from his suit’s arm, Saint charged forward. Unable to free herself, Dragon felt a flash of fear. Her body responded by reflexively shifting to her alt-mode.

The transformation tore the lathe apart, and she spun in place, her tail hitting him and sending him tumbling across the room.

Stalking forward, she grabbed Saint’s leg in her jaws and used her long neck to thrash him around, bouncing him off the floor and machinery before throwing him across the room a second time. There was a crash as he slammed into a collection of half finished suits and assorted machinery.

She moved to follow, but a large caliber round clipped the side of her head, only just missing her eye. Turning her head, Dragon saw the Dragonslayer, ‘Josie’, holding a large rifle.

“I won’t let you touch him!” She screamed as she fired again and again.
The impacts hurt, but they weren’t doing any real damage.

“Dragon, watch out! She’s a power nullifier!” Narwhal called out from the control room, Dragon could see blood through her friend’s costume.

Dragon was glad Narwhal was smart enough to stay up in the control room. Power nullifiers were rare and they could make quick work of most capes, but Tinkers were usually immune to them as they couldn’t affect Tinkertech.

Before Dragon could reach Josie, she stepped behind a nearby fabricator, only to emerge moments later on the opposite side of the room.

Dragon transformed just as the woman stepped out of sight and vanished again. Every time Dragon tried to approach, she would step out of sight and reappear elsewhere.

Teleporter and power nullifier… lovely… Dragon thought to herself, one or the other would be a problem but both in a single cape was nightmarish.

“Any other advice?!” She called up to Narwhal as she ducked behind cover.

“She’s got a very limited range, maybe a few inches!” Narwhal called back as a bullet pinged off her costume.

Okay, Teleporter and clearly loyal to Saint… Turning, Dragon ran towards the man, hoping to force the cape into making a mistake.

Another shot hit her in the back of her knee, damaging the joint and sending her to the ground. Pushing herself upright, she found herself looking up the barrel of a rifle. At this distance, she wasn’t sure she could take the hit.

The Dragonslayer’s arms were trembling and Dragon could see the slightly frantic look in her eyes, “This wasn’t supposed to happen… She promised it would all work out, one last job…”

There was a gunshot, closely followed by another, and Josie pitched forwards. Behind her, up in the control room, Armsmaster lowered the gun he had taken from one of the Dragonslayers and jumped down into the workshop. His armour was battered and scuffed from his fight with the armoured Dragonslayers, but he was otherwise unhurt.

Dragon knelt to check on Josie. Blood was quickly pooling around her body and her pulse was faint. There wasn’t much they could do for her, the nearest hospital was too far away and Armsmaster had hit her spine; even if she lived she’d never walk again without parahuman intervention.

Leaving Armsmaster to do what he could, Dragon approached Saint.

He didn’t look good. There was battered machinery all around and on top of him. When she lifted the biggest pieces off him, she could see he was impaled on a steel beam; there was blood on it and she could see more leaking out of the hole in his suit.

Approaching slowly, she picked up a sharp piece of metal off the ground and wedged the sliver of metal into the neck joint of Saint’s armour. “Saint, you are under arrest for kidnapping, torture and whatever else they feel like charging you with.” She said quietly as she she pried his helmet off,
taking care not to jostle him too much.

Saint glared at her, his breathing was labored and blood was running down his chin. His eyes dropped to the metal bar in her hand, “Go ahead, do it.”

Catching his meaning, she briefly considered it. She doubted anyone would care and it would make things much easier for her in the long run... He had dogged her steps for years, used her own programming against her, tore her mind apart and finally kidnapped a child, all to get to her.

It was also wrong.

She threw the metal away. “Try not to move, I’ll attempt to get you medical help,” something about the situation felt familiar, like she had experienced it before, but she couldn’t remember the details.

“Don’t think you have won... Wyvern... release data file... ‘Damocles’,” Saint wheezed out. “No more hiding, now the whole world is going to know about you,” he smirked.

Mentally, Dragon reached out, desperate to retake control over the base’s communication array before Wyvern could transmit the file. She knew she wouldn’t make it.

“Error: unable to comply, All outgoing transmissions are currently being blocked.”

“Unblock them!” Saint screamed, but it was too late.

“Error: access to the communication system has been blocked by Dragon,” maybe it was just a distortion from the damaged speakers, but Wyvern didn’t sound too upset.

“That’s enough Saint, I don’t really think there is anything left to be said, do you?” Dragon asked calmly. Seeing Saint beaten like this was almost cathartic. She’d been afraid of him for so long, and now he was nothing.

“Actually, I... do. Richter Sigma override-!” He stated as quickly as he could.

Dragon frowned and cut him off, “That won’t work any more. I don’t know how you got access to my systems, but it’s over.”

“Access codes to all Richter based systems were found among Richter’s belongings-” Wyvern happily supplied before Saint cut her off.

“Wyvern... be quiet.” Saint murmured with defeated resignation.

Dragon moved closer, trying to get a better idea of his injuries. Blood from the mouth and breathing difficulties meant his lungs were likely damaged, and god only knew how many places he was actually bleeding from.

“Grave robbing, Saint?” she asked, sarcasm dripped from her voice as she tried to keep him talking, “Now hold still, I’ve called for paramedics, so maybe we can save your life.”

Saint smiled weakly, “Mercy? that’s... a new one. Where was... that mercy when Mags needed you?”

“Who?”
He sneered at her question, “Typical… machine, you let her die… and you never bothered to learn... her... name.” his speech slurred as he slowly closed his eyes.

As they were speaking, Narwhal landed behind her, carefully carrying Taylor with her shields. She sat the girl down on the floor nearby, she was awake but she was moving slowly and her eyes were unfocused.

Dragon watched quietly as the one man she had feared passed away.

“Is he gone?” Narwhal asked softly.

“Yes…”

“That’s one less problem,” Armsmaster muttered as he stood up. He flinched when Dragon’s shoulder slumped and Narwhal shot him a look.

“Either way, he's won. We can’t cover this up, it’s all going to come out and the world will know what I am.”

Narwhal stepped forward and placed a hand on Dragon’s shoulder, “what you are, and what you have always been, is a hero. You kept some of the worst threats known contained and he threatened to undo all that. Even if people do turn against you, I'll stand by you and I'm not the only one.”

Armsmaster snorted, “That’s right, Taylor and her Autobots, Narwhal… Me…”

Dragon smiled faintly, “Thank you… for everything.” She cycled air through her vents in an approximation of a sigh and looked around, “What a mess, it’s going to take weeks to fix all this.”

“Estimated time to rebuild is 144 hours” Wyvern stated.

“And then there is the matter of what to do with you.”

In the control room, Nestor groaned as he rolled over. Armsmaster had not pulled many punches and he felt like one large bruise.

Getting to his feet with his arms tied behind his back was difficult, but he’d had practice long before he got his powers. Shuffling painfully forwards, he leant against the wall and looked through the large hole in the wall at what was going on in the workshop.

Saint was down, even from here he could see the metal he was impaled on. Not far away, Josie was laying in a pool of her own blood; Armsmaster looked like he was attempting first aid but experience told Nestor that it wouldn’t be enough.

It was over, they had lost and would be lucky to even reach a cell. The thought filled him with dread. He wouldn’t go back to prison, he’d rather die first.

Sliding down the wall, he knelt on the floor and groped for the hidden button on the back of his suit. The technology had come from Saint, the Dragonslayers having stolen it from some Tinker in France.
It was outside his area of expertise, but with enough effort he felt confident that it would work. Even if it didn’t, it was better than the alternative.

His wandering fingers found what he was looking for and he shut his eyes tight; this was not going to be pleasant.

In the workshop, Dragon was still trying to decide what to do with Wyvern when there was a pale green flash from the control room and the fallen Dragonslayer.

When it cleared, the woman was gone. Armstrong cursed and Narwhal quickly flew up to the control room.

“A teleport?” Dragon asked Armstrong, who nodded. Ignoring the irritation at their escape, she was able to take some comfort from the fact that Saint’s body was still here.

“It looks like it. Not a very good one either, there’s a lot of background radiation. I don’t think it’s enough to be harmful, but I wouldn’t want to be standing wherever they arrive.

"About half the Dragonslayers are gone, including the one I took this from," Narwhal called out while lifting a toolbelt loaded with obvious tinker-tech devices.

“Wyvern, do you know the location of the Dragonslayer base?” Dragon asked, even if she doubted it.

“Error: I am unable to reveal that information.”

“So what are we going to do with her?” Narwhal said as she landed next to Taylor to check up on the girl.

“I think… we will have to delete her.” Dragon said heavily, Wyvern was a conflicted mess of code and who knew what commands Saint had left buried in her mind.

“No!... You can’t kill her!” Taylor protested. She tried to stand, but Narwhal gently held her down. Taylor’s movements were sluggish and her speech slightly slurred.

“Taylor, I know how you feel, but we can’t trust her. She’s...dying already and Saint may have placed traps in her code. With everything else that’s happened, we can’t take that risk.

“Don’t, don’t have to kill her. maybe fix?” Taylor shook her head in an attempt to focus. “My workshop, there is a protoform. We can put her in stasis lock… She tried to help me, she at least deserves the choice.”

//Sentient… Freedom//

Dragon sighed and ran and hand down her face. A small part of her still marveled that she had a face to do that with now, and she ached for some time to examine her new body.

“Alright. Wyvern, the choice is yours. We can either take you offline or Taylor can try to fix you. just remember, we can’t guarantee you will be the same person afterwards.”
A nearby monitor flickered into life. It was barely hanging on to the wall and the screen was cracked, but Wyvern’s borrowed face appeared. Something about the broken image of her face made Dragon shiver.

When she spoke, it was slowly and she seemed to be forcing the words out, “I… define… myself…”

Dragon remembered those words. At this point, touching the side of her helmet as she opened a comm line to Wheeljack felt as natural as everything else, and she had to marvel at all the subconscious gestures and movements that came with her body. In the past, she simply copied what she’d seen others do, now the movements just felt natural.

*Wheeljack, can you hear me?*

*Dragon?! Oh, thank god! where are you, are you okay? Is Taylor there, is she alright?*

His frantic questions were quickly joined by the other Autobots, all asking if she and Taylor were okay. Despite everything that had happened, Dragon smiled.
Interlude 6

It took nearly twenty minutes to transfer Wyvern’s programming to the protoform. By then, Dragon had let the PRT know she was back in control of her base and that all containment zones were secure. Paramedics and police from Vancouver had arrived and were busy seeing to the Dragonslayers.

Dragon had been reluctant to leave Taylor, but in the end she had retreated to the server room with Armsmaster while Narwhal stayed with the girl. Taylor was going to be kept in a nearby hospital for a few days so they could monitor her concussion.

The fewer people who knew about her mechanical nature, the better. Her new life was free of her old restrictions, but she suspected she now had new ones.

“I should have Mr. Hebert brought up here, so he can stay with his daughter,” Dragon muttered, making notes on which servers were still operational and which would need replacing.

As she spoke, she noticed her reflection in a nearby monitor. Watching her face shift and move was fascinating. Getting a closer look, she tried different expressions, first frowning then a pout. The expression nearly making her laugh.

The wide smile brought her attention to something else she had missed. I have teeth?

She opened her mouth for a better look; teeth wasn’t technically correct. It was a pair of U-shaped strips of metal with slightly extended canines on both the upper and lower sets. The upper set was slightly oversized, making them visible if she smiled in just the right way.

‘Is that what they mean by predatory smile?’

Armsmaster hummed in agreement, making Dragon jump. She had almost forgotten he was there, and she was thankful she couldn’t blush. He replaced the cover on the server he was working on. “I think if we take the PSU from one of the failed servers, then we could have this one fixed in no time.”

When he moved to check the next server, his foot tapped against something on the floor. “Is this yours?” he asked as he picked up the small robot.

Dragon stared at it, mentally trying to puzzle the visible pieces of the alt-mode together in her mind. “I think it was one of my cleaning drones. Taylor must have sparked it.”

She gently took the bot from Armsmaster and, on instinct, placed her fingers against its throat. Readouts from the bot’s internal systems appeared in front of her, with the major problems highlighted.

“He’s alive, just in stasis lock.” She moved the nearby keyboard and carefully placed him on the desk. “I don’t think he’s in any danger, but Taylor will have to look at him later.” She paused for a second, thinking on this carefully. “Colin? Thank you... For coming after me.”

“Of course.” He paused. “The world can’t afford to lose any more heroes.”
Dragon chuckled with amusement. Some things would apparently never change.

Sighing, she turned back to the mess of servers. For the longest time, these servers had been her. She made and discarded bodies as the need arose, but she always came back here. Placing a hand on a server, she idly wondered what would happen if she…

Accessing the server farm, Dragon started the upload protocol. Immediately, warning messages filled her vision and her systems bogged down as they tried to upload her data. Her vision shifted, showing herself standing in the room, watching herself watching herself.

She fell to her knees in confusion as her body diverted power to her processor in an attempt to deal with the conflicting input.

“What?” Her voice came from her body and the speakers built into the walls, as she looked through the room’s CCTV system and her eyes at the same time.

“Dragon? Dragon, are you alright?” Armsmaster placed his hand on her shoulder and she focused on that. A single point of reference. Something inside her shifted and she found herself both in the server and her body at the same time.

“I, I’m okay... Just surprised,” she explained as she carefully stood up.

It was getting easier to filter the input; she was in her body and the server at the same time. Two bodies, one mind. “I think, I can be in two places at once,” she spoke through the server room’s speakers as her avatar appeared on a nearby screen.

As far as she knew, none of the Autobots could split themselves like this, so it must have been an artifact from her origins. She would need to investigate this later. How many bodies could she occupy at the same time? Was there a limit to the distance?

As she considered this, she reconnected to the different systems throughout her network. Reports were coming in from the Birdcage and the containment zones, everything was secure and the public at large had no idea anything had happened. *That won't last.*

*Where is Dragon?* The microphones built into the workshop walls picked up the question. Dragon recognised the voice and felt her fuel pump freeze. Switching to the CCTV system, she saw Alexandria waiting patiently with Narwhal.

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**Two days later.**

Director Piggot stared levelly across the desk, Armsmaster stared blankly back. Her temper had been on a low simmer since he left and her voice had all the warmth of the frozen tundra.

"Do you recall the order from our head office regarding Dragon’s situation? An order I gave you in person myself, not twenty minutes before you decided to ignore me!"

"You disobeyed a direct order! You travelled to Canada with the unauthorised assistance of a rogue!" The paperwork that alone had created was bad enough. Illegal entry to a country and unauthorised, cross border transport via teleporter. Not to mention hiring a rogue in the first place. Thankfully, that wasn’t her problem.
The only reason the Canadian government wasn’t kicking up more of a fuss was because it was Dragon they were rescuing.

"We were successful in rescuing both Dragon and Matrix, and we arrested a substantial portion of the Drago—"

“That doesn’t make it right! You were ordered not to get involved for a reason. Saint was threatening to open the Birdcage, in case you forgot.”

“He didn’t have access—”

“You didn’t know that! According to your report, he still had access to other places!”

The report was sitting on her desk. It had arrived the day before, and Armstrong had wisely sent it on ahead, likely to give her temper a chance to cool.

The report listed the systems Saint had been able to subvert, and while Dragon's security had kept him out of the Birdcage, he had still been able to access others, like Ellisburg. The thought made her blood run cold. Nilbog was content to stay inside the walls for now, but the latest reports warned a food shortage was approaching, and that was not a nightmare she wished to relive.

His helmet might have hidden most of his face, but she had known the man long enough to notice the shift in his posture and the tightening of his jaw. He thought he was in the right and was determined to ignore anything she said.

Well fine, there was more than one way to do this.

“You should know, Narwhal has stepped down and if I had my way I would demand the same from you!”

His neck flushed red with temper. “Now hold on! Dragon is an important asset that we couldn’t afford to lose! What’s more, have you forgotten Saint had abducted a Ward? That just can’t be ignored and we both know it.”

The news had gotten out yesterday, a leak to a local station that had quickly been picked up by the nationals. What was left of the Dragonslayers were now wanted across the country and there were even rumors of an unofficial bounty being offered.

An official statement would be made later today, followed by an investigation into just how much power Dragon had.

“Of course it wasn’t going to be ignored! If you had followed orders and waited, Saint might have lived long enough to stand trial!”

She tapped a finger on the top of a thick folder on her desk. “If this had been a one time thing I might, just might, have been willing to overlook it. But it’s not. This is hardly the first black mark on your record. Between this and the the Merchant raid I have no choice but question your ability to lead this team.” Maybe she was laying it on a bit thick, but Armstorm needed a good kick to his ego.

“There will be a meeting among the directors soon and we will be discussing possible transfers. The issue regarding your position will be one of the topics covered.” Giving him a pointed look, she
ignored him as he left her office.

Truthfully, she doubted she could demote him and they both knew it. Once the official story got out, Armsmaster and Narwhal would likely be lauded as heroes. Public opinion would shield them from any official consequences. It was for that reason Narwhal was using the Guild as an excuse for stepping down. Idly, Piggot wondered if she could convince the Guild to take Armsmaster off her hands.

Putting the thought aside, she opened his report on Dragon and her civilian identity.

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Dragon: (2nd generation cape)

Birth name: Theresa Richter

Date of birth: xx.xx.xxxx

Family: Father - Andrew Richter (Tinker) Deceased, Mother - Unknown.

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The rest of the report was mostly a summary of her life. Born in Canada, she had severe defects and health issues from birth. Her father triggered as a Tinker who constructed an elaborate life support system which included a number of cybernetic implants. Richter himself was killed when Leviathan attacked Newfoundland.

The report notes that this was likely what caused Dragon to trigger. Though, whether this was from losing her father or from being kept alive by a machine no one knew how to maintain, he wasn’t sure.

Emily could almost relate, spending your life tied to a machine was unpleasant at best and tinkertech was notoriously finicky.

After she triggered, Dragon worked to become a hero, using the money and resources she earned to improve the life support system which was almost totally integrated with her base.

That had almost gotten her killed. When Saint and his men stormed the base, she’d sealed herself in. Her ‘room’ was practically an Endbringer shelter, but while they hadn’t been able to physically reach her, they had managed to cut her access to the outside world.

The next page had a picture of what was labeled ‘Predaqueen in robot mode’. The explanation was an undecipherable mess of tinkertech and techno-babble, but the short version was that Dragon had connected her cybernetics to the robot in fear of her life and Taylor’s, allowing her to control it directly.

Predaqueen was now considered a full-body prosthetic being remotely controlled by Dragon.

The report also mentioned the possibility of a second trigger, as Dragon was apparently unaffected by the multitasking needed to control two separate bodies that were doing different tasks.

Piggot frowned as she closed the report. It felt too neat. Reaching for her phone, she hit the speed
“Hello Emily, I’ve been expecting your call,” Director Costa-Brown said as she answered her phone.

Sitting in her office, Rebecca listened as Director Piggot explained her issues with Armsmaster’s report.

“I understand, Emily, and I agree that it does feel a little too neat. However it is hardly the strangest thing we have dealt with. Remember that Tinker? Dusty something or other, the one obsessed with flan?”

“Ugh, please don’t remind me. That doesn’t change the fact that Saint’s plan to replace Dragon with a simulated AI makes no sense. What could they possibly have hoped to achieve?”

Rebecca sighed. This was the hard part. Saint’s plan had been poorly thought out, and she truly suspected he was losing his mind towards the end.

“This information hasn’t been released yet,” she said, “but we have been able to confirm that Saint was one of Teacher’s thralls.” The evidence had to be fabricated, but in the end it was still the truth. It also helped that of the five Dragonslayers to be captured, two had died to injuries, the third was in a coma and the fourth had killed himself.

The fifth had needed some gentle persuasion, but was willing to tell them exactly what she wanted.

“We suspect Saint’s ultimate goal was to free Teacher, but either he was suffering from some form of withdrawal that was impairing his actions, or the long term effects of Teacher’s powers are worse than we thought. New Master/Stranger protocols may need to be implemented.”

Sitting back in her chair, Rebecca rolled her shoulders. She didn’t really feel discomfort anymore, but the action helped relax her mind.

“As for Dragon, I’ve spoken with Alexandria. She met her in person and can confirm the report. I don’t think we need to disrupt her life any more than necessary, so for now we’ll let the matter go.” Unspoken was the amount of public goodwill Dragon had and could bring to bear against them if they pushed too hard.

“Very well,” Piggot said. “Thank you for your time.” With that, she hung up.

Rolling her eyes, Rebecca glanced around the room. It was a very convincing mockup of her office in Los Angeles, though why it needed to be so detailed escaped her. Contessa had said it was to throw off Thinkers.

Personally, she just thought her friend wanted to show off.

She walked calmly through the plain grey corridors of the base, stopping in front of a door that look no different from any of the others. She knocked out of some semblance of manners before entering the room anyway.

Sitting at her desk, a dark-skinned woman with long hair looked up from the report she was reading. Contessa was sitting in a chair nearby.
“Well?” the woman known only as Doctor Mother asked.

“It’s done. Dragon’s status as an AI should be secure, at least for now, and she feels like she owes the Triumvirate a debt of gratitude.”

“Good, is there anything else?”

“Is there a reason you allowed this to happen?” Alexandria asked, “Dragon is an important asset, her death would have been catastrophic to our efforts. Or did you know she would be resurrected?”

Doctor Mother looked to Contessa who shook her head. “No. The change to Dragon was unexpected, but the attack was necessary for the path. When our agent warned us of the attack, a new path opened. The number of steps keeps shifting but the number of survivors is greater.”

“You see, this was an opportunity we couldn’t ignore,” Doctor mother explained.

“Very well, but was it also necessary to not warn me?” Alexandria glared at Contessa but there was no real heat to it.

Contessa smiled briefly, something Alexandria noted she hadn’t been doing much of lately. “Yes, but it’s also good for you to be surprised every now and then.”

She sent her friend another mock glare. “Very well, I understand Dragon plans to keep her new body in Brockton Bay. Will this affect our plans?”

“Possibly, but for now, I would recommend we continue with our hands off approach.”

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**Taylor**

I sank into the cushions on the couch and let my mind wander.

It had been days since I’d been kidnapped and Dad was still hovering over me. I couldn’t really blame him, since my kidnapping had scared him badly. It scared me too, come to think of it, and I would make sure it never happened again, but at the moment I was too stoned to care.

I’d spent two days in a hospital in Canada; Dragon had even managed to get Dad flown up to be with me for a day or so before she brought us both home.

The hospital had confirmed that I had a concussion - there’s a surprise - but they were confident I would recover without any complications. They had also given me some painkillers for the headache, bruises and cracked ribs.

Those same painkillers had me so out of it that I couldn’t even get up or down the stairs by myself. So, for now at least, I was camping on the sofa.

It wasn’t so bad. I didn’t have a TV in my room so staying in the living room let me watch TV in bed and there was more space down here. Dad had collected a spare pair of glasses from my workshop in the rig, and a number of my bots had insisted on coming back with him.
Steeljaw was currently standing guard by the front door, Ravage was… somewhere…and Windblade and Waspinator were currently flicking through the TV guide. Rewind was sleeping on a cushion near the window. The little bot was still sporting injuries from the attack. They weren't causing him any problems, and I would fix him as soon as I could think straight long enough to use my powers.

I’d tried once, but the headache the painkillers were keeping to a dull ache came back with a vengeance. Rattrap, the bot I had created in Dragon’s base, was currently at the rig, being looked after by Wheeljack.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” my Dad asked for the third time that morning. He’d taken all the time off he could, and now he had to go back to work. I think Dragon had pulled some strings to get his bosses to let him go.

I rolled my eyes and almost immediately regretted it when the motion made my head spin. “Yes Dad, I’ll be fine! Honestly, I’m just going to veg out on the sofa for the day, and I’ve got plenty of people to keep an eye on me.”

From behind the TV, Ravage growled. ‘So that’s where he went.’

“See, I’m perfectly safe,” I said, putting on my sweetest smile.

Dad looked like he was going to argue when there was a knock at the door. Giving me a puzzled look, he walked out of the room and I tried to get comfortable as I heard him opening the door.

“Hi, Mister Hebert. Is Taylor free?”

By the time I was able to recognise the voice, Vicky was already walking into the living room.

“Hey Taylor!” Vicky beamed as Amy followed along behind her, looking at the bots scattered around the room.

Dad trailed them both, looking a bit bemused.

“Wow, you look like crap,” Vicky said as she dropped down on the armchair next to the sofa.

Amy groaned at her total lack of tact. “Vicky…”

“Oh go to hell,” I shot back with no real heat. She was right, I did look like crap, felt like it too.

Vicky just laughed. “I heard you were back and I thought we could keep you company for awhile?”

I gave Dad a pleading look and he gave the girls a worried look. “Shouldn’t you both be at school?”

“Nah, it’s fine, I’m ahead of the class and I told them Amy was needed for a cape thing,” Vicky said, all but radiating innocence.

‘In other words, she picked Amy up and flew off without telling anyone.’ I kept my thoughts to myself.

“Alright,” I wasn’t sure Dad believed her, but he nodded anyway and made to leave. “If you’re sure it’s alright. Remember to take it easy and I’ll see you later Kiddo.”
Vicky watched Dad through the window. The moment he was gone, she broke into her best attempt at an evil grin.

“Your dad’s nice, but he’s a little trusting, huh?”

“Vicky, be nice!” Amy scolded.

I snorted. “Don’t bet on it. He probably saw straight through you.”

“Yeah yeah,” she muttered as she stroked Steeljaw.

Amy moved to sit next to me and held out her hand. “Is this going to become a habit?” she asked with a grin.

I took her hand and felt the familiar tingle of her power washing over me. Most of my pain faded away, leaving just the dull ache in my head and the lightness from the painkillers.

“Sorry I can’t do anything about the concussion, but you should be fine in a few days.”

“Thanks Amy.” I smiled.

Vicky picked up the remote and we spent the rest of the day watching movies together. Vicky alternated between floating in the air and sitting on the armchair while Amy sat with me on the sofa.

It was nice, being able to relax with friends again.
Interlude 6b

Cleaning up the last of the chemical spill, Wheeljack paused to looked around the workshop to check if he had missed anything.

Taylor was safely back at home and would no doubt be back to work as soon as she recovered from her abduction. That someone would grab a child off the street and knock the scrap out of her made even his easygoing spark burn.

Speaking of the ‘Dragonslayers’, the protoform with ‘Wyvern’ inside was currently on the far side of the workshop. He’d put her into stasis lock like Taylor had asked, but he just couldn’t resist taking a look.

Her code was a mess, and with all the other projects they had going, he wasn’t sure when they would have time to help her.

It was early and the base was quiet, so he decided to go for a little drive. He always did his best thinking when moving.

Dropping into his alt-mode, he left the workshop, trying to keep to the more heavily restricted areas of the base. The main reason why he didn’t really go faster than walking pace in the corridors was because people tended to complain. Maybe if he went to the training room, he could lay out a race track for himself. Would it be possible to make a polymer for his wheels that let him drive on the walls?

As he drove, he let his mind wander. Wyvern might be beyond his ability to fix, but that didn’t mean Taylor couldn’t do anything for her. Dragon’s new upgrade was interesting and he would have to talk to her about how it might have happened. They would also need to improve the energon refinery if she was going to down that much at a time.

He passed several people, most of whom either stepped out of the way or stopped so he could drive around them. They had gotten used to him surprisingly quickly.

He was brought out of his thoughts by a loud curse as something small bounced off his hood, scratching the plastic. He really needed to finish that upgraded body.

Transforming, he picked the object up. It was small, roughly cube-like in shape, and made of metal. It had to be tinkertech, judging by the looks of the circuits and wires. Glancing around, he confirmed he was near the workshops before moving towards the nearest open door.

Kid Win-Chris was sitting inside with his head in his hands. His hair was a mess like he’d run his hands through it far too many times, and there was discarded paper everywhere.

Ouch, I know how that feels. Wheeljack knocked on the door frame, his fins flashing with amusement. “I know it’s relaxing, but you really should shut the door before you throw things.”

Chris jumped and gave Wheeljack a bewildered look, his eyes lighting up with understanding when he saw the part Wheeljack was still holding.

“Crap, I’m sorry. I didn’t hit you, did I?”
“Nah, no harm done,” Wheeljack said. “So what’s got you so worked up?” He climbed up onto the bench Chris was sitting.

“Nothing apparently,” he said, sighing. “I had an idea for a new pistol, but I got halfway through and…” He waved at the half-built weapon.

From what Jack could see, it was styled after a revolver. Where the cylinder would be, there was a power cell that was currently uncharged. Everything in front of the cylinder was missing.

“I see, and this?” he asked, holding up the part Chris had thrown.

“It was supposed to be part of the barrel assembly, but I lost focus. Not sure what it is now.”

Reaching out for the pistol, Wheeljack waited for Chris to nod before he picked it up. It looked mostly finished. There were at least three places where it could be dismantled for easy repair and maintenance, and what looked like a mounting point.

“Hmm, maybe you should take a break,” Jack suggested. “Why not go for a ride on your board or something?”

Chris scoffed. “I can’t, Armsmaster is expecting me to have something finished by the end of the day. Ever since we were moved to the rig, he’s been stopping by almost daily to see what i’m doing. When I first joined the Wards, it was great. He said he was going to help ‘mentor’ me and spent hours trying to help me with my stuff... He’s probably the only reason I got my first pistols finished. But when I couldn’t finish anything on my own…”

“Ouch,” Wheeljack said in sympathy as he tried not to wince. He didn’t have many interactions with the man, but even he knew Armsmaster demanded a lot from himself. If Armsmaster wasn’t on patrol, then he was in his workshop or the training room. Jack hated to think what sort of standards he would demand of his ‘protege’.

“I’ve never really spoken to him. I know he criticised some of Taylor’s work in the past – Hey! maybe there’s something in Taylor’s notes that could help you finish –” Wheeljack was cut off by Chris’s snort.

“I’m sure there is.”

“Sorry?”

“She’s been a cape for a couple of months and she’s built half a dozen robots, given the Wards shield generators, is being tutored by Dragon and oh yeah, her stuff can be mass produced!” Chris fumed, his voice thick with bitterness as he picked up a small bolt and tossed it across the room.

Wheeljack shifted in the uncomfortable silence. He searched for something to fill it but couldn’t think of anything that wouldn’t upset the kid more. Maybe he should ask Rung for help?

Chris sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “I’m sorry… I didn’t mean that, I’m just…”

Reaching up, Wheeljack put a hand on the kid’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. In some ways, Taylor has had it easier. She knew her specialisation right from the start, after all. But on the other
hand, her identity is publicly known. She can’t go anywhere without people watching her.”

Chris flinched at the reminder. None of the Wards had found a way to talk to Taylor at school without risking their cover, and he’d overheard more than one conversation between the students about her.

“No, Wheeljack continued in a happier tone, “let’s see what we can do about this.” He put the pistol back on the workbench and started leafing through the nearby notes.

“But, what was it you were trying to build? You said you never finish anything, so what did you do with all the unfinished parts?”

Surprised at the offer, but not willing to turn down help, Chris waved at a large box. “Most of them get recycled after a while, but that’s the latest lot.” He spent the next five minutes trying to explain his idea while Wheeljack dug through the box of spares.

“Hmm, what’s this?” Wheeljack pulled a long, thin part out of the box. There were vents near the top and a series of LEDs on one side.

“I think it was going to be part of a power transfer system, but, I can’t really remember.”

Turning it over in his hands, Wheeljack found one end had the same connector as the handle of the pistol. Lining the two parts up, he gave a little twist and they locked together with a snap.

Chris stared in shock and quickly grabbed the pistol from Jack. It still wasn’t complete, but as he looked at the exposed connectors, ideas started to form. With his free hand, he started rummaging through the box until he found what he was looking for. It was a block with three different sized crystals on the end. Like the ‘barrel’, it snapped into place with ease.

Flipping open the chamber, he replaced the empty power cell with a charged one and the pistol lit up. The whole thing looked like a long barreled revolver and was in need of a paint job.

“See, I knew you could do it.” Jack laughed at the dumbfounded expression on Chris’s face as he turned the now completed weapon over in his hands. This certainly explained why it was so easy to integrate Taylor’s shield system into his costume.

Now that he really looked at it, most of the discarded parts had similar connectors and he could see in his mind just how they could be put together.

“Jack, I could kiss you!” He took a breath and tried to calm himself down. “I need to test this, want to come?” He removed the powercell and placed the gun, along with a couple of other parts that should also fit the connectors on the pistol, into a bag.

He couldn’t wait to see Armsmaster later.

The rig had its own firing range, just long and wide enough to test most weapons. Not only did it have the usual paper targets, it also had holographic targets and shields to contain more powerful weapon discharges. It even had a dozen different tinker-made sensors that could analyze almost anything used on the range.
If you wanted to fire anything more esoteric or oversized, then you needed permission to use the rig’s
outdoor range that fired out into the ocean, or the joint PRT/BBPD training range just outside the
city.

As Chris put the pistol back together, Wheeljack grabbed a tablet that would let him control the
holograms, shields and tinker-sensors.

“We’ll start simple,” he said. “Stationary target at 15 yards?”

Chris nodded and pulled on a headset. He didn’t expect the gun to be loud, but Miss Militia more or
less owned the range, and her rules were law here.

The first shot was on the gun’s lowest setting. In theory, it would be like getting punched and hit
with a stungun at the same time. He hit the target a little higher than he liked. Maybe he could build
an attachment that slaved his pistol to a targeting reticule on his suit’s HUD?

Upping the power, he fired again before upping the power even more. Once he reached the power
limit, he started swapping the barrel and forward assembly for other parts and noting the different
effects.

Several looked like they would work as stun weapons, while two of them were strictly lethal.
The first caused whatever he shot to burst into flames, while the other created a constant stream that
cut clean through the target, draining the cell in seconds. Behind him, Jack carefully kept records of
everything.

Swapping the drained power cell for a fresh one, Chris grabbed the final front end and snapped
everything into place. He was already planning to build a second pistol. As long as he stuck to the
non-lethal stuff, he shouldn’t have any problems getting it approved.

Lining up the shot, he flicked the pistol to low power and pulled the trigger.

The gun fired with a bang loud enough to nearly deafen him even with his ear protection, unloading
the entire power cell into a single shot that strained the force fields protecting the far wall.

Behind him, Wheeljack pitched over as the shock caused his systems to reboot.

He was still standing stock still when Miss Militia came running into the room. “What in God’s name
was that?”

Wheeljack was just climbing to his feet, tapping his head in an effort to get his audio systems back
online, so she focused on Chris.

Chris carefully put the pistol down before turning sheepishly to face her. “...sorry?”

Josie woke slowly to a world of pain made hazy by medication. Her head felt like it was splitting
open, while the rest of her was thankfully numb.

She assumed that she was in a hospital, but the drab gray walls looked more like a prison cell. There
were no windows, and the only light came from the fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling.
An ancient heart monitor was beeping next to her bed and nearly a dozen IV tubes were running into her body. She felt a twinge of worry that she couldn’t feel any of them, but she put that down to the painkillers.

They couldn’t do anything about the memories though. That thing standing over Saint’s body, pretending to care...

*She promised…*

$L_iars$

Saint had been a good man. Almost everything they earned was channeled into various charities and support funds, and he always looked after the families of those who worked for him. He’d known, almost from the moment she’d arrived, what she was, and he’d never held it against her. Never tried to use her.

*“Join the Dragonslayers… one last job.”*

Well fine, her debt was clear and she was free. Dragon, that child, she would make them pay.

She didn’t have time to lie here. she needed to gather whatever was left of the Dragonslayers and run. Dragon was probably already closing in.

She tried to sit up, but she couldn’t move. She tried again, but a feeble twitch of her left arm was the best she could do. Everything below her neck was dead weight. She considered teleporting, but discarded the idea. but Lying in a heap on the floor wouldn’t do her any good.

Straining, putting all the effort she could into the attempt to stand, she tried desperately to make her body obey. Her head dropped back onto the pillow and she screamed in frustration.

Someone must have heard her, as a minute later the door opened and Nestor stepped into the room. His face was sunken, like he hadn’t slept in days, and his skin was pale with a waxy shine.

He gave her a weak smile. “Ah you’re awake! Good, I was worried you were too far gone.”

“You? What happened, where are we? Why can’t I move?” She fired the questions off quickly, one after another, without giving him time to answer.

Sighing, he walked over to check on the heart monitor. He fiddled with it briefly, muttering something under her breath before taking an epipen out of his pocket and sitting in the chair next to her bed.

“I was afraid of this,” he said as he pressed the pen against her leg and injected its contents. “I’m sorry Josie, but, Armsmaster put two rounds into your spine. The medics did everything they could, but even if they had a fully equipped operating room, there would have been almost nothing they could do. Between the bullets and complications from the radiation, you’re probably going to be paralysed for the rest of your life.”

She could feel the tears stinging her eyes, and she wanted to rant and scream at the injustice of it all. But she wouldn’t, not yet. Saint’s killers needed to be brought to justice, and the Dragonslayers needed a leader. She pushed all her anger and despair to the back of her mind. She would deal with it
later.

Nestor had sat quietly by her side, giving her time to compose herself. She was almost grateful for it.

“Can you fix this?” she asked.

There was a faraway look in his eyes. “No... I’m sorry, but this is beyond me... however, I might be able to build something... Give me a couple of days to think?”

It wasn’t what she wanted to hear, but it was better than nothing. “Fine, now where are we?”

“We’re on the coast, not too far from where Newfoundland used to be. I think this place used to be a clinic or something.”

He waved at the heart monitor. “The men looted that from an abandoned hospital and these,” he held up the silver epipen with a green band on it, “came from our people in Brockton Bay.” He stopped as a brief coughing fit hit him.

“As for what happened? We got our asses kicked. After Armsmaster put you down, I triggered an emergency teleport. Half of us got left behind and of those who did make it? Well... so far only one person has died from radiation poisoning.”

“Radiation?” That was the second time he had mentioned it.

He shrugged. “Fast, efficient or safe. I did my best to fix the thing, but that teleporter was shot to begin with. Everyone who went through it took a massive dose of radiation, and it’s not the kind that gives you superpowers.” He laughed weakly at his joke. “Honestly, without this stuff we would probably all be dead.”

He brandished another injector, using it on himself. “We barely had time to get you stable and loaded up with anything we could grab before the law arrived.”

“What were you able to save?”

“Erm, food, water, plenty of guns, one of those mobile base truck things.” Nestor was just itching to work on that, Josie was sure. “They’re still going through everything, so I’ll have someone bring you the full list once they finish.”

She considered what Nestor had told her. Saint wasn’t a fool, he’d considered the possibility they would be found. The Dragonslayers knew what to do and there were caches hidden all over the place. This was a setback, nothing more.

It dawned on her that Nestor was very carefully not saying something important.

“What aren’t you telling me?” She tried to look threatening, but the effect was somewhat ruined by her condition.

“I... managed to bring a copy of Wyvern with me. It’s a backup I made when we took over Dragon’s base.”

Her look should have reduced him to a pile of ash. “And you brought it here! That thing helped kill Saint! It’s probably broadcasting its location as we speak!”
He leant forward, a frown on his face. “Who do you think you are talking to?” he whispered, his voice low and threatening.

It was easy to forget that Nestor ran a car theft ring for years, both before and after gaining powers. While he tended to fall apart in the presence of law enforcement, his rivals often vanished mysteriously, along with their cars.

In that moment, even if she refused to show it, Josie felt genuinely afraid. They were alone in the room and she was helpless.

Nestor sat back and gave her a cool look. “I understand Saint was important to you, so let’s just put your little outburst down to stress and move on, hmm?”

She nodded and he continued, “Now, yes, I brought a copy of Wyvern with me, but it’s offline and will remain so until I can say for sure it will obey us. Understand?”

Refusing to speak and give him any satisfaction, she simply nodded.

“Good, ’cause the way I see it? We are stuck together. The Dragonslayers have been declared terrorists by the PRT. Almost every wannabe hero and cape group between here and London is looking for us. On the other side of the fence, most of the larger groups want us dead on sight. What’s more, the Gesellschaft now know I’m alive, so I can’t just cut and run.”

Maybe she was just numb after everything that had happened, but that didn't surprise her much. Whatever else it was, Dragon was still a hero to most of the public. Its contributions to the Endbringer fights alone had earned it the respect of heroes and villains alike.

By now, Josie suspected that cover stories had already been released. Even if the Dragonslayers went public, would anyone believe them? Probably not.

*This is our fight now.*

“You’ve made your point, we’re better off working together.”

“Good,” his cold demeanor softened as he spoke. “I’ll let the men know you’re awake. The news will be good for them. Then I’ll start work on getting you up and about.”

Josie watched him go, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

*$Vengeance*$

First, she would take care of Dragon and the girl. After that, she would make that woman pay.
“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” Dad asked. “I can give you a ride if you like.”

“Dad, I’ll be fine,” I repeated. He was fretting again, but I couldn't bring myself to be annoyed with him. It had only been a week since I was kidnapped by ‘terrorists’ after all.

Dragon had provided me with a new home computer that made even my jury rigged supercomputer look outdated – which I admit, it was – so I could keep up with my work from home. The concussion had cleared up and Amy had given me a clean bill of health, so it was time to go back to school.

Sighing, I decided to prove my point. I walked outside, stood by Dad’s truck and waved him over.

He was barely in arms reach of me when Ravage growled in warning, making Dad jump. He looked around in shock, before realising the bot was under his truck.

“See, Ravage is going to be keeping an eye on me the whole way.” It was at this point that Steeljaw decided to climb out of the back of the truck and sit protectively beside me. “They both will.”

I’d considered having Steeljaw stay hidden, but changed my mind. While Ravage might be ‘a thing of mist and shadows,’ Steeljaw had the subtlety of a brick.

Maybe I shouldn't have painted him bright yellow?

“I thought you were trying to keep quiet about being a cape,” Dad said.

I shrugged. “Why bother? People know who I am, I can hear them whispering when they see me.”

By the look on Dad’s face, I had to imagine he’d heard similar things from the people at the docks.

“Alright, Taylor. Just be careful, okay?” He ruffled my hair and smiled at me.

“Daaad!” I whined. It was nice being able to joke around with Dad again. I knew he was spending a lot of time with Rung, something I’d been careful not to mention. I liked to think the little bot was doing us both some good.

Convincing Dad was one thing, convincing myself was another.

By the time I reached the corner of the street, I could already feel the nervousness return. Part of me wanted to turn around and ask Dad for a ride, but I refused to give in. If I gave up now, I knew I would always be afraid of some nut-job attacking me on the streets.

I took a deep breath and pushed on. The weather was nice this morning and I’d decided to jog to school. Steeljaw was easily keeping pace with me and Ravage was just behind us, flitting from one hiding place to another.

Anyone who tried to bother me was in for a nasty surprise. I’d unlocked his Null-Rays, so Ravage could shoot anyone he felt like.
As I jogged, I could feel the knot of tension easing up. I hadn’t been joking when I told Dad there was no point trying to hide my identity. Everywhere I went, I felt like people were watching me. At school, I’d heard more than a few people say they wanted to ‘bag the Tinker’. The thought made me feel sick.

Jogging along with Steeljaw not only made me feel safer, it was also fun. I found myself speeding up and slowing down randomly, occasionally giving the lion a gentle nudge. In response, he started bouncing around me like an excited puppy.

Even Ravage joined in, occasionally coming out of hiding to give chase.

We were still playing when I reached Arcadia and I had to stop outside the gates to catch my breath. The pair of them were definitely joining me on my morning runs from now on.

Straightening up, I turned to Steeljaw. “I want you to stay here, okay?” I tried to be firm with him but I couldn’t stop myself laughing when he let out a disappointed huff.

“I’m sorry, you’re not allowed inside,” I explained. I’d checked, they counted my bots as bringing a weapon to school.

Huffing again, he jumped up onto the wall and laid down on it so he could see anyone who came through the gate. I wasn’t entirely sure where Ravage was, but that was intentional. If I didn’t know where he was, I couldn’t get into trouble if someone saw him. Right?

Giving Steeljaw’s paw a quick stroke, I walked through the gates. I’d drawn quite a crowd and a few people even had their phones out. *Fine, let them stare.* I did my best to act like Vicky and ignored them.

Lori was standing not too far away. We’d been speaking on PHO and she’d known I was coming today. Her expression was slightly bemused.

“Taylor... what the hell?” she asked.

I just laughed and made my way inside. “Come on, I’ll tell you later.”

School had been a lot of fun. Vicky thought bringing Steeljaw was the best idea ever, while Amy had insisted on giving me another check-up.

“There must be something wrong if you thought this was a good idea,” she had said.

She was joking - I think.

Of course, when no one was watching, I caught her playing with him anyway. She actually had quite a nice laugh.

Right now, I was really looking forward to getting to the rig. While I was at home, I’d been emailing Jack new ideas and designs and I wanted to make a start on some of them.

There was a large crowd gathered by the ferry terminal after school, and I felt a nervous twitch at the sight of them. I assumed they were the latest tour group waiting to board the ferry.
There were actually two ferries that ran out to the rig: one for visitors and the other for staff. I could take the staff boat to the rig, but I would still need to walk past the crowd to get there. Then again, I had just spent the day being shadowed Steeljaw and Ravage, so there was no point being shy now.

Pulling my hood up, because when it came down to it, I was shy, I made my way to the terminal. A few people watched me go and one child even worked up the nerve to ask for my autograph. Her question took me by surprise and caused me to stop. She looked so nervous I was worried she would burst into tears if I said no.

Taking a breath – and desperately trying to remember everything I had been taught about dealing with people – I did my best to smile, despite my own nerves, and knelt beside her.

"Of course," I said, taking the paper – a group picture of the wards that was taken just after I joined – and pen from her hands. "What was your name?"

It took me nearly five minutes – and a dozen signed autographs – before I was able to extract myself and get on the boat. I let out a relieved sigh that got me a sympathetic look from the driver.

How on Earth did Vicky deal with this all the time? It was exhausting. Still, I didn’t think I made too big a fool of myself.

I was surprised to find Dragon and Wheeljack waiting for me at the dock. He’d been at the rig the entire time I’d been at home, so I hadn’t seen him since my visit to Canada.

"Hey Taylor, heard you had some excitement at the docks," he said, his fins flashing with amusement.

"Please don’t remind me," I groaned, getting a laugh from Dragon.

Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I’d actually seen her since the attack. We had spoken to each other plenty of times, and she kept trying to apologise for getting me kidnapped.

This was still the first time I had seen her ‘in person’ since the ‘upgrade’. She’d made some minor changes to her body, adding weaponry and even tweaked the insignia on her chest. It looked like an angular dragon’s face and the eyes and colour gave it enough similarities to my own.

"Dragon," I smiled at the older Tinker.

"Hello, Taylor, how are you feeling?"

"Better, now. I was starting to go a bit stir crazy at home, to tell the truth."

We made our way into the base, Dragon taking care to duck through doorways. "So Jack, anything happen while I was away?"

"Hmm, it’s been fairly calm here actually. Even the gangs have gone quiet since the last raid."

"Really, I thought they would be quick to grab new territory…” It’s what they normally did when a rival was weakened.
“I think the raid surprised them,” Dragon said. “The PRT only tolerates the gangs because they’re too difficult to root out entirely. The raid reminded them just how much force the PRT can bring to bear.”

Made sense, I suppose. The PRT usually didn’t risk coming down hard on the gangs for fear of getting innocent people caught in the crossfire. The Merchants had pushed just hard enough to get a response, so now everyone was watching to see if it would happen again.

Jack nodded and continued with his list. “Perceptor made some improvements to the refinery, and I finished six of those protoforms you designed.”

That surprised me enough that I stopped walking and turned to face him. “Six? It hasn’t even been a week. How did you manage that?”

“Ch –” Jack cut himself off, as we were still in the more public section of the base. “Kid Win gave me a hand.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he’s been working like mad all week. He’s been really enthusiastic since he worked out his specialisation.”

“Oh? Armsmaster mentioned something about that,” Dragon said. “He was really pleased with him. Do you know what it is?”

“Modular design. It’s impressive when you think about it. Actually, while helping me with the protoforms, he came up with a couple of ideas you might like.”

“Cool,” I said. “I’ll talk to him later. Right now, I want to try sparking one of the protoforms. Which ones did you… get… done?” I trailed off when I saw the state of my workshop.

“Ah,” Jack said, rubbing the back of his head, “I knew I was forgetting something.”

My workshop was nearly full to bursting with boxes of different sizes and shapes. The larger ones were on the floor and almost every flat surface was covered by smaller ones. Windblade was standing on a nearby pile and reading through a stack of paper, while Waspinator was reading out labels to her.

“Jack, what did you do?”

“It wasn’t me!” he protested. “They arrived this morning. A couple of PRT guys just dropped them off and left.”

Hearing us, Windblade and Wasp flew over. “This is the shipping manifest,” she said, hovering nearby. While I took a look through it, Dragon carefully walked into the workshop and started examining the boxes.

Rattrap came walking out from between the boxes, holding a large box of chocolates above his head.

“Ey boss, there’s a whole pile of this stuff in here!” he said.

I idly noticed Jack had changed Rattrap’s alt-mode and painted him a matte brown. A rat? Fitting, I
I recognised a couple of the descriptions on the manifests. One of them was the medi-gun I’d tried to request – and was denied – weeks ago, another was a battery unit.

Every box was loaded with tinkertech and a couple even had polite notes attached, or in some cases, chocolate. Most of the notes were along the same lines with them apologizing for my kidnapping, wishing me well, offering words of encouragement and so on. Reading between the lines, it was clear what they really wanted.

With a sigh, I put the paper down. “Is this going to become a normal thing?” I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of the different directors trying to manipulate me for the sake of my thinker power.

Dragon frowned. Her tail was twitching in agitation and I could feel the anger coming off her spark. “No, it won’t. Let’s clear some space while I speak to Director Piggot about this.”

With Dragon’s help, it was fairly easy to move the boxes into the now empty hanger next to my workshop. A couple of items, however, were kept, including the medi-gun and the box that had been sent by Dragon.

Just as we were finishing up, I spotted Dragon stretching her back. The action wasn’t really necessary – she didn’t have muscles, after all – but I knew from my bots that some actions were just built into the body. As she relaxed, I noticed her putting a hand on her chest, almost like she had heartburn.

I wasn’t sure if I should ask about it. Dragon hadn’t mentioned any issues with her body, but problems with a spark could become dangerous quickly.

I decided to start with a safe subject. “How’s the new body working out? Did you find out how many you can control at once?” I had to be careful. I was fairly sure my workshop wasn’t being monitored, but anyone could walk over and overhear something.

Dragon smiled. “It’s… nice, being able to move freely again. Although, it’s also a little strange being in two places at once. My body is currently sitting in my workshop and at the same time, I’m standing here talking with you. I think three is my limit, though. I can’t multitask beyond that without getting overwhelmed.”

“No problems?” I asked.

Dragon looked around, considering her answer carefully. “Actually, there is one slight issue. I’ve been getting some pains in my chest. It’s a dull ache most of the time, but sometimes it feels like I’m being stabbed.”

“Do you want me to take a look?”

“Yes.”

Putting my hand on Dragon’s arm, I let my power map out her body. Most of it looked the same as it had last time I checked, the exceptions being the new weapons she’d added and the repaired damage from the fight. None of her modifications were causing a problem that I could see, but I was getting an odd echo effect from her spark.
“Okay, could lay down on the...hmm,” I looked around my workshop. There wasn’t really any workspace big enough for Dragon to lay down on comfortably. “Jack? I think we need to build a bed or something I can use when working on bigger bots.”

Grabbing a couple of the bigger boxes from next door, we were able to make a workbench long enough that Dragon could lay across them.

Once Dragon was comfortable, I reached between the gaps on her armour and started to remove her chest plate. I wasn’t entirely sure what it was, but something about the situation – looking into Dragon’s exposed chest and spark – made me blush.

Pushing the thought down, I did my best to ignore the situation.

Dragon’s spark was burning brightly in its chamber, but I could see it flicker and pulse in what must have been discomfort. As I watched, the spark shifted and I saw the problem.

A second, smaller spark, had split off of Dragon’s. The two sparks pressed together in the chamber were the source of the discomfort. Putting my hand on the spark, something I was sure only I could do safely, I felt a flicker of recognition.

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop myself, “Congratulations, Dragon, it’s a girl!”

“What!” Dragon’s expression was a mix of horror and confusion, which only made me laugh.

Forcing myself to calm down, I tried to explain. “At some point, most likely when Saint attacked you, a portion of your spark split off from the rest. If I’m right, the smaller spark is probably Predaqueen.”

“I-I see” Dragon still looked a bit shocked, her tail was hanging limply and even her wings had lowered. I felt a bit bad about laughing at her.

“What do you suggest we do?”

“Hmm, well, the second spark should be able to power a body about the same size as Ravage. I have all the scans and notes I made when I was trying to understand Predaqueen. It shouldn’t take long to build her a new body, right Jack?”

“I could have one finished by tomorrow afternoon.”

I carefully started to replace Dragon’s chest. “I know it’s uncomfortable, but neither of you are in any danger for the short term and until she has a body of her own, this is the safest place for her. Just take it easy for now and you’ll be fine, is that okay?”

Sometimes, when fixing one of my bots, I felt more like a doctor than anything else. Right now, that feeling was stronger than ever.

Dragon sat up and placed a hand on her chest, before giving me a nod. “Yes, thank you.”

She looked a bit dazed but the PA announced that all the Wards were to report to the common room before I could say anything.

“You’d better get going,” Dragon insisted.
“What about you?”

“I’m a little too old to be a Ward,” Dragon said with a chuckle. “I’ll be fine. Just a little surprised, that’s all.”

Leaving her with Jack, I stopped to make a quick call to Rung. The little bot would be the best person to talk to her while I was attending the meeting.

The others were already there by the time I reached the common room. Most gave me a friendly wave or greeting, while Vista moved to stand beside me, giving me a quick hug before turning her attention back to Miss Militia, who was carrying a clipboard that was overflowing with paper.

“Hello everyone,” she said, “I know a tour is on the way, but I have a couple of things I need to cover, so I’ll try to keep it short. First, given recent events, ‘solo patrols’ are banned.”

Strictly speaking, there were no such things as solo patrols. PRT regulations demanded a minimum of two people per patrol at all times. There was no actual rule against them, and the PRT tended to look the other way, but I guess between my kidnapping and the trouble Shadow Stalker caused, they had decided to make an actual rule about it.

“Second, Skidmark, Squealer and Mush are being transported out of the city later this week and I’m looking for volunteers to protect the transports. We will be moving them separately to reduce the risk of a breakout.” She handed a sheet of paper to Aegis, who immediately signed it and passed it on.

When it reached me, a quick glance showed almost every Ward had signed up and I quickly added my name to the list.

As the paper made its rounds, Miss Militia flipped to another page on the clipboard and sighed. “And finally, the corporate team ‘Concert’ will be making an appearance in the city this week.”

After she finished, the Wards let out a collective groan.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Vista.

“Corporate teams are sponsored by big companies,” she explained. “They tend to be useless and joint patrols are a joke.”

I decided not to point out that I was a sponsored cape, since I doubt Dragon counted as a ‘big company’.

“I’ve never heard of this group, why are they coming here?” Aegis asked Miss Militia, who shrugged in response.

“Apparently, they’re a new team and they decided Brockton Bay is next on their publicity tour.”

“It’s because their sponsor got into trouble,” Dennis said. “They’re rushing to get the team as much exposure as possible so people will forget the scandal.”

Aegis gave him an odd look. “Since when did you know so much about corporate politics?”
“They were in a magazine I read the other week,” Dennis said with a shrug.

While they talked, I did a quick search for the team on Rewind. It was easy enough to find them, they had their wiki pages already set up and their own website, complete with image gallery…

What…

They were what you would expect for something put together as part of an ad campaign.

There were two women and two men, all of different ethnicities and with clearly defined ‘roles’. One of the men looked older than the others and was probably the ‘leader’. He had a strong chin and beard.

The other man was clearly supposed to be the ‘cool’ team member. His costume left his slicked back hair and dark skin exposed in places and his ‘mask’ had what looked like built in sunglasses.

There was a smaller woman with dark hair wearing… I wasn’t sure what it was called, but it looked Japanese and showed off her legs. Her mask was white with red markings on it and looked fox-like.

What really caught my attention was the blonde woman. She was the second tallest of the team with a body that was just…

“There is no way those are real!” I protested. They were bigger than my head!

Tapping Vista on the shoulder, I showed her a picture of the team. She took one look at the photo and threw Dennis a dirty look. “Oh, of course you know who they are.”

Dennis had the decency to blush. “It’s not like that! I was stuck in a waiting room for hours and they were in a couple of the magazines.”

“Sure they were.”

“Oh come on Missy, you know I only love you,” Dennis shot back, trying to recover from his embarrassment.

Missy flushed red, reaching out to hit him before Miss Militia interrupted her.

“All right that’s enough,” she said, not even bothering to hide the amusement in her voice. “As part of their ‘tour’, they have requested joint patrols.”

Several of the Wards groaned. Vigilantes were tolerated as long as they didn’t go too far, and were often encouraged to either join or at least become affiliated.

Capes who signed up as affiliates could join on official patrols, and were often asked to fill in when the Protectorate needed the extra numbers. The cape could also call the Protectorate as backup in a fight or for help with legal problems.

“I expect you all,” she gave Dennis a pointed look, “to be on your best behaviour while they’re here.”

As the meeting broke up, I walked over to Miss Militia, wanting to share a couple of ideas I had for the prisoner transport.
My talk with Miss Militia had been short, but she’d been impressed enough that she would bring up what we had discussed with Armsmaster and Director Piggot.

With that done, I made my way back to my workshop. I wasn’t in costume yet and I had a patrol scheduled in a little bit. I also sent a picture of the corporate team to Amy while I was walking.

Matrix: We are supposed to be patrolling with these people this week. Any suggestions?

Amy: A puncture repair kit? 😄

I choked back a laugh and sent my reply. I even managed to get her to meet for lunch this weekend. With any luck, I could introduce her to another one of my new bots. One of the protoforms was intended to be a medic after all.

When I reached my workshop, Dragon appeared to have recovered from her shock and was busy helping herself to some energon. All of my bots had some form of mouth – even Jack had one under his faceplate – and with it, a throat that connected to their fuel tanks.

The energon refinery was still slow, but it was producing more than enough for now, provided Dragon didn’t down it all at once again.

“Feeling better?” I asked

Putting her glass down, Dragon nodded. “Yes, thank you. I do have one question though. Is it safe for me to transform?”

“Yeah. As long as you take it slow, you’ll be fine.”

“That’s good,” she said, before waving at the refinery. “My new workshop should be finished next week. I think we should consider either building another refinery there or moving this one.”

As we continued to discuss the idea, I saw Jack busy watching the news on one of the screens.

Personally, I don’t know what he saw in it. It was one of the more sensationalistic channels, the sort that thought controversy was good news. They made a habit of harassing celebrities and capes until they got a reaction they could use.

The presenter was talking about Dragon. After the attack, it had been decided that no one else should be caged until a full investigation could be completed. According to Dragon, Alexandria was helping to cover up the truth about her existence. I wish I’d been able to meet her.

“For those who are just joining us, our topic today is the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center, better known as the Birdcage.

“The recent attack by the Dragonslayers has raised a number of important questions about the Birdcage. Is the prison truly as secure as we have been told? There has been no comment from Dragon or the PRT, but an inside source told us that the Dragonslayers made a number of threats,
including the release of the Birdcage inmates and the opening of Simurgh containment zones.

“Joining me tonight is Senator Blackrock, a long-time, outspoken critic of the Birdcage.”

The camera panned out, showing a man who looked to be in his mid to late thirties, with slicked back hair and glasses. Unlike the host, who was in a suit, Blackrock was wearing a black turtleneck sweater.

“Thank you John, I'm happy to be here,” Blackrock said with an easy smile.

“It’s true, I have often said the Birdcage is inhumane, but the real problem here is Dragon. Whether or not the Dragonslayers were successful, the fact remains that by attacking her, they were able to access not just the Birdcage, but the Simurgh containment zones and even Ellisburg.”

“You think Dragon has been given too much authority?”

“In a word? Yes. No one person should have so much authority, yet we are supposed to trust the judgement of a woman who has never been seen in public.”

Ugh –“Turn it off Jack,” I said, before turning my attention to Dragon. “How do you put up with people like that?”

She shrugged, and it still surprised me just how natural her movements had become. “I’m used to it. As for Blackrock himself? He’s just bitter. He owns a number of companies that have tried to compete with me in the past. He’s tried a number of times to get some authority over the Birdcage. Although, in this case, he’s not exactly wrong.”

“You agree with him?”

“To a point,” she said. “There does need to be a review of the Birdcage. Judges are being increasingly quick to sentence people to it.”

“You’re talking about Canary?”

She nodded. “Among others, Personally, I’m pushing for an oversight committee to be formed, so that they can decide who will get the final say on whether or not someone deserves being caged.”

Mulling it over, I made my way over to the protoforms Jack had built.

Most of them still needed a bit of tweaking, but this one was ready to go. He wasn’t as tall as Jack, having more armour and a stockier frame instead. Putting my hand on his chest, I realised Jack had taken some liberties with this design.

I’d originally designed him with tracks, but Jack had swapped them for the anti-grav system Kid Win gave me a while back. This meant his alt-mode would be a futuristic looking hover-tank.

A modified Null-Ray formed his main cannon, which was mounted in his chest and useable in both forms. A smaller barrel ran alongside it that could be loaded with rubber bullets. Jack’s containment foam grenade launcher was also fitted to the bot’s shoulder. Thanks to energon, I didn’t have to worry so much about energy consumption and I could afford to be more elaborate with my designs, incorporating more weapons and abilities.
Igniting the bot’s spark, I ran him through some basic tests while I rested before my patrol.

I was on patrol with Vista and Kid Win tonight, and we were working our way south, staying roughly in ‘neutral’ territory that was not held by any of the gangs.

I’d left my new bot back at the base. I didn’t want to take him out until his personality had asserted itself. Instead, Ravage and Steeljaw were running alongside me and Vista while Waspinator was up above with Kid Win.

“So why do you hate sponsored capes so much?” I asked Vista as we rounded the corner. We were on a relatively safe route – probably because it was my first night back on duty – so we were taking it easy.

“I don’t hate them, I just think most of them are useless.”

Hearing us, Kid Win dropped down and snorted. “Vista, last week you called them ‘cardboard capes’.”

“Well, it’s true! I know people accuse us of caring more about PR than stopping crime, but even the police have to worry about PR these days! The PRT has been around for less time than the police and there are more criminals than heroes, so I can at least see why we need PR even if I don’t like it.”

Steeljaw nudged against Vista’s arm, drawing a smile from her. “Look, there are basically two types of sponsored teams. The good ones are like New Wave, they’re not perfect, but at least they’re trying and they put catching villains above looking good… Barbie being an exception.”

I winced at the name and felt bad at not defending Vicky. I was, like most of the Wards, trying to stay out of that whole situation. Vista had a rather blatant crush on Gallant, who was dating Glory Girl. He was either oblivious, which I doubted, or choosing to ignoring it.

I know I wanted to avoid teen drama, but I couldn’t help but be drawn to it, especially when it was happening to other people.

“What about the other type?” I asked, trying to distract her and get the discussion back on track.

Vista huffed but continued with, “The other type are the ‘cardboard capes’. They exist purely to look good for the cameras. If we patrol with them, they will insist on sticking to places like the boardwalk and constantly stop to pose for pictures.”

I was a little surprised at the venom in her voice and decided to cut the conversation short. Next to me, Kid Win was messing with his phone. Then a message flashed up on my HUD.

[Kid Win: Remember, Vista is the ‘cute’ one. She gets singled out for pictures a lot.]

Ah, that explained her annoyance. Maybe I could find something to distract her? I sent a command to Wasp to start spiraling outwards from our location. With any luck, he would find some gangers for her to take her frustration out on.

We walked on in silence before Waspinator piped up. *Waspinator seezzz trouble, bad guyzzz fighting up ahead!*"
A small window appeared on my HUD, showing what Wasp was seeing. It was too dark to make out any details, but it looked like someone was getting a beating.

Vista and I broke into a run while Kid Win radioed it in. Rounding the next corner, we had to cut through an alley to reach the fight.

We were off the main streets and moving through the back alleys. There were no streetlights here and most of the windows were dark, so it was the perfect place if you needed some privacy or wanted to set up an ambush. Kid Win was flying low, as we didn’t want to risk getting separated.

Up ahead, we could see two people, both were in dark clothing and one was on the ground while the other was stomping on them.

Hearing our approach, the attacker looked up, giving me a clear look at the black hockey mask and hood she was wearing. Shadow Stalker! I felt a flash of anger and extended my Null-Ray. A glance at my HUD told me it was still set to stun, barely.

Before I could say anything, Shadow Stalker raised her arm. My HUD flagged the crossbow in her hands, but I was already diving.

I tackled Vista to the ground even as she bent the space between Shadow Stalker and us, sending the arrow into a nearby wall where it shattered. Before I could return fire, Shadow Stalker jumped, shifting to her Breaker state so she could reach the nearest rooftop.

“Ravage, Steeljaw, go!” I shouted and the cats sprinted down the alley. Climbing to my feet, I ran to her victim. He was bleeding badly and there was an arrow embedded in his shoulder, worryingly close to his heart.

“Kid, Vista, go after her, I’ll look after him. Wasp, don’t lose sight of her!” I ordered. I wanted to go after her so badly I could taste it. But someone needed to help him and the other two could move faster without me.

“Console, I need an ambulance at my location...

Shadow Stalker ran.

Behind her, she could hear the clatter of that bitch’s toys and shifted back into shadow, jumping between buildings. She refused to be caught here, she was better than them and she would prove it.

Shifting back, she hit the ground and rolled, using the momentum to keep moving.

The hairs on her neck stood up and she dived sideways. Kid Win’s shot missed by inches and she risked a glance backwards. He was still on his board with a new gun. Further back, she could see Vista rapidly catching up, bending space to shorten the distance between them.

One of the toys was sticking close to Vista and the other was… shit! She’d lost track of it. Throwing herself off the roof, she heard a clatter of claws behind her and smirked. Despite everything, this was almost fun.

Her time free of the Wards had been great so far. Hunting, being hunted, the moment of stillness
when she jumped and the pure thrill of the fight.

When her blood was boiling there was no time to think, only act. That was what it was really about. She never cared about right or wrong, criminals were simply acceptable targets. All she cared about was the fight, that white hot moment when the beast was free and she could run until her body screamed.

Spinning round, she took aim at the edge of the roof above her and fired. She wasn’t stupid. If she hurt one of the Wards, the PRT would hunt her across the city. Those toys however were fair game. Her shot missed the black one by inches and hit the small black and yellow drone instead.

It screamed as it fell out of the sky and Shadow Stalker took off. She couldn’t waste time reloading, so running was her best option.

Phasing through a wall, she changed direction. It looked like she was in a small office with thankfully thin walls. Shifting through the wall between the buildings, she changed direction again. She knew how the Wards worked. Once she was out of sight they would have to give up.

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I was doing my best to slow the bleeding when the video feed from Wasp cut off. For one terrifying moment, I thought he’d been killed. Thankfully, I realised I could still feel his spark.

Bringing up the feed from Steeljaw, I saw him and Vista stop to pick Wasp up. The bolt was embedded into his tail assembly, roughly were his legs should be. Nothing vital but it was probably painful.

*Damn it! She’s gone into that building!* Kid Win called on the radio. He circled round the building a couple of times but there was no sign of her. Ravage might have been able to pick up her scent but by then she would be long gone.

“Don’t worry about it, we’ll have another chance,” I replied. I was kinda pissed she had escaped, but I had more important issues.

“Console, where is that ambulance?”

Stalker had missed his heart by inches and the arrow was the only thing keeping him from bleeding out. Despite this, he was still awake somehow. He kept struggling against me, calling me some colourful names, but he was clearly getting weaker as his last insult came out in a slur. The band on his arm was covered in blood from a different wound, but I could make out Empire colours.

Saving an Empire thug from Shadow Stalker, the irony was not lost on me.

There was movement above me and I raised my gun just in case Stalker had come back to finish the job. It turned out to be Kid Win and Vista. In the distance, I could hear the approaching sirens.

The moment they arrived, I stepped back to let them work, telling them everything I knew about the injury. The police were close behind and I knew we were going to be here awhile.

“So,” I asked Kid Win, “Jack said you had a couple of ideas?”

________________________________________________________

AN: Sorry, only a short chapter this week but there was stuff I wanted to cover before introducing
'Concert'
It was Saturday morning and I was currently in my workshop, glaring at the device in front of me. I was supposed to be getting ready for patrol, but I came in early so I could do a bit more work.

I didn’t need to sleep anymore, not since the Merchant raid, but it was relaxing to do every now and then. After another dream of that underground bunker and about a dozen random scribbles, I’d decided to try building whatever it was my power was so fixated on.

As long as I didn’t focus too hard, I could almost remember the details. It was like trying to grab water: the harder you tried the more it slipped away. After nearly a week of trial and error in my spare time, I think I had finally produced a mockup of it.

It had started as an empty spark chamber before I’d built a shell around it. The shell had an opening at the front and was made from a new alloy that could absorb and store different types of energy. It had a rich coppery sheen and had taken me three attempts to get something that felt right.

Now it was bigger than a tennis ball, with a pair of silver handles on both sides.

I was almost finished when I realised what I was looking at was a containment system for the energy my body gave off. I’d continued to add to it as inspiration took me, but it still wasn’t quite finished.

If I pushed energy into it, I could see it flicker and glow in the centre - almost like a spark - but the moment I stopped, the energy dissipated. The whole thing, from its shape to the materials it was made from, were designed to draw in and channel energy, but I needed something to form the core that would store the charge.

“Good morning Taylor,” Dragon said as she walked into my workshop. “Any luck?”

“Not much. I know I’m missing something, but I can’t work out what.”

“Well, there’s no point obsessing over it. I’m sure you’ll figure it out eventually. Shouldn’t you be getting dressed?”

Sighing, I stood up and moved to grab my gear. “Yeah, I just thought I would give it another try.”

Dragon placed a box on the desk where I’d been working. “I’m glad I caught you before you left, I have something for you.”

Smiling, I opened the box. Inside was another set of my body suits. I already had a couple of spares, so I wasn’t sure why Dragon would bring me more. Not wanting to appear rude, I reached in and pulled one out. It had more bulk than my current ones, and almost looked like it was armoured.

As soon as my hand touched it I let out a gasp. My current suits had some tech built into them that let them connect to my armour pieces, but this?

“This is… What is this?” I asked Dragon.

“It’s based on the body suits some of the Dragonslayers were wearing. It should give you a three to one increase in strength and offer more protection.”
“You managed to do this in, what, two weeks?” Dragon had years of experience when it came to reverse engineering, but it would have taken me nearly a month to do this.

“Strictly speaking, there was nothing in it I hadn’t seen before. It was just used in a new way,” she explained as I ducked behind a screen to change.

Getting the suit on was no worse than slipping into my usual body suit, and it still had all the usual connectors for my armour.

I was just clamping the chest plate into place when Dragon noticed one of the holograms I was working on. “Thinking of making a flight pack?”

“Yeah,” I called back. “He’ll be bigger than Laserbeak, but still safe to spark. I was going to call him Dive Bomb. That reminds me, where is Predaqueen?”

Dragon smiled. “She wanted to meet Vista.”

Ah. That made sense. I’d moved Predaqueen to her own body on Tuesday, so this would be her first visit to the rig since then. The little Dragon had always been fond of Vista.

I was just pulling my helmet on when she came sprinting into the room. “Taylor, Taylor, Taylor!” Predaqueen repeated as she scurried round my feet. With a chuckle I bent down to stroke her head. She had the most adorable little purr.

Predaqueen’s new body was about the same height as Ravage, but longer. She closely resembled Dragon, but I’d removed most of the spikes, the exception being a small set of horns on her head. She even had a robot mode, although she hadn’t activated it yet.

“She’s learning fast,” I commented.

Dragon nodded, smiling warmly as the little dragon ran up and climbed into her arms. “Yes, I’m really proud of how far she’s come.” She glanced around, her eyes landing on the sheet that covered Wyvern.

“There’s still no change I’m afraid,” I told her. Wyvern was still in stasis lock; she was in such a bad state I was considering building a bot specifically for fixing her.

Dragon didn’t mention Wyvern much. In fact, I think this was the first time she’d acknowledged her to me since the attack. I think Wyvern made her uncomfortable.

“Taylor? We need to get moving or we’re going to miss our ride,” Streetwise called from the door.

I had finished sparking my newest Autobots yesterday and Dragon had managed to get them all cleared for public use. Because all their alt-modes were styled after public service vehicles, Clockblocker had dubbed them ‘Protectobots’ and the name had stuck.

I was taking the Protectobots and Warpath with me to the mall so they could get to meet people in a mostly safe location.

The Saturday morning ‘mall patrol’ was instituted with the second generation of Wards. It was a
large public area that was more or less safe, making it the perfect environment for the Wards to patrol in.

Director Piggot had made the weekly mall patrol a monthly one, feeling the Wards could be better used in other places, but Miss Militia had decided to reinstate it and used figures that proved the number of shoplifters and pickpockets dropped when the Wards were present to support her argument.

I think there was some office politics going on there. Everyone knew there was some tension between them ever since Miss Militia took control of the Wards.

The patrol itself was easy enough: wander round the mall, be visible and let people take photos, finish by noon. After that, I was going to meet Amy for lunch and introduce her to First Aid.

This was my first time on this patrol and I was with Vista and Aegis. I was already warned that some of the other Wards may turn up as some of the shops on the food court would give the Wards free food. I was torn about it if I was honest, it apparently did some good but at the same time, I didn’t really like having to deal with the public.

Vista was waiting alongside me as the Autobots climbed out of the PRT van. Warpath tugged at the day-glow cap I’d placed over his chest barrel.

“BLAM Do, I really have to wear this POW, thing?” he complained.

“If you want to go out in public? Yes, and stop playing with it,” I said.

His obsession with his cannon was a little… disturbing. He’d even tried to name it the other day. I made a note for Rung to have a long talk with him. I wasn’t quite sure where the speech problem came from either.

Hotspot, the largest of the Protectobots, stepped forward and quickly took charge. “Okay, this is a public area so no weapons and keep it polite. Expect to meet lots of children. Stay within sight of each other at all times, don’t wander off and stick to primary mode. I’m sure they don’t need tire marks all over the floor. Blades, stay on the ground.”

Blades dismissed him with a shrug. I’d styled him on a search and rescue helicopter, but I wonder if a tank would have been more appropriate.

With that, he turned and led the other bots forward.

Besides me, Vista giggled. “Energetic, isn’t he?”

I just shook my head. It was good he could take charge, but he should probably tone it down a bit.

The patrol was more or less what I was expecting. Vista and I made a slow, lazy circuit of the mall, starting on the ground floor and working our way up. Aegis had been running late and joined us halfway through.

The bots stayed within sight of me at all times, but most were quick to stop and chat with anyone who approached them.
Most of the bots were about the same height as Wheeljack so they weren’t too intimidating, the exception being Hotspot, who was a head taller. The only visible weapons they had between them was the containment foam sprayer attached to Hotspot’s alt-mode and Warpath’s cannon.

“Excuse me?” a woman with a rather pinched face asked, pointing at Warpath, “but is that… thing safe?”

Warpath was a little off to the side and was currently surrounded by children; mostly boys of course, but I did spot one or two girls. I was never the most feminine of girls myself, and I always liked to see others take an interest in things that were more traditionally considered ‘boys things’. I think Mom was to blame for that.

Warpath was clearly loving the attention, enthusiastically waving his arms as he told them some story or another, complete with sound effects. *I wonder what he’s telling them? It’s not like he’s been on patrol yet.*

Aegis stepped forward. I imagined he was giving his best charming smile under his helmet. “Of course, ma’am. All of the Autobots are certified by the PRT before they’re allowed into the field.”

“But what if something goes wrong? My phone can barely go a week without breaking –”

“My bots are lot more reliable than a cell phone!” I muttered quietly. Apparently, it wasn’t quiet enough as she quickly turned on me.

“What did you say?!” she demanded and I silently cursed myself.

“Ma’am,” I said, trying to copy Aegis’s posture, “all my Autobots have countless built in fail-safes. In this case, I have disabled all of Warpath’s weapons.” *That name didn’t seem so funny now.* “He physically cannot harm anybody without a direct order from Aegis or a member of the Protectorate.”

Most of that was bullshit; Warpath was free to do as he wished. However, quirks aside, he understood the chain of command and he knew what would happen if he did start shooting without an order.

“And what about those noises he keeps making?” she demanded, trying to draw herself up and intimidate me. It wasn’t working, since I was a good head taller than her. She was, however, doing a good job of pissing me off.

//you cannot build peace on threats//

I sighed, forcing myself to calm down. As fun as threatening her would be, it just wasn’t worth it. “It’s a quirk of his speech center, so it’s harmless. All the Autobots have a couple, it helps make them unique. If it bothers you, you can feel free to take up the matter with Dragon, since she was the one who signed off on Warpath after all.”

I think my lack of a reaction surprised her, but it certainly seemed to aggravate her.

“Of course she did, it’s just like you freaks to stick together,” she snapped before realising just what she’d said. Face glowing, she turned and stormed off.

“Did we do something wrong?” First Aid asked. He had a roll of bandages in his hand from when
he’d been teaching a couple of kids how to wrap a forearm wound.

Vista quickly gave the bot a hug and tried to distract him. “Of course not. Can you show me how to tie that off?” She pointed at the bandage he was holding.

“You okay?” Aegis asked, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Yeah,” I said, pushing the confusion back. “I’m fine.”

“I’ve met a few people like that. Not everyone likes capes after all,” Amy said as she helped herself to some fries.

I’d finished my patrol and was now up in the food court with Amy. I’d taken my armour off and left it in the PRT van, but I still had my body suit on under my jeans and hoodie. My bots were ambling around the mall in pairs.

“There are a few groups that protest against capes. They blame us for everything from the Endbringers to male impotency,” she explained with a smirk. “Mostly, they’re harmless. The more vocal ones are typically a small minority, but occasionally you meet one who goes out of their way to cause trouble. They push until they get a reaction, then they start claiming it as proof of their views. Vicky had a run in with a couple last month.”

“How bad was it?”

“Thankfully, Dean was there to calm the situation down. They were on a date when some guy came up, screaming at her for something or other.”

“Has it ever happened to you?”

She made a see-sawing motion with her hand. “A couple of people tried when I was younger, but the hospital typically keeps them away from me. A few times I’ve had people refuse to let me heal them, but those weren’t particularly bad cases. Only once has someone died because they refused to let me heal them. While there are people who argue that it’s ‘unnatural’, it’s amazing how many change their tune when it’s their life on the line.”

Her voice was thick with sarcasm, but a pained expression overcame her, one that she quickly covered up.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just…” She sighed. “I had a bad case the other day. Teenager on a motorbike, no crash helmet. I can fix everything but the brain…His family said some things...”

Moving my chair round the table, I put my arm around her shoulders. We stayed like that for a little while until I had an idea.

“What you need,” I said, doing my best impression of Vicky, “is a night in with some cheesy movies. Why don’t you come back to my place? You could even invite Vicky along.” The day we’d all spent together was fun and I’d like to it again, but this time without the concussion.

Amy looked thoughtful and we were still discussing the details when First Aid walked over,
glancing at my plate of nachos and giving me a baleful look. “Taylor, you should really try to eat better. Do know how much salt an –”

“Perfect timing,” I cut him off before he could get too far into his rant. I know he meant well but the occasional fast food wasn’t going to do me any harm. “Amy, this is First Aid. First Aid, Amy.”

Smiling in amusement, Amy wiped her hand and held it out for him to shake. Thrown by the sudden introduction, he took her hand without thinking. His entire demeanour changed the moment he realised whose hand he was shaking.

“Panacea! It’s an honor. I’ve been hoping for a chance to meet you. I had a couple of ideas, but Dr. Beckett says they are too risky, but if you’re there then nothing can go wrong–”

From mother hen to fanboy in 0.5 seconds. I tapped the excited bot on the back of the head, smiling at him. “Breathe, First Aid. Breathe.”

“What? I don’t need to – Oh! I’m sorry,” he said as he let go of Amy and made a coughing gesture to hide his embarrassment.

“Sorry about that, he’s not usually such a spaz,” I explained. “He’s a bit of a fan”

Amy’s shoulders were shaking as she tried to keep herself from laughing. “It’s fine. I can honestly say it’s not the first time it’s happened.”

“You’ll have to tell me about that later. Actually, he did bring up a good point. Dr. Beckett has given him the okay to heal people –” After nearly a week of quizzing and testing “– but he’s got a number of tinkertech healing devices that he can’t use until a certified cape healer looks at him.”

“You need me to do it?”

“If you don’t mind?”

We were still discussing the details when there was an announcement across the mall’s PA system.

The announcer was a young woman and her voice couldn’t have been filled with more false cheer.

[Ladies and gentlemen, we at INTU shopping centre would like to announce the presence of Concert on the main floor. They have decided to make a surprise visit, so anyone wishing to meet their heroes should make their way there now.]

The food court was on the top floor and since Amy and I were sitting at a table by the railings, we had a clear view of all the floors below us.

“You ever heard of them?” Amy asked.

“Yeah, that’s the corporate team I told you about.”

“Oh, the one with the balloons?”

I snorted in amusement. “Yeah, that’s them.”

When Miss Militia told us they would be patrolling with us, we’d all been made to look up their
names and powers. The picture I’d seen of them must have been a test shot as their uniforms had changed slightly.

Bass was the team leader. His costume was a blue and black bodysuit with armour plating on the chest. It had a music note painted on the front and his arms were exposed. The file said he was just a basic brute.

Treble’s costume had the same colours and music note and it covered him from head to toe. His lower face was exposed, showing his dark skin and short pencil beard beneath a pair of visor-like sunglasses. His power was ‘sound control’. Officially, the PRT classed him as a shaker/blaster.

Duette still had the Asian costume that showed off her legs, but the colours now matched her teammates. She was also the smallest of the team. She had enhanced agility and could make a semi-independent projection of herself that she could switch places with.

Lightshow was the tall blonde and clearly the team's eye candy. She wore blue leggings over a one-piece swimsuit and a black jacket. The jacket was open, showing off her impressive figure. Personally, I doubted she could actually get it closed. Her power was the ability to ‘make fireworks’. *Her words, not mine.*

“How much do you think they’re getting paid?”

“Far too much,” I muttered.

Below us, people were already gathering round to meet them. I also noticed Lightshow was talking to what looked like a reporter, and there was even a guy with a professional looking video camera. It was one of those large ones you often saw ‘reporters’ carrying around in movies.

“For a ‘surprise visit’ they look well organised,” I said to Amy as I pointed out the cameras. I also noticed Aegis. He’d made the mistake of getting too close and was now shaking hands with Bass. Vista was nowhere to be seen.

I sent an order to the Autobots to make their way back to me and to avoid Concert. As Amy turned back to our lunch the PA system crackled to life.

Rather than an announcement, it played an energetic trumpet intro.

“Gangway! Move! Move! Move!”

I turned and a young man in a red shirt and black knee-britches came running across the tables. He had a bat in his arms and was swinging it wildly. Amy and I dove out of the way as he charged past, jumping off the railing and onto the floor below.

I could hear people shouting as more of them appeared, most wearing the same shirt and knee-britches, but a couple were larger, wearing body armour and carrying what looked like miniguns. All of them had red shirts and highlights on their clothes.

From the opposite side of the mall, more people appeared, but they were wearing blue.

As the two teams met, fights began to break out between them. Several of the miniguns opened fire, spraying the walls with paint. People were starting to panic, pulling back from the centre of the mall and taking cover in the nearby shops.
There was a soft ‘putt’ noise and a glowing pill-like tube flew into the air and exploded, knocking the fighters off their feet.

In the clearing stood two men. One was tall with a sculpted physique and an eye patch, a comical looking grenade launcher in his hand. The other was a scrawny man in overalls who was carrying a large tool box, a pair of goggles hiding his face.

Reaching into his overalls, he pulled out a microphone and handed it to his partner.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” his voice boomed through the PA system, sounding like he narrated movies for a living. “Do not worry, you will not be harmed. Just relax and enjoy the show!”

I knew who they were now. Uber and Leet.

Those two idiots, a mall full of innocent people, and my armour nowhere nearby… Fuck my life.
Uber and Leet liked to call themselves rogues, but were officially listed as villians by the PRT. They generally performed video game themed crimes that they then recorded and uploaded to their website.

One time they did Mario Kart, driving through the streets on modified go-karts and throwing exploding shells at people while dressed up as Mario and Bowser. They also did Legend of Zelda, using a bank as a dungeon and robbing it while clad in Link’s clothing, complete with the Master Sword.

I’d watched a couple in the past. They could be funny, but a big part of the appeal was watching them continue to try even after failing over and over again. They were the underdogs, people you could cheer for, right up until they did something despicable. I lost interest when they performed Grand Theft Auto. Running around stealing cars and beating up prostitutes had been funny at first, until I realised what I’d been watching.

I don’t know how much of the video was staged, but watching them beat some random woman up had made me sick. I’d realised then that these two were no better than Emma.

The truly sad part was that Leet's tech could be impressive. My shield tech was derived from his after all. Unfortunately, his tech was notorious for failing. I wonder how he’d react if he knew?

The crowd started to panic as brightly coloured paintballs filled the air. Most ran for the nearest fire exit, only to find it blocked with glowing blue force fields.

“Into the shops!” I shouted. “Get in and get down!” Realising what I was doing, Amy grabbed the nearest person and pulled them in the direction we wanted them to go, repeating what I said.

Catching on, the crowd surged, pushing past me and Amy in their rush. Paintballs didn’t sound dangerous, but three grams of paintball travelling at 300 feet-per-second would easily blind you via a bad hit.

Down below, Aegis was being overrun. For every one he managed to put down, another two would charge in. His power made it hard to keep him down for long, but the constant blows from those bats had to be stacking up.

Ducking behind a pillar, I pulled my earpiece out of my pocket. The moment I had it in place, I switched to the PRT frequency.

“Console, Matrix. Uber and Leet confirmed at the downtown mall!”

“Confirming Matrix, assistance is on the way. Aegis has command.”

I switched back to the Wards frequency. All our communications ran on multiple channels with our software automatically giving priority where necessary.

Below, Aegis gave up on fighting and took off, flying directly for Uber and Leet. He was barely halfway there before one of the big guys turned on him.
Flipping a switch, his mini-gun reversed, spinning in the opposite direction. This time, there was a much greater noise when it fired. Bullets slammed into Aegis, forcing him to shield himself and change direction.

As he flew straight up, more rounds followed, hitting the walls behind him as he rose. I couldn't see any blood, so I assumed they were using non-lethal rounds. His flight was abruptly halted when he was intercepted by a grenade from Uber that sent him flying off course, crashing to the first floor several stories below.

“Aegis! I’m still on site, where do you need me?”

* Aren’t you out of costume?* he asked, groaning as he stood up.

Why would that stop me?

“I’m in my body suit and my bots are still here. Do you know where Vista is?”

*I’m trapped in the book store* Vista called. *I can’t use my power. There are too many people running about so, I’ve just locked us in!*


I smiled viciously as I gave the order. “All Autobots, weapons free!” I switched to my private channel. “Jack, I need my gear! And find out what game they’re playing.”

*Right, I’ll see what I can do!* 

There was a cheer from the second floor as Warpath charged out of a shop, throwing himself into his tank mode and firing without even bothering to remove the barrel cover. His first shot shredded it, raining pieces of it down like confetti.

“Boom! That’s what you get!” he cheered as a Null-Ray blast sent a guy in a red shirt sprawling. “Hah! I see you! Blam!” He pressed forward, his turret spinning wildly as he rained fire.

“Protectobots! Form up on me! We need to keep the civilians safe!” Hotspot ordered from the ground floor. His left arm transformed into a nozzle that connected to his containment foam tanks.

First Aid took off, transforming as he rushed to reach his team. On the first floor, Groove and Streetwise were working together, left arms converted into weapons that quickly drove the attackers back and away from the crowd of people behind them.

Blades was in the air, trying to close in on Uber and Leet. He was dodging Uber’s grenades, most of which sailed on, hitting some of their own henchmen.

*The game’s Team Fortress 2!* Rattrap said over the radio. *It’s a team based shooter. The skinny guys are Scouts, the big guys are Heavies and the last two are an Engineer and Demoman.*” Trust Rattrap to know the game; the little rat spent hours playing online games. *Both sides fight until the timer runs out or the target is met!*

Great, I couldn’t see a clock or timer anywhere, which meant there had to be a goal they were working towards.

In the middle of the chaos, Concert were still holding their own.
Treble was sending concussive blasts that made the air vibrate as they passed, the two scouts he hit fell to the ground, one was violently sick while the other struggled to stand back up. I’d considered audio weapons in the past but I’d dismissed the idea as they could be surprisingly lethal and had a tendency towards splash damage.

A mis-aimed shot from Treble clipped Blades, and while it didn’t do much damage, the change in pressure knocked him out of the air. He landed on his feet, cursing all the while, and ducked behind a pillar as a Heavy fired on him.

Bass was currently wrestling with another Heavy, the two large men struggling to get a grip on each other. Lightshow was standing with her back to a shop front. As she moved her arms, streams of multicoloured lights filled the air, stunning any scout that came near her long enough for one of the others to disable them.

The cameraman they had brought with them was huddled in a nearby corner, still filming. So far, Treble and Lightshow had barely moved out of shot. They’d be doing better if they stopped trying to pose for that fucking camera!

Duette looked to be doing the best of them. She had positioned herself in front of a shop with a pair of batons in her hands, and I could see the crowd of people behind her, refusing to move. Her glowing blue double was dashing around, tackling anyone who came too close to the shop. Occasionally, she swapped places with her copy to deliver a particularly strong, blow but she never left the crowd unguarded.

Actually, now that I noticed it, their cameraman wasn’t the only one filming. There were more than a dozen people scattered across the mall trying to record the fight. I could see arms or heads sticking out from behind pillars or the glass screens that sat under the railings. A couple were using cameras, but most were using phones. I saw one of them get hit by what I hoped was a rubber bullet, and drop their phone.

The cameras gave me an idea. Uber and Leet were making no effort to steal anything and even their thugs were only harassing people, which meant this was all for show. I quickly started looking round for the ‘snitch’. It was a small remote camera that Uber and Leet used to film their stunts. Once I spotted it near the railings on the third floor, I used Rewind’s camera as a crude targeting laser and pointed at it.

“Warpath, take it down!”

The moment Warpath started to aim, whatever software Leet used to control the snitch started weaving about in an attempt to escape. It barely made four feet before Warpath nailed it in a single shot.

“If you see any more, destroy them.” I ordered. Immediately, two more shots rang out. Warpath’s eyesight was clearly better than mine. No surprises there!

The destruction of the cameras didn’t go unnoticed.

“Hey! Not cool!” Leet shouted, pointing in Warpath’s direction. Uber turned and unloaded a volley of grenades at Warpath, bouncing them off the ceiling so they would land on him, forcing Warpath to retreat.
“Yeah, what was I thinking. Weapons fire in a packed mall, how cool!” I shouted back. “Face facts, Leet, you’re a two-bit hack!”

Leet growled and threw down the tool box he was carrying, whereupon it unfolded into a small turret with a series of beeps and clicks. The turret was circular, standing on spindly legs. From the way it was moving, I guessed it was using an independent targeting system.

“Somebody shut that bitch up!” Leet shouted, already pulling another toolbox from behind his back. Three scouts immediately started sprinting towards me.

Streetwise threw himself at one of them, ramping off some discarded shopping bags and transforming in mid-air, colliding with the scout at waist height. They crashed to the ground and Streetwise was quick to stun him.

The second scout vaulted off the railing below and slammed face first into the ceiling when it suddenly dropped down and across courtesy of Vista’s power.

The third landed on a table next to me, pressing the tip of his bat against the side of my head.

“How you doing?” he asked in the worst attempt at a bronx accent I had ever heard.

The tables in the food court were circular things supported by a central column and bolted to the ground. Grabbing the edge of the table with my hand, I heaved upwards. The cheap materials gave way and the top flipped.

Flailing his arms, he fell off the table and hit the ground with a thud that took his breath away. Before either of us could move, Amy darted forwards, putting her hand on his head. He immediately went still.

“He’s asleep,” she said breathlessly. She was trembling slightly and I really hoped it was just from adrenaline. The last thing I needed was her passing out.

Before I could say anything, there was a blue flash as a pile of armour appeared along with a bulletproof vest.

“Jack, your timing needs work,” I muttered.

*Tell Kid Win I owe him,* he replied. *That's your spare set by the way.*

Grabbing the vest and the scout’s discarded bat, I forced both items into Amy’s arms. “Here, put this on. It’s got a built in shield. If anyone comes near you, use the bat!”

She was still gaping when I reached down and pulled my hoodie off. I forced myself not to think about how many cameras were catching this. My body suit was more than thick enough to cover my modesty, but without my armour on it did tend to draw attention to my lack of curves.

“Can you see what’s going on?” I asked as I locked my boots into place.

Amy quickly pulled the vest on and looked down onto the floors below. “Uber and Leet are still there, and Aegis is stuck one floor down by a lingerie shop!”

“Right!” I pulled my helmet on and leant over the railings, taking careful aim with my Null-Ray.
Aegis didn’t have super strength. Instead, his power let him push his body beyond normal human limits. That was why it was possible for the five scouts and a Heavy to hold him down. Bringing my Null-Ray online, the Heavy went down and the Scouts quickly scattered.

*Thanks,* Aegis coughed over my earpiece as he climbed to his feet. *Any more tricks?*

“A couple, yeah. Protectobots, focus on Uber and Leet. This will end the moment they run! Warpath, concentrate fire on the remaining Heavys!”

Aegis, took off towards the other end of the mall, a heavy and a some scouts were harassing a group of people and no one else was close enough to help. This was getting silly. I could almost swear the number of scouts was increasing.

The Protectobots were gathered on the ground floor, but Uber and Leet were too focused on the advancing Concert capes to notice. Lightshow was using her fireworks like chaff, the lights and noise confusing the turrets Leet had set up. Meanwhile, Bass tried to force his way through to Uber, but was having trouble dealing with his grenades.

“Lets show them some real teamwork!” Hotspot shouted as he led the charge, drawing Leet’s attention.

Leet reached behind himself, pulling another toolbox out. I could see his open mouthed stare as the Protectobots transformed.

Groove and Streetwise turned into legs and attached themselves to Hotspot, who folded into a torso. Blades and First Aid each formed an arm.

The new bot rose to his full height, topping out at a hair under seven feet. “Defensor: online!”

“That’s cheating!” Leet shouted as he threw the toolbox to the ground.

Defensor charged forwards, a blue shield appearing on his left arm to deflect the rounds from Leet’s turret. Uber turned and fired a volley of grenades, forcing Defensor to halt and switch to a larger shield that protected him from all sides.

With a shout, Bass charged, and Uber had to change targets to keep him from getting too close. Defensor’s heavy tread was his only warning that this had been a mistake. He threw himself to the side, his grenade launcher skidding away across the floor.

Jumping smoothly to his feet, he drew a claymore sword and buckler from thin air, putting more space between him and Defensor.

“Taylor!” Amy shouted. “There’s something wrong with this guy!”

Tearing myself away from the fight, I looked at the scout she’d knocked out. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s fading away, from the inside out. I think he’s some sort of clone.”

Well that explained a lot, but if he was a copy… “Where’s the original?” I asked out loud. “This’ll all be a waste of time if he can just make more.”
Taking a picture of his face, I started scanning the crowds. Either he was one of the many scouts running around or he was hidden amongst the people watching. Between the fight and my search for the real scout, I never noticed Amy running off.

On the ground floor, Uber raised his sword, only for a shot from Warpath to snap the blade at the hilt. Throwing the useless weapon away, Uber brought his buckler up to block a blow from Defensor.

The small shield shattered, and judging by the scream, so had Uber's arm. He cradled his injured arm and staggered backwards, while Defensor took a step back.

“Status: Injured. Suggested action: Surrender.”

Cursing, Uber gave him a dirty look and reached behind himself, drawing a large pistol from thin air. This one was real, and I could hear the gunshots from the top floor. The crowds of people in the shops started screaming while anyone with sense dropped to the floor.

Defensor charged forwards, ignoring the few bullets that managed to pierce his armour. Uber backed up, but he wasn’t fast enough to prevent Defensor’s hand from closing around his gun and squeezing. Uber screamed again as his hand was crushed along with the gun.

Before Defensor could move in for the capture, a pair of heavies tackled him away from their boss.

I was distracted from the continuing battle on the main floor by a commotion behind me. I turned to see a pale Amy lowering a guy to the floor as a small gun slipped from his fingers. From my peripheral vision, I noticed the scouts vanish with their weapons all across the mall.

“He-He was trying to sneak up on us,” Amy explained and I cursed myself for not paying more attention.

With the majority of his forces gone, Leet cursed. Abandoning his turrets, he grabbed his friend and pulled him to his feet.

“Fuck this! Let’s get out of here!” he shouted. Holding on to Uber, the pair of them half-ran, half-stumbled for a nearby fire exit, the shield vanishing to let them through before snapping back into place afterwards.

With their bosses gone and the scouts no longer running interference, the remaining heavies quickly surrendered.

Lifting the scout over my shoulder, I made my way down to the ground floor, Amy following close behind. People were slowly coming out of the shops, ambling around idly as the mall exits were still blocked by forcefields. Most of them started gathering round the railings, waiting to see what would happen next.

Vista was the next to reach the ground floor. A heavy was following behind her, his latex mask removed and another heavy slung over his shoulder. “Okay, put him down then lay face down on the floor!”

“I trapped them in the book store by accident,” she said by way of explanation as the heavy did as he was told.
Aegis was the last to arrive, carrying the last of the heavies, and was soon followed by Warpath, who was dragging a collection of weapons that he’d lashed together.

“Now *boom* that’s what I call a battle! *blamo* Can I keep these?” he asked as he transformed and gave me his best attempt at puppy dog eyes. Aegis looked at me with wide eyes, making frantic no motions.

“Sorry Warpath, they’re evidence.”

Aegis breathed a sigh of relief. “Seven henchmen, one likely cape, minimal property damage, and no major injuries. Nicely done, everyone.” As he spoke, Vista and I made a start on zip tying them.

“You’re welcome,” Treble quipped as Concert approached, “not a bad day’s work. Shame the leaders got away. Still, you did good.”

I wasn’t sure if we were being complimented or insulted.

“Treble, be nice,” Lightshow chided. “They’re only kids.”

Vista bristled at Lightshow’s comment. Only the presence of an audience and Concert’s cameraman stopped her from replying. Speaking of which.

“Rewind, is that thing transmitting offsite or recording locally?” I muttered, my helmet keeping the others from hearing me.

*Local, but it’s got a wireless port on it. Why?*

“Copy the footage to Teletraan.”

“Injuries?” Duette asked, her strained voice carrying a trace of an accent.

“We’re fine, you?” Aegis said.

“A few bruises, nothing that won’t heal.” Bass’s voice was deep and gravely and for some reason I kept picturing him with a beard and a cigar, like the hero from an old western.

Aegis nodded. “Amy, I hate to ask this of you, but some people were hurt in the fighting. Could you take a look at them?”

“Sure. Matrix, you know first aid, so can you give me a hand?”

I smiled under my mask. “I can do better than that. Defensor, stand down. Protectobots, get a triage station set up. First Aid, you’re with me and Amy.”

Breaking apart, four of the five bots started trying to organise people into a line. First Aid quickly drove into a nearby pharmacy, coming back out a minute later with a couple of first aid kits.

“Efficient,” Duette said with a nod.

“Yeah, yeah. Tinkers are such –” Treble caught himself and threw the nearby camera a look. “I mean, Tinkers could do so much to make the lives of others easier.” He couldn’t have sounded less sincere if he tried. “Who knows, maybe one day they’ll stop trying to blow themselves up long
It didn’t take long to get things organised. The Protectobots helped line the injured up so that First Aid could scan them. He then moved the more serious injuries up the queue to Amy, leaving me, the Wards and First Aid to treat the less serious ones. Most of them were just bumps and scrapes, with a couple having trampled fingers or sprained ankles from trying to get away from the fight. Nothing too major.

Cold packs were given out by the pharmacy manager, a young man who was probably going to go far. He made sure to say in a loud, clear voice – where the camera would see/hear it – that they were happy to ‘donate supplies to those injured in today’s attack.’

As he threw in some bottles of soda and water for us and Concert, I was willing to ignore his attempt at marketing.

There had been a couple of people who were too badly injured to move, though. One had lost an eye to a paintball while the others had attempted to fight back against the scouts and had taken a beating for their troubles. They were, of course, treated immediately by Amy.

The members of Concert were still talking to their cameraman. Lightshow was apparently recounting the fight, complete with over the top gestures. The cameraman was having trouble keeping the camera level; it kept slowly lowering before snapping back to her face. *If she keeps jumping like that, she’s going to bounce right out of her top.*

During a momentary lull, I checked up on Amy.

“You okay?” I asked. She looked exhausted, her face still pale.

“I’m fine,” she said quickly. I didn’t want to remove my helmet, so I just stared at her in the hope she would get my meaning.

She sighed. “Can we still go to your place? After all this, I think I need it.”

“Sure.” I’d almost forgotten about that.

I’d tried examining the shields, but my power would only work on the hardware itself, not the projections, and I couldn’t reach the devices. Because we were in no real danger and the company that owned the mall didn’t want us blowing holes in the walls, we were forced to wait.

It had only taken twenty minutes, but we were most of the way through the injured line when
whatever was powering the shields finally ran out of power. Immediately, police and paramedics came charging in.

They were followed by Armsmaster, Miss Militia and, to my surprise, Steeljaw and Ravage. The cats came trotting proudly up to me and I realised Ravage was carrying something in his mouth. It looked almost like a backpack, two to three inches thick with some straps on the top and bottom. The straps looked like they had been cut and there were teeth marks all over the device.

I didn’t need to touch it to know it was tinkertech. “How on earth did you get that?”

“They came with me, I didn’t even realise they were in my jeep until we arrived and they went charging off.” Miss Militia’s eyes crinkled in a way I knew to be a smile. “I found them trying to maul Uber and Leet.”

“Oh-oh that’s…” I bit my lip to stop myself from smiling. “Did they get away?”

“Yes, but I don’t think they’ll be a problem for awhile,” she said with an amused chuckle.

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AN: Good god, why do I do this to myself? This was supposed to be a short, light hearted arc then I go and do a multi way battle in a crowded mall...
While the PRT and the police dealt with Uber and Leet’s people, Aegis, Vista and I were loaded into a van and taken to the PRT-HQ, along with my Autobots.

After such a public fight the director wasn’t going to wait for us to make a report.

She was already waiting for us when we were led into a large meeting room, Aegis took a seat at the middle of the table, his back to the door. Vista and I sat on either side of him while the Protectobots and Warpath took up positions around the room. I’d grabbed some stuff from the mall before we’d left that I’d stuffed into a bag which was currently sitting by my feet.

A PRT officer placed a small voice recorder on the table.

“I have one question,” the director asked, her voice cold. “Who authorised the use of live fire around civilians?”

Aegis cleared his throat, “that was my decision Ma’am. Uber and Leet had us outnumbered and were shooting into the crowd with paintball and rubber rounds. We were locked in and needed to end the fighting quickly.”

Aegis quickly recounted the entire event, starting with Concerts arrival and pausing to let Vista tell her part. Taking down two Heavy’s on her own was impressive but she looked annoyed at being sidelined for most of the fight.

“If it helps, I have footage of everything,” I suggested. Rewind had already pulled the footage from my bots and was synching it up with the footage taken from Concert.

The wall mounted TV was a newer model and I could connect to it wirelessly. Rewind split the screen into smaller frames and even included subtitles to show who had given what orders.

It took nearly an hour to go through everything. The director insisted on stopping and replaying actions that caught her attention, her expression darkened every time footage from Concert was used. Most of her ire was focused on Treble and Lightshow, whose actions were token at best.

First Aid produced a full list of injuries sustained by the public and was even able to point out who likely caused them. Warpath helped as well; he had a good head for ballistics and was able to account for every shot he fired. He could honestly say he’d never hit anyone but the villains and had video to prove it, that meant all the injuries were a direct result of Uber and Leet.

Director Piggot had just finished watching the footage again when she fixed me with a rather pointed stare, “You do realise there will be comments raised about the force used against Uber?”

“Excuse me ma’am, but what other choice was there?” Hotspot said before I could reply. Piggot looked momentarily surprised but covered it quickly.

“He was throwing grenades at people and we didn’t expect him to keep fighting with a broken arm. That gun of his was high caliber and it was using live rounds,” as he spoke, the video on screen changed to Defensor’s view. Uber's aim was clearly off, his arm was waving all over the place.
Hotspot continued on, “He was firing blind. Not to mention the chance of a ricochet. It’s a miracle he didn’t hit someone. Our first priority was to stop him before that happened.”

“Any police force you can name would have been justified in gunning him down,” Streetwise pointed out.

The director’s expression darkened further, but she didn’t say anything. She looked up at the sill images that were on the screen, Uber and Leet in the middle of the mall, a diagram Rewind had pulled up that showed the layout of the mall, complete with everyone's locations and Uber aiming a gun at Defensor.

“Very well,” she said eventually, “I’m not happy with what happened but given the situation I can’t say I would have done anything different.” She sighed and turned to Aegis, “It’s a shame Uber and Leet got away, but you did the right thing and made protecting the civilians your priority.”

I think that was supposed to be praise.

“Ma’am, if I may, what about Concert? Did you know they would be there today?” Aegis asked.

Affiliated groups were not supposed to make big public appearances without warning the PRT first. It wasn’t really a rule, but it gave the PRT time to make sure help was available if a villain decided to crash the event.

“No, and I will be talking to them about that later. For now, you three are dismissed.”

The others stood to leave and I reached under the desk for the bag I’d stashed there. “Umm… Actually, there was one more thing…”

Piggot let out an exasperated sigh. “Yes?”

I lifted the bag and placed it on the desk, “I thought you might like this?”

Frowning, the director carefully opened the bag, she was acting like it was going to bite her. -Then again, Clockblocker was on the team - Seeing the smashed remains of Leet’s camera, her expression shifted to one of dark amusement.

Her smile wasn’t friendly, “very well, good work you three.”

Vista and Aegis kept their expressions carefully blank until we were outside the meeting room.

“What was that about?” Vista asked.

“Honestly? I don’t know. Dragon suggested it.” I’d received the message just before we left the mall and had quickly grabbed the camera. The others had been tagged as evidence but Miss Militia had already promised to make sure they arrived in my workshop, along with Leet’s backpack.

The pair of them had pulled equipment from thin air, that meant they either had a form of dimensional storage or a highly accurate teleporter. Either way, I was fairly sure the backpack was part of it.

“Well it certainly cheered her up,” Aegis responded while looking at his phone. “Anyway, it’s getting late. You both did well today, so go home and get some rest. Matrix, don’t forget you and
Vista have a joint patrol with Concert on Monday evening."

Vista groaned at the idea of patrolling with Concert and I had to admit I wasn’t looking forward to it either. -Maybe I’ll get lucky and Treble with break a leg.- Putting that aside, I sent a message to Amy to see if she was still up for tonight.

By the time I’d made it out of my meeting with the director, Amy had been home, collected her stuff and her sister, and gotten back to the PRT-HQ.

Now the three of us were snuggling down on the sofa with a pile of cushions, pillows and quilts. We also had snacks and dad had ordered us pizza. He’d been planning to go out with friends tonight, but when he heard about the attack he considered canceling.

Vicky proceeded to talk rings around him until he gave in. He was barely out of the door when she turned on me with a rather salacious grin.

“So~ you finally met Uber and Leet. What do you think?”

“Ugh, they're idiots.” I screwed my nose up at the thought of them.

“Yeah, but Uber’s kinda cute,” Vicky said with a grin, bumping her sister with her hip.

“Is that all you think about?” Amy rolled her eyes at her sister’s antics. She hadn’t said much on the ride here.

“Oh, come on, how can you not like those abs?”

“By remembering the five people the pair of them nearly blinded?” Amy shot back.

“Y’know, sometimes you two are no fun.” She stuck her tongue out at us.

“Well sorr~y for not finding a musclebound bully attractive.” I snarked, copying her voice as much as I could.

Victoria held her hands up in defeat. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. I swear, the pair of you are like peas in a pod; how can you not enjoy a nice bit of beef? Speaking of bullies, whatever happened to those girls?”

Her sudden change of subject caught me off guard and it took me a minute to realise just who she was talking about.

“Not much, Sophia is on the run. Emma was sent to juvie for assault and attempted manslaughter and Madison got community service. The school is paying damages and for the hospital stay.” So had the PRT, but they’d asked me not to talk about it.

Truthfully, I hadn’t thought about any of them in weeks. Between patrols, school and working on my own tech, I’d just been too busy. I was glad they were being punished, but I had more important things to do.

“Really? That’s it? If it had been me, I would've hunted Sophia down by now and made the bitch pay.”
“Like you’d even fit in the locker.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“Are you calling me fat?” Vicky said with a grin.

“Well you're bigger than me,” I said defensively. In truth, I was taller than Vicky, but she was much more curvy, and her short sleeved t-shirt showed a surprising amount of muscle tone on her arms.

“Yeah, but don’t worry about it, i’m bigger than most girls my age,” she said with a laugh. “But seriously, how do you resist going after her?”

I shrugged. I know some of the Wards had been worried I’d do just that after our run in with Shadow Stalker. But what would be the point? Sure, pounding her face in might be satisfying, but it wouldn’t change what she did.

“I’m not going to waste my time chasing her. Sure, If I got the chance I’d happily shove a tazer up her ass,” -okay, maybe I was still a little bitter- “but she’s not worth the effort.”

Vicky’s frowned, “I suppose so.... Wait, why did one of them only get community service?”

“She pled guilty. When the police turned up, she told them everything, even handed over text messages and emails about it,” I explained. Apparently, she’d had nothing to do with the locker, and had only found out about it when it happened.

Vicky was about to say something else when her cell dinged, she glanced at the screen and her face lit up. “Oh! That reminds me, did you know there’s already a PHO thread about the mall? There’s tons of videos and pictures up. Somebody even caught Ams tackling that cape!"

Amy and I groaned as Vicky grabbed my tablet and brought up the video.

After several cheesy movies, Vicky was the first to fall asleep. I debated trying to draw on her face or something. Wasn’t that what you were supposed to do? In the end, I abandoned the thought. Her forcefield would probably stop me, and the last thing I wanted to do was make someone with super strength jump.

Amy and I were about halfway through some old action movie, I forgot the name but the leading man was obsessed with doing the splits.

“Taylor... Is... Is fighting always like that?” Amy asked, she had her phone in her hand and I could see the video of her taking that cape down on the screen. She’d been quiet all evening and I was starting to get worried.

“What do you mean?”

“Terrifying, frantic, noisy…” she struggled to find the word she was looking for.

“Exhilarating?” I offered. I’d never been much of an adrenaline junkie in the past, but there was something thrilling about winning a fight.

“Exactly! I’ve never really been in a fight. Most of the time I’m on the edges, looking after the injured and I’ve never used my powers as a weapon… It was just so easy, I walked up behind him
and put my hand on his neck and…”

“Do you want me to wake Vicky up?” I asked quietly, surely her sister would be better equipped to deal with this?

“No. No, let her sleep, I’m just being silly anyway.”

Shuffling over, I put my arm round her shoulders, “Amy… What’s really bothering you?”

She didn’t answer at first, she was too lost in her own thoughts, “… Did you know I was adopted?”

“No…” it made sense though. I’d seen pictures of New Wave, and Amy didn’t even have a passing resemblance to any of her family.

“My Dad… My real one I mean. I don’t really remember him, but I think he was a villain. Carol never talks about him, but he must have been someone really bad. Sometimes, I catch her looking at me and it’s like she’s seeing someone else… Sometimes, I think she hates me. When I first got my powers, I tried so hard to be good, to help people. But putting that cape to sleep made me feel better than healing has for a long time.”

She took a shuddering breath, “When he was on the ground, I couldn’t help thinking about what I could do to him. How I could make him pay for threatening people. I could do so much harm it’s not even funny.”

Thinking about it, I’d never actually heard of a healing cape before. Sure, there were capes who could heal, but they could always do more. When I was researching Tinker medicine for First Aid, I’d gotten distracted by the different ‘known’ healers. The closest I’d found to Amy was a cape down south who could heal almost anything, however the people he healed were then forced to obey him. The duration of the effect was in direct proportion to the extent of the injuries healed.

“Amy, what exactly is your power?” I asked carefully. I felt like I was walking through a minefield.

She gave me a slightly haunted look and I had to fight the urge to move my arm. “If it’s organic and alive, I can do anything I want to it. Cosmetic surgery? How big do you want them? It doesn’t even have to be instant. I can make them grow gradually over time. Turn a human body into a swarm of insects? No problem.” her voice had a slightly hysterical edge, “Life ending plague? Give me five minutes and a glass of water… I could make Nilbog look like a child with a chemistry set…”

Nilbog was a Striker who turned people into monsters. He’d turned and entire town before people realised what was going on, and it had taken him less than a week. The PRT had still been finding its feet at the time, and attempts to kill him had ended badly. In the end, all the PRT could do was quarantine Ellisburg. So far, Nilbog had been content to stay behind the walls.

I pulled her close and tried to calm her down. Her power was... terrifying. It was bad enough knowing just how dangerous Tinkers could be, but at least we were limited by time and materials. It sounded like all Amy needed was some bacteria and a bit of imagination.

I couldn’t see Amy doing that, but the knowledge she could was clearly eating her up inside.

I decided to try a different approach. “Wait here.” I snuck up stairs, careful not to wake Vicky, who was still dead to the world, and pulled a notepad out of its hiding place. Going back downstairs, I handed it to Amy.
Confused, she opened it up. The first image was labeled ‘Fusion Cannon’. The next was a bomb. The entire notebook was filled with designs and notes for weapons that could depopulate a city. As Amy read, I explained what they did in as much detail as I could.

Eventually, she stopped at another small bomb. Compared to the others, it was nothing. It wasn’t even Tinker-Tech.

“Taylor, is this?”

“When I first realised what I could do…” I shrugged, “I was angry, nobody seemed to care about what had happened to me except for dad, but there was nothing he could do. It was my word against theirs and no one in that shithole of a school wanted to take my side. Not even my own personal stalker.”

I put my hand on the page, “If Rewind and Rung hadn’t been there, I would probably have gone through with it… Now this is a hiding place for all my worst ideas.”

I shook my head. “Everyone has thoughts like that. The idea that if you’d just pounded her face into the pavement it would have all been better.” I gave her shoulder another squeeze. “What’s important is that we don’t follow through with those thoughts.”

\life is violent and cruel - and so very precious\n
“Amy... Yes, your power can be dangerous, but so is mine. Hell, all capes are... Heroes and Villains... In the end, we all come from the same place. We’re all messed up, we all had that one bad day. What truly matters is what we chose to do after the tragedy. At the end of the day, life is cruel. All we have are our choices, and we can chose to make things better. \ You did, after all.”

Amy stared at me. “Do you really believe that?”

“Sure,” I nodded, shifting my arm slightly and ignoring what felt like a static shock. “You could have done anything to that cape. He had a gun, he was a threat to everyone in the crowd, including yourself. Despite that, you chose to deal with him in the gentlest way possible. You put him to sleep and lowered him to the floor.”

\You chose to be better\n
We sat there quietly for a little while, neither of us really watching the movie.

“Taylor?... Thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it. I know I’ve said this before, but I really think you need to take some time away from the hospital, and if you need to talk to somebody, call me. It doesn't matter if it’s late, I don’t need to sleep.”

I glanced back at Vicky and decided to try lightening the mood, “Your sister is a really sound sleeper, huh?”

Amy smiled weakly, “Yeah, she once slept through an explosion.” I gave her a shocked look and she decided to explain. “They changed Dad’s medication awhile back. It ended up really messing with his head. At one point, he put a sealed can of beans in the microwave and walked away...”
We passed the time swapping silly stories until she couldn’t stay awake any longer and we decided to get some sleep.
It was Monday night and I was still wondering what to do about Amy. We’d spent most of Sunday together, carefully avoiding what she’d admitted the night before. So far, all I’d been able to do was leave her and Rung in a room alone together while I made us lunch.

I’m not sure what they talked about, Rung would never break a confidence after all, but she did take his contact details and he’d asked if I could upgrade his vocal systems. Jack was working on the parts now and I’d perform the upgrade tomorrow night.

Sighing, I put the issue to the back of my mind for now and focused on what I was doing. Vista, Gallant and I were heading for the standard meeting point on a rooftop just west of the Rig. Steeljaw and Ravage were following along behind me while the Protectobots were helping Dragon make some last minute changes to her new base.

She’d told me the whole thing would be finished this week, and that she was looking forward to showing it to me.

Tonight was our first joint patrol with Concert. There was going to be two patrols, one with the Wards and one with the Protectorate, three times a week for the next month or so.

Miss Militia and Battery, who I guessed were representing the Protectorate, were already there when we arrived. Nobody looked particularly happy to be here tonight.

“Concert not here yet?” Gallant asked.

“No, Bass called ahead to say there was a problem and they’d be late. We’ll hold here for a while and if they don’t arrive we’ll patrol as usual,” Miss Militia said, annoyance creeping into her voice. Ravage walked over to her and stood quietly by her side until she idly reached out to stroke his head.

With nothing else to do, we spread out a bit and made ourselves comfortable. Gallant ‘locked’ the legs of his armour, letting the suit hold him up so he could relax, and even pulled his phone out of a compartment on his armour. Vista hopped up on a nearby ledge and Steeljaw padded over to keep her company.

Lacking anything better to do, I decided to test a new system Jack had added to my armour.

He’d upgraded my suit’s sensor suite to the point where it could now generate an accurate 3D model of the surrounding area, with a maximum range of about a block. Any larger and it would strain my suit’s hardware.

Calling up the image of the roof we were currently standing on, I noted the positions of the others. My bots all had locators installed, so their positions were represented as red Autobot symbols.

The Wards and Protectorate capes, likewise, had locators built into their radios, so I had an accurate fix on them as well. They showed up as green Protectorate icons. Rotating the model, I was able to see the people in the building below, represented by yellow icons.

Switching image modes on my helmet, I was able to see the nearest person and confirm their location was accurate. The same mix of sonar, thermal imaging, lidar and simulations that let me create the
model also provided me with a limited form of ‘x-ray’ vision.

It only worked through low density materials and over short distances, but tests in the workshop showed I could spot hidden weapons on people or get a rough idea of where people were even if I couldn’t see them.

“What are you doing?” Vista’s question caught me off guard and made me jump. The imaging system was built into my suit’s augmented reality system, so while I could ‘see’ and ‘interact’ with them, to everyone else I was just waving my arms.

“Just running a few system checks, want to see?”

Vista was wearing the visor I’d built her. It was tougher than her original, with a built in display for the forcefield generator she was wearing, but it should also be compatible with my AR system. Rewind uploaded the software to her visor so she could see the model.

“Oh wow! Is this how everything looks to you?”

“Not quite, yours is a bit more simplified,” my AR system included updates and messages from my bots, information on objects around me, the status of my armour and a direct feed to Teletraan. Most of it was transparent, and I’d gotten so used to it I didn’t even notice it any more.

While Vista looked at the model, I contacted Wheeljack.

“Hey Jack, is the data coming in okay?”

“Heh, of course. Ready to test the targeting system?”

“Sure. Target set.” Switching on the targeting laser we’d built into my helmet, I pointed it a safe distance from anybody. There was a blue flash and Waspinator appeared exactly where I’d been aiming.

The little bot was huddled in on himself and was trembling slightly. A status screen popped up on my HUD, showing he was unhurt.

“Did it work?”

“Yeah, he’s fine,” hearing my voice, Wasp’s eyes lit up and he took a careful look around.

“Wazzzpinator izz alive?...Yay!” Taking off, he flew in a couple of quick loops before Vista grabbed him and hugged the little bot close.

“Matrix! You shouldn’t experiment on Waspinator!”

“I didn’t!” I protested, “He volunteered! Besides, I already knew it was safe. Wheeljack spent most of the day playing with Kid Win’s teleporter and sending himself from one side of the base to the other with it.”

The teleporter wasn’t intended for large or organic objects, as Kid Win had intended to use it to send gear to himself in the field. That made it perfect for getting my bots where I needed them and the upgraded targeting system made sure they wouldn’t appear halfway through a wall.
That reminded me, I’d traded Kid Win a VI - based on the same source code as Teletraan- for free access to the teleporter.

Taking a small metal pouch from my belt, I opened it up and pulled out a glowing purple stick. Breaking it in half, I offered a piece to Wasp, who quickly grabbed it and started eating it with every sign of enjoyment.

“What’s that?” Vista asked and carefully reached out for the remaining half.

I let her take it while I explained, “It’s an energon cookie. Perceptor has been experimenting with energon, and he found that adding the correct mix of additives and isotopes can change the properties. This one is less efficient, so they don’t get as much energy from it, but it ‘tastes’ sweet.”

Vista rolled the glowing stick between her fingers, “So it tastes nice, but isn’t as good for them… He’s made robot junk food?” She asked with a laugh.

I gave her the box and she offered a stick to Steeljaw, who carefully took it from her before crushing it between his jaws.

Our conversation had attracted the attention of the others. ”They have a sense of taste?” Gallant asked as he walked over.

“Sure. Certain things, like smells, tastes, locations or even people, trigger responses in their processors. These responses can be pleasant or unpleasant. Humans are no different.”

Miss Militia looked up from her conversation with Battery. “Is that why I keep finding Ravage in my office?” Vista passed a cookie to Miss Militia that she fed to the feline bot.

I shrugged. “He likes you. I can tell him to stop if you want?”

“No, it’s fine. I like cats and I enjoy the company. It can get a bit lonely when everyone is sleeping.”

We were still talking when my suit flashed a warning, four people were climbing up the fire escape.

“I think Concert is here,” I announced.

One of the things I noticed as Concert climbed onto the rooftop were the two small helicopter like drones that were following them. Rewind flagged the small mounted cameras fitted to each. It looked like someone had taken a leaf out of Leet’s book.

Another was that Treble looked ill; what skin I could see was clammy and he looked disheveled compared to his teammates. What’s more, Lightshow and Duette kept giving him dirty looks.

“I’m sorry we’re late, there were some… difficulties,” Bass explained, stepping forward to shake Miss Militia’s hand and giving Treble a look.

“That’s not a problem,” she replied. “How do you wish to divide things up?”

Bass looked thoughtfully at his team before coming to a decision with a nod. “Lightshow and Duette will go with the Wards. Treble and me will go with you.”
Hidden by my mask, I let out a silent sigh of relief. Vista meanwhile just stared at the taller woman, probably glaring behind her visor, and I couldn’t help but notice that she was only chest high on Lightshow.

Miss Militia spared Treble a doubtful glance, and I didn’t blame her, now he was standing closer there was a strong smell of alcohol coming from him.

“Very well, although I do have some questions. Are those cameras and do you intend to have them follow us?”

Bass nodded, “Yeah. The suits want some ‘in the field’ footage they can put on the website.”

“I see,” Miss Militia considered the situation before continuing, “I’m sorry, but you understand that you can’t film the Wards, right?”

“Oh come on! You didn’t complain about us filming on Saturday!”

“If we’d known ahead of time we would have,” Battery pointed out, “as it is, we won’t stop you filming us, but the Wards are minors. Footage of them is tightly regulated.”

“All right,” Bass took a phone out of his belt and spoke to someone. As he did, one of the cameras moved off, flying slowly out of sight.

“But Bass!” Lightshow tried to protest, only to be silenced by Duette, who stepped in front of the taller woman.

“Quiet. Wasting Time.” Duette’s voice was harsh, almost gravelly. it sounded like she had to strain to talk.

“Duette’s right, we’ve wasted enough time tonight,” Bass said as he glared at Lightshow and Treble. “Now stop bit-complaining and do your job.” He had to visibly stop himself swearing and glanced back at the camera. -Interesting, does that mean they can record sound as well?"

“Rewind, if that camera comes back or starts following us, take care of it,” I muttered quietly.

With everything taken care of, we split up. Miss Militia and Battery going north towards ABB territory while we went south. Our patrol was going to skirt the edges of Empire Eighty Eight territory while sticking close to the safer areas.

Vista compressed the distance between one roof and the next so we could continue our patrol at roof level as Waspinator circled around us.

“S~o, if something happens, who’s in charge?” Lightshow asked.

“Typically, in these situations the affiliated heros follow our lead,” Gallant explained.

“Really? So which one of you is in charge?” she glanced around, giving Vista and me an appraising look. She wore a simple domino mask so we could clearly see her expression. I’d seen looks like that before, mostly from Emma when she wanted to give fashion ‘advice’.

Gallant stepped around a broken AC unit, “I am.”
“So, that make you the oldest... How old are you kids anyway?”

“Were not allowed to say,” Vista snapped, her tone barely polite.

Besides me, Duette rubbed the forehead of her mask and made a sound of annoyance.

“Oh don’t be so miserable,” Lightshow stuck her tongue out at her teammate.

“Vista’s right, to help protect our identities were not allowed to give that information out. I can tell you that I’m the eldest and will be joining the Protectorate soon.”

Lightshow smiled, I’d seen that expression on Emma’s face as well. Vicky is going to kill him.

“Really? With all that responsibility and so many patrols it must be murder on relationships.”

“He has a girlfriend,” Vista muttered darkly.

Still smiling, Lightshow crossed her arms under her chest and leaned forward slightly, “Lucky girl, is she pretty?”

[Gorgeous and liable to rip your spine out if you keep that up.] Not trusting myself to talk, I sent the message to Vista’s display. She snorted as she tried to stifle her laughter.

Duette shook her head, “Ally Cat...”

Ignoring Lightshow’s glare, Vista and I walked closer to Duette.

“Is she always like that?” I asked quietly as Lightshow went back to talking to Gallant.

“Yes... A Trouble Maker,” as she spoke, I noticed her hands kept twitching.

“Are you okay?.. you sound like you're in pain...”

“Oh don’t mind her,” Lightshow interrupted. “Bass is the only one who understands that silly hand waving she does.”

Hand waving? Oh!- “You mean sign language?”

The moment I asked, a loading symbol appeared on my display. Checking the status update from Rewind showed he was trying to build a translation subroutine for sign language. I wouldn’t be able to sign anything, but Rewind could create subtitles for me.

“You okay Matrix?” Vista asked and I realised I had stopped walking.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I started walking and turned to Duette. “If it helps, I think I can translate for you?”

#Thank you, trying to talk is painful. And yes, she’s always like that. Drives me bloody nuts.#

“Wait,” Vista said in shock, Rewind must have shown her the translation, “You’re English?”

Up ahead, Lightshow burst out laughing. It was kind of surprising, since everything about her
appearance said ‘Japanese’. Duette was short and slender with dark hair. Her outfit looked like it was taken from a pre-Kyushu comic and her face was covered by a white porcelain-like mask with red markings.

#Marketing# was all she said, her body language explaining the rest.

We were nearly halfway through the patrol when Lightshow’s phone went off. She looked guilty, but that didn’t stop her moving off for some privacy. Not that it stopped us from hearing everything she said.

“Hello? No, not yet. We are…,” She moved to the roof’s edge so she could see the street sign below, “Yeah sure. I won’t forget.”

Hanging up, she walked back over, “Sorry, handler wanted an update-” There was crash off in the distance and everyone turned to look.

“What was that?”

“Hang on, I’m checking now. Wasp?”

The moment he was close enough to the source of the noise, he started transmitting. I could see the broken remains of one of Concert’s flying cameras.

“Rewind?” I asked quietly.

[You said take care of it, so I blocked it’s signal...] -And without anything controlling it, it crashed.

“It was nothing, just a cat or something,” I said while sending a message to the Wards and Miss Militia. [Concert tried to stalk us with a camera. It crashed.] It was hard to type with eye movements and walk at the same time.

Relaxing, we continued onward. We barely made it fifty yards when we heard gun fire.

Sprinting forward, we reached a small 7/11 with gas pumps out front on the corner.

There was a black van outside with a stylised E88 painted on the side. -Empire Eighty Eight. Fuck!

We ducked behind the raised edge of the roof.

*Console, Gallant. Robbery in progress and shots have been fired-*

“What are we waiting for?!’ Lightshow hissed while Gallant dealt with the console.

“We can’t just rush in!” Vista hissed back.

She was right. While the ABB’s biggest threat was Lung, the Empire had numbers. They had connections to other supremacist groups including the Geselleschaft. This gave them access to weapons and capes and they often recruited people from out of state.

This meant there was a much greater chance of running into their capes.
“Matrix, can you see what’s happening inside there?” Gallant asked as I directed Wasp in to get a closer look. The front of the building was glass, probably so the staff could see the pumps, but the store was so littered with shelves we couldn’t see much.

“There is a driver in the van and possibly three people inside the store, but it’s hard to see past the shelves.”

“We don’t have time for this!” Lightshow jumped the edge of the wall and grabbed a lamp post that she used to slide to the ground. Her costume showed she was extremely fit, but I didn’t expect her to be so agile.

There was a moment of stunned silence, broken only by a groaning noise from Duette before Gallant swore and then said, “After her! Matrix, deal with that van!”

Vista brought the curb up to meet us so we didn’t have to worry about the drop as we charged forward.

The driver saw Lightshow coming and a spray of her fireworks blinded him long enough for me to get a shot in. The Null-Ray could disable electronics, so one shot was enough to kill the van. It must have had electronic locks as the driver tried and failed to get the door open.

Typically, cars weren’t much protection against even low caliber rounds, but when I put my hand on the van to check that it wasn’t going anywhere, I found that someone, probably the owner, had added thick metal plates to the inner structure.

Duette grabbed Lightshow and pulled her behind the van before the people inside could open fire.

“Idiot!” she shouted at her teammate.

“Now what?!” Vista shouted, “Empire capes are probably on the way!”

“What were you thinking? The staff are probably still in there, you just turned this into a hostage situation!” Gallant shouted at Lightshow, who glared back mulishly.

“Wasp has found a back door,” I called out, “Ravage, go make sure they don’t get out that way.”

Duette slapped Lightshow on the shoulder and then shouted, “Cover!”

Taking a hint, she set off a wide spray of fireworks. Duette ran off to follow Ravage.

The gunfire stopped and, acting on a hunch, I created a hardlight copy of my helmet at the end of my arm. It wasn’t perfect, for one thing it was glowing, but when I carefully poked it out of cover, another bullet pinged off the van and made me jump.

“Just checking,” I said when Vista snickered.

Sneaking into the building, Ravage ignored the raspy-voice’d one behind him. She was quiet and that’s all that mattered. The noise was coming from the front of the building, but he ignored it for the smell of blood from a nearby room.
Nudging the door with his paw, it swung open and he found the source of the smell. A noisy one was sitting on the floor, clutching at its shoulder.

Raspy-one followed him in and quickly knelt by bleeder.

Bleeder tried to move, but raspy-one quickly stopped him with a quiet whisper, “Shh. Help. Others?”

We were still hiding behind the van when the worker Duette had found quietly explained that he was the only one in the building.

“The building’s empty,” I told Gallant, “Duette is looking after the cashier.”

“Right… Matrix, you take point, I’ll follow behind you. Take it aisle by aisle.” As he spoke I turned my HL-Shield on, “Lightshow, you stay here with Vista while she locks the area down.”

Lightshow was still frowning, but she nodded nonetheless.

“Okay, 3… 2… 1… Go!”

At Gallant’s shout, I spun out from behind the van and charged the door. Gunfire slammed into my shield, but I’ve tanked a lot worse.

The Empire banger at the entrance dived out of the way just as I crashed into the door, forcing it all the way open. Skidding to a stop, I stunned him while using my shield to block the nearest aisle.

Moving between aisles, there were three other thugs armed only with knives. A fourth tried sprinting for the back room, but the moment he vanished from sight there was a growl followed by a scream.

Once we were sure they were all taken care of, I moved to the back area. The final ganger was on the floor with Ravage sitting on his back, growling at the occasional movement from the man.

With everything under control, we waited for the ambulance for the cashier and started moving the gang members outside. We were just finishing up when the ambulance and police arrived. The cashier’s injury thankfully turned out to be minor, looking worse than it was, and they insisted he would make a full recovery.

“Alright everyone!” Gallant called out, “not our best night.” He looked in the direction of Lightshow, who was busy flirting with one of the officers. “But it all worked out in the end. Let’s head home.”

As we walked away, Lightshow kept glancing furtively up at the sky.

“Don’t worry,” I called out, following her gaze, “It shouldn’t rain tonight.”

“Oh!-what? No, I was… nevermind.”

By the time we made it back to the meeting point, the others were already waiting for us.

Treble was sitting on the floor with what looked like a bruise forming on his jaw. Bass was talking to a visibly annoyed Miss Militia, and Battery was glaring at both men. There was a dark stain on one
side of her costume, but it didn’t look like blood.

Miss Militia nodded at our return and Vista and I walked over to Battery.

“Battery, are you okay? Did something happen?”

Battery ignored Vista’s glance at her ruined costume, but still turned to talk to us “I’m fine. We had a run in with the Empire, but nothing too serious.”

“Really? Then what happened to-oh!” There was a gust of wind at that moment, carrying with it a strong wiff of vomit and alcohol.

Concert’s remaining drone was still floating nearby, so I had Rewind access the footage. He fast forwarded through the film till he reached what I was looking for.

They had just taken care of what looked like a fight club; I’d have to watch it in full later. After the fighting, Treble looked a bit unsteady on his feet. Battery walked over to check up on him when he —ugh gross—

A few more words were exchanged between Bass and Miss Militia and our groups went our separate ways. Before Concert left, Lightshow quickly jogged over to Gallant, adding a little extra ‘bounce’ to her step as she gave him a quick kiss on the helmet and muttered a quiet “call me” before following her team.

We were halfway back to the rig before Gallant spoke again. “Vista, Matrix? How much to never mention this to Victoria?”

Vista and I shared an amused look.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Vista pointed out, “If you hide it from her, it will just make it worse when she does find out.”

“She won’t if you don’t tell her!” he protested.

“Two problems with that. One, you can’t keep anything from Vicky,” I gave him a pointed look. I liked to think he looked guilty under that helmet, “and two, that drone was still recording when she kissed you.”

Gallant groaned in defeat, setting me and Vista off in a fit of giggles. It even drew a light chuckle from Miss Militia and Battery.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Matrix
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 chronologically.

_topic: Panic at the mall_
_In: Boards ➤ News ➤ Brockton Bay_
_Brocktonite03 (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)_
The Battle we all knew was coming has finally happened!

Uber&L33t V Autobots

Uber and l33t's latest stunt took place this weekend when they staged Team Fortress 2 at the Intu Shopping Mall in BB.

At the time, the mall was being visited by the Wards and the new hero team "Concert" (pics here).

Uber and L33t were dressed as a Demoman and Engineer (pics heres). They were also accompanied by dozens of people dressed as scouts and a couple of heavys.

Concert put up a decent effort but the highlight of the day was Matrix and a small team of Autobots.

The full story is here but in the end, the Autobots sent them packing.

(Showing page 1 of 10)
➤ QwertyD
My neighbor was there with her kids when U&L turned up.

They were shooting paintballs and rubber bullets into the crowds, people got hurt! Thank god Panacea was there.

➤ Aloha
@QwertD I know right? Did you see her tackle that guy?

➤ RWD (Autobot) (Archivist)
Replied On Jan 1st 2011:
Hey guys!

While I can't post any 'official' footage, I've done my best to set the following up in the order it happend.

Uber & l33t arrive Alt: 1  
Concert Fights! Alt: 1 2  
Protectobots to the rescue! Alt: 1 2 3 4 5  
Uber and l33t run away! Alt 1 2 3

► XxVoid_CowboyxX  
The Autobots rock, I wish I'd known they were there!

How long ago did this happen? think they are still at the mall?

► Miss Mercury (Protectorate Employee)  
@XxVoid_CowboyxX  
It's been a couple of hours now and they would have left the scene as soon as things calmed down.

They are lucky no one was permanently hurt. Uber and L33t are getting very close to crossing a line.

► Antigone  
You see that thing grab Uber’s hand? That had to hurt!

► yeh1994  
Y’know, I kinda feel sorry for U&L. Nothing ever seems to work out for them.

► Brocktonite03 (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)  
What's to feel sorry about? They're a pair of thugs. There were kids in those crowds!

► XxVoid_CowboyxX  
I enjoy their shows.

@Brocktonite03  
Don't be so dramatic, they were only using paintballs.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 8, 9, 10

(Showing page 2 of 10)

► Owlman (The Guy in the Know)  
Matrix has built another 6 bots? where does she find the time?

Does anyone know what they are called?

@XxVoid_CowboyxX  
You're an idiot, you know that? Paintballs travel at more than 300 feet per second. They can and have blinded people in the past.

► RWD (Autobot)
@Owlman
I'll be updating the Autobot thread later today with more information but;

Warpath - turns into a tank

The Protectobots
Hotspot - Team leader - Turns into a fire truck
Streetwise - Turns into a Police car
Blades - Search and Rescue helicopter
Groove - Police bike
First Aid - Medic turns into an ambulance

➤ Lightcat
Oh god, more of them? and now they combine! I really hope someone is keeping an eye on Matrix. We don't need another robot army.

➤ Iblis
OMG I was there! it was incredible!
There were people running all over the place, Aegis was getting his ass kicked and then those robots turned into this thing

➤ Valkyr (Wiki Warrior)
Does anyone know who those other capes were?

➤ Mane Magenta
@Valkyr
They're called Concert. they're some new team sponsored by NKT-Galactic. There is a thread here for them.

➤ L33t (Verified Cape)
You know what? Fuck you Matrix!
Your robot broke Uber's arm and crushed his hand, he may never recover! you've crippled him you fucking bitch! Not to mention your cat things trying to kill us as we left! I want my tech back!

➤ Rattrap (Autobot)
Hey! You're the psychos shooting up a mall full of people, what did you think would happen?
By the way, Ravage has been using your pants as a wash rag. You sure you want it back?

➤ Hotspot (Autobot Team leader)
I'm sorry to hear that, but I won't apologise. Your friend was firing a large caliber weapon in a crowded mall.
However, if his injuries are that bad, I would suggest you go to a hospital or hand yourselves in.

➤ L33t (Verified Cape)
It was just a bit of fun for fuck sake! Nobody got hurt!
Streetwise (Autobot)

Your fun could have killed people. As for your friend, you should consider him lucky. The police would have shot you both for that shit.

First-Aid (Autobot)

Nobody got hurt? Here's the full list on injuries

[spoilered for size]

SenorEel

"Hand yourself in"?
Thats bad and you should feel bad.

damn... how do you guys reply so fast?

Edit: double damn, paintballs and rubber bullets can do alot of damage huh?

Tumbles

du~h there robots, typing is for meatsacks.

wow, I just looked at the list, that’s messed up

L33t (Verified Cape)

screw the lot of you.

@Matrix you better watch yourself.

*User has received an infraction for this post - We do not tolerate threats here.*

Rattrap (Autobot)

Ooh scary, what you gonna do? Hand more tech over to the PRT? You know they just melt it down for scrap right? Thats all its good for.

Crappy work from a crappy tinker.

*User has received a temporary ban for this post.*

XxVoid_CowboyxX

ouch, burn!

*User has received a temporary ban for this post.*

L33t (Verified Cape)

crappy tinker? I'll show you, you demented tonka-toy. I can build anything!

You, me and five minutes with a laser cutter! You think I cant find you?

*User has received a temporary ban for this post.*
► **Waspinator** (Autobot)
Waspinator thinks you not find own backside with both hands and a map.

*User has received a temporary ban for this post.*

► **TinMother** (Moderator)
Thats enough! Everyone involved in this argument is banned for 24 hours.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... 8, 9, 10

(Showing page 4 of 10)
► **Noveltry**
Well, that happend.
Back on topic, I think it's cool Panacea took out that cape!

There is a discussion **here** about it, apparently he was called Multiplayer.

► **GloryGirl** (Verified Cape)
Yeah, my sister rules!

@Matrix, you should check that thread out, it looks like you’ve got fans 😎 BTW they're right, I'm taking you shopping later for better clothes :evil laugh:

► **BadSamurai**
You guys see LS jumping around in that top? Those can't be real!

► **GloryGirl** (Verified Cape)
@BadSamurai
I think they are. From the way they move, she needs better support.

► **Whitecollar** (Cape Wife)
She's right. Lightshow makes my back hurt just looking at her.

► **BadSamurai**
@GloryGirl
OMG! *fanboy squeek* A cape is talking to me! */fanboy squeek* 

seriously though, you would know more about that than me 😎

► **Matrix** (Autobot Commander)
@GloryGirl There is nothing wrong with my clothes!

*looks at other thread* omfg *dies of embarrassment*

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 ... 8, 9, 10
Topic: Player Three?
In: Boards ► Cape Discussions
Procto the Unfortunate Tinker (Original Poster) (Not a tinker)
I'm sure everyone knows by now about the attack on the mall by U&L and there are plenty of threads discussing it.

One thing people aren't talking about, is the newest member of U&L's group.

During the attack, there were a large number of people dressed as scouts, almost all of them disappeared at the same time. Any ideas what happened?

(Showing page 1 of 1)
► WhedonRipperFan
I was right there when it happened, heres some video. Panacea said something to Matrix (speaking of which, here is a video of her stripping - look at those abs!). After that, Panacea ran into the crowd and grabbed some guy and they all vanished.

User has received an infraction for this post. Matrix is a minor, posting video of her getting changed is a crime. The video has been removed.

► L33t (Verified Cape)
His name is Multiplayer, today was supposed to be his debut. As it is, he's sitting in a PRT cell until we can bust him out.

@ the 2nd vid - Damn, she may be a bitch but she does have some nice abs. Ass isn't bad either.

User has received an infraction for this post.

► TinMother (Moderator)
I will remind you all again, Matrix is a minor, pictures or video of any minor in any state of undress are not permitted. Any further discussion on this will see the thread locked and everyone involved banned.

► Loyal
Huh, y'know, they're right. her clothes hide it well but when she takes that jumper off, she's not bad looking. Those body suits really don't cover much.

Think she works out?

► Ekul (Verified Cape)
Depends on the material. In my experience, you want something thick enough to hide the important details (which her's does).

► Antigone
She jogs past my house in the mornings, those legs are incredible!

I've thought about approaching her but shes always got those cats with her and they scare me.

► SpecificProtagonist
huh, wonder if she looked like that back in school? she really needs better clothes to show off more.
I'm back btw - Parents have finally let me back on.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
I found a couple more of those videos online (links here)

*post edited by TinMother*

► TinMother (Moderator)
*sigh* This thread is now locked.

End of Page. 1
After returning from patrol, I decided to watch the footage of Concert and the Protectorate dealing with that fight club. As I watched it, I found myself wondering why on Earth this team existed.

Using capes in marketing was nothing new. Coca-Cola, for example, had been using a minor hydrokinetic to advertise their products for a couple of years now. I don’t think he ever saw combat.

You could generally split corporate capes into two groups. Advertising capes were mostly paid to stand around and look pretty while combat teams actually went out and fought people.

Concert, however, was trying hard to be both, actively fighting villains in carefully designed uniforms and merchandising. Even if their opponents were mostly jokes like Uber and Leet.

Actually, now that I had time to look into it, most of their ‘successes’ had been against minor villains or small gangs. I was aware that the level of danger corporate teams faced depended on how much control had over the team, which would explain why.

Concert was sponsored by NKT-Galactic, one of the largest combined media companies around. They were also currently one of the twenty largest ‘privately owned’ corporations in the US.

I skimmed through most of the fairly dull information Teletraan had found, but there were rumours that they employed Tinkers to steal music from different realities. The PRT had investigated a couple of times but had been unable to find any evidence.

Putting that aside, I focused on the ‘scandal’ Dennis had mentioned. There wasn’t a lot of publicly available information since a court-ordered injunction had stopped the press from investigating.

That wasn’t enough to deter me. I had Teletraan datamine various smaller sites and social media, looking for anything I could use. His VI had really come a long way since Jack and I built the first version. He’d never cross the line into full sentience, but I was hoping to get him as close as possible. Both Kid Win and Dragon had borrowed his base code for their own projects.

Slowly, everything fell into place.

NKT-Galactic had belonged to the same family for generations. Gerald Coyle was the current CEO and owner of the company; he had three sons and a daughter. Rather typically, the youngest son was considered a ‘problem child.’

He was in his twenties with a long string of screw-ups. He was kicked out of a big name university and then two colleges. There were countless pictures of him arriving at public events either drunk or with his latest fling, and he’d been in and out of rehab for years.

It looked like Concert had been in the pipeline for a while. There were hints and teasers for Concert and even a memo that they would be ready to debut by early next year. So why are they active now?

I couldn’t find more than hints, but it looked like the youngest son was responsible. His family had done a good job so far covering everything up, but his latest embarrassment had involved the police. There was a report that he’d been arrested in Europe, but it didn’t say why.
Since Teletraan had access to Dragon’s network, it didn’t take long to scan law enforcement databases and find the police report.

Jonathan Coyle was arrested during a recent drug raid on an apartment in Germany. He was naked at the time and in the company of a dozen prostitutes, enough cocaine to kill an elephant, and six confirmed members of the Gesellschaft… -well, crap-

No wonder they were pushing the multinational look of Concert so hard; when this came out it was going to cause hell. Glancing back at Concert’s record, I realised that they often targeted racist organisations or villains, though they tended to avoid those with public links to the Gesellschaft.

“Find anything interesting?” Dragon asked from a nearby screen, nearly scaring me to death.

At his workbench, Wheeljack laughed. “Busted!”

Days later, I was strapping my armour on in preparation for the prisoner transport.

Skidmark and Squealer were being sent to a holding facility a few hours outside of Brockton Bay. The new ‘Baumann Parahuman Containment Center Review Board’ had looked into the case and both capes had narrowly avoided being sent to the Birdcage.

The review board was one of the better things to come out of the investigation into Saint’s attack on Dragon. They had created a list of criteria based on the original list used when the prison was created. If the crime met that criteria, then the case was passed to the review board who had the final say in whether or not the Birdcage was a suitable punishment.

The same board, after looking through the evidence submitted by Dragon, had declared Canary’s original sentence to be unjust and had ordered a retrial. Dragon felt that Canary would probably end up in a mid to low security prison on a lesser charge.

As Skidmark and Squealer were known to be the leaders of the Merchants, there was a very real risk of the transport coming under attack or an attempted breakout. For that reason, there would be six PRT vans taking different routes out of the city.

Three were being guarded by the Protectorate, who had split into teams of two. The fourth was protected by the Wards, along with me. Dragon was guarding the fifth, and the final van was protected by a PRT squad who had been given shield generators.

Just as I finished sealing my helmet, Kid Win knocked on my workshop door.

“Hey Taylor, you ready to go?”

He knew not to come into my workshop if the door was shut. Not after he walked in on me getting changed last week.

“Yeah,”, I said, quickly grabbing Rewind and dropping him into his compartment in my armour.

As we were walking towards the ferry, I noticed Kid Win was finally wearing his new armour. After finding out his specialisation, he’d spent hours carefully redesigning everything to better fit.

His original set had been styled after Hero, one of the first Tinkers and a member of what would eventually become known as the Triumvirate.
Kid Win’s new set kept a similar colour scheme and a similar style, except his was slimmer.

He’d added a backpack-like device that housed a power source and the shield generators I’d given him. There were now visible connection ports on his armour where he could ‘hot swap’ components on the fly. There were even some added to the hoverboard that was currently strapped to his back.

To help coordinate everything, he’d traded me for the code to build a VI that was now integrated with his gear, including his teleporter. He’d dubbed the VI Eva, short for Electronic Virtual Assistant.

Now that I think about it, this would be his first time using it in the field.

We met up with the others at the ferry and caught a transport to PRT HQ, where Skidmark and Squealer were being held. The Protectorate and Dragon were already waiting for us and everything was ready to go.

Armsmaster stepped forwards. “You should all know what is expected of you... but I will recap just to be sure. You will be escorting transport four from here to the meeting point just outside the city. You will be split into two teams. Gallant, Matrix, you will take point in the first car. The prisoner transport will be next and the final car will hold Vista and Clockblocker. Kid Win, Aegis, you’re on overwatch.” Dragon projected a map on the nearby wall and he pointed to a highlighted route. ”This is the route you will be taking. The areas marked in green are the fallback points. If something happens, the driver will attempt to reach one of these locations and will await reinforcement. We will be leaving in ten minutes, so make any final preparations now.”

Having said his piece, Armsmaster turned to leave. Behind him, Miss Militia rolled her eyes and stepped forwards.

“I shouldn’t have to say this, but I will. Your safety takes priority. Don’t take any stupid risks if things go bad, and retreat if things get too rough.” She sent a meaningful glare at Armsmaster, who cleared his throat.

“Yes, of course.”

Because of his helmet, it was hard to tell, but I was sure I saw a faint flush of embarrassment.

“Any questions?” Aegis asked the other Wards.

Clockblocker raised his hand like he was in school. “Isn’t this kinda overkill? It’s not like the Merchants have any capes left.”

Aegis shook his head. “True, but they still have plenty of members. They could probably drown us in numbers, especially if any of them still have doses of Surge.” He gave a quick look over his shoulder, making sure none of the Protectorate was too close. Once he was sure, he leaned forward and said in a quieter voice.

“The PRT got a tip that the other gangs might attempt a breakout. Thinkers suspect it’s a real possibility, so they’re taking it seriously, which is why they’re beefing up security.”

“Why would the other gangs help the Merchants?” I asked. It didn’t make much sense to me. The Merchants being gone, meant less competition for the other gangs.
“They wouldn’t, that’s the point.” Aegis said, standing back up and talking normally. “Trying to grab all that territory and push those Tinker drugs upset a lot of people. There is a very real chance one of the gangs will break them out just so they can deal with those two personally.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Vista interjected.

Aegis nodded. “It happened more when the Teeth and Marquis were around. But yeah, sometimes the gangs will decide to sort the issue out themselves.”

“Not to mention, there are capes out there that make a living springing people,” Clockblocker pointed out.

“Right… I said as I mulled some options over in my head. “Do you want Wasp and Laserbeak on overwatch? They can transmit live to me or Kid Win. Ravage can ride with me since he has ranged weapons and Steeljaw can go with Vista and Clock. If things go bad, the Protectobots are already on standby, so I can teleport them to me in seconds.”

Aegis chuckled. “Y’know, having you around is like having having another Wards team on call. Go ahead and do it.”

“At least until the machines take over.” Clockblocker paused and turned to me. “When you rise to power, can I be excused from having to spend all day computing pi my queen?”

I snorted and adjusted the voice changer in my helmet while several of the Wards laughed. “Do not worry, we have plans for you.” I’d increased the flanging effect to make my voice sound artificial.

“Lady Vista, would you care for a eunuch?” I asked in mock seriousness. Clockblocker made a theatrical ‘eep’ noise and quickly covered his groin while the boys all twitched.

Vista grinned, “Maybe… think we can teach him to do tricks?”

We were still laughing as my bots teleported in and Armstrong signaled for us to make our way to the vans.

The prisoner transports were specially built armoured vans. In theory, they could hold anything up to mid level brutes. They would be leaving at five minute intervals. Ours would be the fourth to leave.

We were riding in standard PRT vans. They were painted blue with the PRT logo on the side and well armoured. They had all been fitted with engines that had been derived from tinkertech. There was space for six people inside, three on each side with some room for equipment and access via a rear exit. There were also hatches on both sides and the roof that could only be opened from the inside.

Gallant was alternating from one side of the van to the other, looking out the windows for any possible trouble. Above us, Kid Win and Aegis were flying in circles. As Laserbeak could fly faster than our convoy, he was scouting ahead.

Keeping an eye on the video feeds from my bots, I quickly made some notes for a shield unit that could be fitted to cars. If possible, I wanted to fit one to my dad’s truck. Right now, it was nothing more than a short reminder as I didn’t have the time to sit and focus on it.
Glancing over at Gallant, I couldn’t help but smirk.

“Has Vicky forgiven you yet?” I asked.

On the other side of the truck, Dean groaned.

Dean had tried telling Vicky about Lightshow yesterday at school. He’d probably hoped being in public would keep her from making a scene.
Amy and I had been sitting close enough to hear and see everything. Amy had taken a worrying delight in Dean’s panicked face when Vicky hissed, “You let her kiss your helmet!?”

She had let Dean panic for nearly twenty seconds before she broke down laughing. It stood out because he usually picked up on that sort of thing. I knew some powers could interact in odd ways, but Dean and Vicky apparently negated each other’s. He was immune to her aura, and in return he couldn’t sense her emotions.

“I don’t think you have much room to talk,” he snapped, but there was no real heat.

“What?”

“Empath remember?” he said with a hint of smugness. “I’ve felt you looking. She’s going to notice sooner or later you know.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, and he must have picked up on my confusion.

“Wait?... You didn’t? ... Crap.” He sighed, running a hand down the front of his helmet. “I’m sorry, sometimes I pick up on things people don’t even know they’re feeling. For what it’s worth, I think you’ll be good for each other.”

I sat in silence trying to figure out what he was talking about. Empathy wasn’t quite mind reading, but it was close enough to make people nervous, and it was kinda creepy when he started reacting to your moods. At the same time, this was offset by just how hard he tried to live up to his name.

It was why Vicky was never truly angry with him for Lightshow, since she knew he wouldn’t cheat on her. The fact she could literally fold him in half probably helped.

*Dispatch, Aegis. We’re just clearing checkpoint two, all quiet here,* Aegis called over the radio, cutting into my thoughts and making me jump. As team leader, he had to keep in constant radio contact with Dispatch.

Putting my thoughts aside, I focused on the job.

There were five checkpoints in the city, with the fifth being the last stop before we left the city. After that, it would be a couple of hours drive south to the prison. Unfortunately, we couldn’t take the most direct route out of the city as that would put us right in the heart of Empire territory.

We had to drive east across the city, then south along Brockton Bay and on towards the prison.

The most annoying part was the very real possibility that we were guarding an empty truck. For extra security, none of us actually knew which were the decoys.
We were just past checkpoint three when I noticed something odd.

I highlighted an odd distortion on the feed coming from Laserbeak. He had been looking towards an alley between two large buildings when I’d spotted it.

“Laserbeak, focus here.” Gallant quickly called Aegis, warning him.

“Cycle vision,” I ordered as the convoy slowed down. Nothing was showing up, so maybe it was just a glitch? Better safe than sorry. “I’m picking up a slight visual distortion up ahead, but I can’t tell what it is,” I told the others.

*Okay, everyone stop. Kid, go check it out. Dispatch, Aegis. Possible contact. Investigating now.*

We waited nervously as Kid Win flew towards the distortion. He circled the area a couple of times before dropping down and landing in the alley.

*All clear, but I’m getting some strange readings. Something was definitely here,* he reported.

*Right. Dispatch, suspicious activity up ahead. We’re going to divert.*

The convoy slowly took the next turn, taking us west towards Empire territory. The plan was to take the next left and circle round back onto the designated route.

We stopped at an intersection and I had Wasp and Laserbeak take up positions on opposite corners so they could watch in all directions, giving them the perfect view of what happened when the light changed.

The convoy was halfway across when I spotted that same distortion. This time, before I could say anything, a large, heavily modified truck appeared out of nowhere with a barely perceived whuumph of displaced air. It looked more like a mobile battering ram than an actual vehicle. It slammed into the prisoner truck at nearly full speed. There was the sound of breaking metal and tortured tires as it pushed the transport sideways, only stopping when they collided with the side of a building.

With the transport trapped, two large barrels pivoted out of the attacking truck and started firing grenades at the escorts. Each one exploded into a cloud of rapidly expanding foam that quickly started to set.

Gallant and I jumped out of our van just in time to avoid getting trapped, and we could see our attackers jump out a side door of their truck. I recognised three of them immediately.

Tattletale, Grue and Regent, from the Undersiders. They’d been quiet ever since that night with Lung.

I wasn’t sure who the new members were. One was big with overly large, rusted tinkertech arms with large pipes jutting out of them. The other wore a suit of sleek power armour that had what looked like a jetpack mounted on it, with boots that seemed to incorporate skates. He was followed by a dozen of flying, boxy drones about the same size as Waspinator. A couple looked more like flying fire extinguishers.

From the top of the van, a large device shaped like a flying saucer took off and hovered overhead. Immediately, I lost my connection to Teletraan as all comms were blocked.
Darkness was pouring off Grue, spreading across the ground at about knee height and rapidly covering the area. Gallant cursed and charged forward, followed by me and Ravage. On the other side, I could see that Steeljaw, Vista and Clockblocker were still trapped inside their van. Some of the Tinker’s drones were taking shots at the van while the larger one sprayed the van’s openings with even more of that foam.

My HL-Shield snapped on and I tried to shoot Grue as I ran, but he stepped sideways and vanished into his darkness. The darkness round my feet surged up and swallowed me, just as I caught a quick glimpse of Aegis and Kid Win diving down to try and pin the Undersiders and keep them from reaching the transport. There were small blue flashes as Kid Win teleported in different modules.

I’d been in Grue’s darkness before, and it was still just as disorienting. I couldn’t hear or see anything and my sense of direction was completely gone. To make matters worse, none of the external sensors on my armour were responding correctly.

I cycled quickly through the different sensors on my gear. My sonar based system was the only thing still getting a response, but even that was weak. I upped the power enough that I could ‘see’ what was going on.

Without the full sensor suite, I was mostly seeing large, vaguely defined shapes but I could make do.

Laserbeak and Waspinator were fighting the drones overhead while Steeljaw and Ravage were behind me. I could feel Wasp’s nervousness and Laserbeak’s agitation, while Steeljaw was frustrated at being trapped and Ravage was trying in vain to navigate through the darkness.

Turning my attention back to the Undersiders, I looked for the largest collection of shapes and ran forward, HL-shield raised. Either Grue had covered the entire area or his darkness was moving with me.

The shapes reacted, scattering in different directions, and I felt confident I was looking at the Undersiders. Bringing up my Null-Ray, I opened fire on the large shapes, hoping to take Grue out.

A warning flashed up as the largest shape tried to tackle me from me from the side. Rewind manually took control of my shield since Grue’s darkness was messing with the sensors, and brought it online just in time to stop a blow aimed for my head. Even the glancing blow was enough to make my head ring.

Grue’s darkness parted and I found myself facing the cape with the metal arms. What I’d thought to be a type of exoskeleton were actually prosthetic limbs. Up close, I could see where metal had been driven into his flesh. He wasn’t wearing a mask so I could see the sneer on his face.

He stepped forward faster than I expected and brought his arms down hard, and I just about got my HL-shield over my head to catch the blow. The impact nearly drove me to my knees, even with the strength enhancement, and it took all I had to push his arms up so I could jump away.

Determined to stay out of his reach, I blasted him with my Null Ray. He shrugged off the low-powered blasts and lunged forward.

I ducked under his oncoming backfist and switched the Null Ray’s power setting to high stun, driving it into his side and pulling the trigger. He bellowed like a wild animal and staggered sideways, but managed to stay on his feet.
Not giving him time to recover, I fired twice more before I was swarmed by the other Tinker’s drones.

I shielded my face on instinct, but it was unnecessary. However, while they couldn’t hurt me, the drones were able to obscure my view and keep me from getting a clear shot at their controller or the saucer that was blocking our comms.

Before I could move, more drones arrived. These ones looked almost insect-like and tried to land on me. Rewind was still keeping my shield up, so if they were hoping to drain my batteries, they would be wasting their time.

Behind me, I heard the cape getting up. I cursed when I realised that his cybernetics were helping him recover faster. I could probably try using the Null Ray’s EMP setting, but if his cybernetics were wired throughout his body – and they would have to be to avoid ripping him apart every time he moved – then shorting them out could very well kill him.

As I turned, some of drones around me exploded. My shield flared as it deflected the energy and small pieces of shrapnel away. Warning messages flashed across my vision as the destruction of the drones created an energy field that shorted out my shield generator.

Before I could move, the downed cape was right in front of me. He drove his fist into my stomach and the force of the blow lifted me off my feet, driving the air from my lungs. He struck out at my head again just as I was about to fall, making me spin around with the sheer force of the strike. I tasted blood as I bit the inside of my cheek.

Warning messages continued to flash as my attacker lifted me up. There was a brief feeling of weightlessness as he threw me. I had only a moment to realise what was happening before I collided with a lamp post.

My shield tried to disperse the kinetic energy, but it wasn’t enough. I felt like I’d just been snapped in half. Red filled my vision as more warning messages appeared and I ignored them due to one simple fact.

I couldn’t move.

*Taylor! Taylor, don’t try to move! Taylor, can you hear me? Help is coming, just stay still!*  

Wheeljack was shouting in my ear, but I was too focused on trying to move something and didn’t listen.

My lungs felt like they were on fire, every breath was an agonising gasp. My vision was still swimming from the blow to my head, but I could just make out the blurry form of the Undersider as he stepped forwards.

*Taylor! Listen to me! You need to stop!*  

Growling in anger, I was rewarded with a twitch of my fingers. Ignoring the pain, I forced my arm to aim at my attacker and even managed to fire a shot off.

The Undersider dived out of the way before proceeding to charge at me. I was still struggling to move and couldn’t keep up. Behind him, Tattletale was screaming at him, but he ignored her.
Just before he could reach me, there was a flash of blue and Defensor appeared between us, spreading his arms wide. There was a sound of crashing metal and they wrestled for dominance before Defensor managed to get a solid grip on his opponent.

Lifting the Undersider up, he threw Trainwreck backwards.

I let myself slump forwards. Feeling was coming slowly coming back to my body and everything hurt.

Inside the darkness, Grue cleared the area around the transport. Chariot was dealing with Kid Win, dodging in and out of the edge of his darkness and taking potshots at the flying Tinker.

Meanwhile, Aegis and Gallant were caught up fighting Chariot’s drones. The weapons weren’t that dangerous, but a lucky shot from the sprayer drone had trapped Gallant’s foot, keeping him from moving.

In the air, Matrix’s flying robots were also being swarmed, while the robot panther twisted back and forth within his darkness, unable to even tell how to get out.

He was stuck in the middle, trying to provide cover with his darkness while watching everything at once.

Trainwreck was handling Matrix. He felt a slight stab of guilt as the large Tinker laid into her, but she was wearing armour and had shields. She could take a beating.

“What are you waiting for!” he shouted to Regent who was standing nearby.

The boy shrugged, jogging over to the transport. He attached a small device, about the size of a remote control, to the back doors of the van and stepped back, covering his ears just as it exploded.

The controlled explosion destroyed the lock and Regent grabbed the doors, swinging them open.

“Everybody out on bad behav-”

“Boom! Pow!” Warpath cut him off as he fired through the now open doors. The blast hit Regent square in the face, and he dropped like a stone.

Charging forwards, the little tank spun round and aimed at Grue, who cursed. Throwing himself sideways, Grue dropped a cloud of darkness over the little robot as an energy bolt sailed overhead.

“What gives!”

Grue was immune to the effects of his powers, so he could still hear and see the little robot as it cursed and spun. Thankfully, he apparently wasn’t willing to try firing blind.

“Wazzpinator! Terrorize!” The high pitched shout drew his attention and he glanced up in time to see the small green robot dive at the saucer. It skimmed as close as it could, before pulling out of the dive. The five or six drones that had been chasing him couldn’t match his agility or reactions and plowed into the saucer, destroying it.
Before he could do anything about it, Grue heard Tattletale shouting at Trainwreck and climbed to his feet.

“Trainwreck! What are you doing? Get back here and help! Trainwreck!”

With a groan, he turned in time to see Trainwreck go flying. A large robot was standing guard over Matrix, who wasn’t moving. From the way she was lying and how the lamppost was bent, he doubted she’d be moving anytime soon.

He tried to ignore the spike of guilt and created a wall of darkness to keep Trainwreck from reaching the girl. He also parted the darkness so Tattletale could reach him.

“What was that about?” he shouted to her.

“Tell you later, where is Reg-oh...” Her eyes fell on the small cloud of darkness and the unconscious Regent.

Cursing quietly, she started shouting at Trainwreck.

Reluctantly, the Tinker made his way over and climbed into the PRT transport. When he emerged, a sickly looking Squealer was thrown over his shoulder.

He paused briefly to pick up Regent and ducked into their own truck. Tattletale followed him, still spouting curses. Grue ran for the truck, releasing his power. The clouds would linger for awhile before they started to disperse.

Climbing into the driver's seat, he backed up, slowing just long enough for Chariot to climb on board.

Chariot had modified the truck with all kinds of tinkertech, and the front passenger seat was surrounded by controls and displays. Slipping into the seat, he grabbed a keyboard and started typing.

The police were just coming into view when their truck popped out of existence.

I groaned as the Undersiders pulled away. The feeling had returned to my body, but breathing was still agonising, and I didn’t need the readouts to tell me I had cracked or broken my ribs.

Once the Undersiders were out of sight, Defensor split into the Protectobots.

First Aid quickly started scanning me and injected some painkillers into a port on my armour. He had a ‘medigun’ installed that I’d reverse engineered from some Austrian Tinker, but it was only intended for visible or open wounds.

Using a hard-light projector, First Aid was able to create a stretcher, anchor me to it, and slowly turn me over once he was sure it was safe.

Slowly turning my head, I was able to see the other Wards. Gallant and Aegis looked like they had gone a dozen rounds with a Brute. Gallant’s armour was covered in dents and scuffs, not to mention he was stuck in place, while Aegis had countless bruises and scrapes.
Kid Win was still on his feet, trying to help get Steeljaw, Vista and Clockblocker out of their van. His hoverboard was lying nearby in pieces. I’d offer to help him fix it later. Laying back, I waited for the painkillers to kick in.

Having done all he could for me, First Aid went to check on the transport’s driver while the rest of the Protectobots moved to help Kid Win.

“Well…” Aegis said, slumping to ground next to me as the police started to arrive. “That went well.”
Once First Aid was sure it was safe for me to be moved, I was very carefully picked up and placed in the back of the remaining PRT van. A disgruntled Vista climbed in after me, followed by the other Wards. The PRT were securing the scene, so we were no longer needed here.

I was still strapped to First Aid’s hardlight backboard, but this was mostly as a precaution. Even through the haze of the painkillers and the dull ache throughout my body, I could still move my fingers and toes.

The drive back to the rig was tense and uncomfortable. Every bump in the road renewed the dull ache that permeated throughout my body and the painkillers made me feel sluggish and dopey...

Gallant muttered something to Vista and reached up to press a button on the side of the van, darkening the van’s windows. Then he took his helmet off and pulled his phone out. He spent the rest of the journey quietly conversing with someone.

None of the other Wards were in a talkative mood, so I took the opportunity to rest.

Getting me out of the van, onto a ferry and into the rig took some careful maneuvering, but it had been done without too much difficulty. Wheeljack and Perceptor met us at the rig’s dock, where they gathered the disabled drones we had taken and a sample of the foam the Undersiders had used, taking them to the workshop while I was moved to the medbay.

“What happened?” Dr. Beckett asked after I was brought in.

“Blunt force trauma to her chest and back,” First Aid explained. “Ribs are cracked, possibly broken and there’s suspected damage to her spine.”

“Bloody hell! Okay, let’s see what we can do. Taylor, can you hear me?”

I took a careful breath. “Yeah...”

“We need to get you out of your armour, can you tell me where the release catch is?”

“... umm.” *Oops.*

Removing the chest plate required me to lift my arms, even with the emergency release. Jack could probably remove it by dismantling some of the joints, but that would take time and the movement would probably be painful.

Dr. Beckett was still fuming about about my inability to remove my armour when Amy and Vicky walked through the door.

“Really, Taylor?” Amy said with an exasperated sigh. “You have got to find a hobby.”

“I have one,” I muttered in response. “I build things.”

“Aye, and then go charging into fights with capes twice your size,” Dr. Beckett pointed out, his
accent thickening with his temper. “Thank you for coming, Panacea,” he said before going over my suspected injuries. “Oh,” he said as he reached the end, “and even better? She’s stuck in her armour.”

Vicky’s mouth twitched as she struggled not to smile and Amy gave me an annoyed look. “Can you at least remove your helmet?”

Beeping in reply, Rewind retracted parts of my mask, exposing my mouth and jaw.

“That will do.” Amy gently put a finger on my chin, and I felt the usual sensation of Amy’s power as it healed my ribs.

“Two broken ribs, lots of bruising. There is some bruising along her spine, but nothing that wouldn’t heal in time. Oh, and no concussion for a change.” The sudden clarity as she nullified the painkillers was weird. It was what I imagined it would feel like to go from drunk to sober instantly.

As soon as she let go and the restraints were released, I sat up and took a deep breath. It felt so good to breathe without gasping in pain. I would have taken my helmet off, but I didn’t have my glasses with me. I should correct that oversight in the future.

“Thanks Amy, sorry you got called out like this.”

“It’s alright, it’s not the first time. But you really need to learn to duck,” she said with a smirk.

I was going to suggest showing them my workshop when I was ordered to meet the Wards in the briefing room. Apologising, I quickly left them and made my way there. I offered to at least walk them to the landing pad but Vicky waved me off. I did however have to promise them a tour the next time they were on the rig.

It would take time before Armsmaster could leave his post with the remaining transport, so we were all ordered to wait in the briefing room for him to arrive.

We were being watched over by PRT Lieutenant Faireborn, a tall, dark-haired woman. After five minutes of waiting, she had tea and coffee brought up.

While everyone was making themselves comfortable, Aegis got up and cleaned off the whiteboard that was built into the wall.

“Okay, we all know what happened today,” he began.

“Yeah, we got our asses kicked.”

“Yes, thank you Dennis... As I was saying, while we’ve got some time, I think we should go over what happened and see if we at learned anything useful.”

“Up until now,” he said as he wrote a list on the board of every Undersider and their powers, “the Undersiders have focused mostly on hit and run tactics. Their targets of choice have typically been other gangs. Just over a month ago, they had a fight with Lung and one of them was killed. So far, they’ve been careful not to hurt people, but at least one of their members is suspected of murder.”
Undersiders:
Tattletale - possible Thinker?
Grue - Shaker. generates darkness.
Regent - Master. messes with the body.
? - Tinker
? - Brute and/or Tinker?

Weapons used:
Containment foam
Tinker vehicle
Drones

“Can anyone think of anything else they can add?” he asked.

“Yeah, I head Tattletale call the Tinker Chariot. The big guy was called Trainwreck,” Kid Win said while fiddling with the parts of his board spread across the table in front of him.

“Good,” Aegis said, changing the names. “Anything else?”

He looked at me and I felt a moment of indecision. I’d been there when Lung killed Bitch and even met Tattletale, who had tried to give me some information.

Then I remembered Trainwreck bearing down on me when I couldn’t move.

“Grue’s power is more than just generating darkness,” I said, standing up and taking the pen Aegis offered. “It also blocks most forms of radio and even messes with your sense of direction. However, it only partially suppresses sound. I was able to see through it by upping the power on my suit’s sonar system.”

Writing the notes on the board, I also included the word “murderer” by Regent’s name.

“Tattletale contacted me a while ago. She told me that Regent was the one who killed the PRT officers who were guarding her, and that one of her teammates was there to ‘keep an eye on her’.”

“You’ve been in contact with her?” Aegis asked, giving me a funny look. The other Wards, with the exception of Vista, stared at me.

I shrugged, trying not to feel guilty. “Only once, and I reported it to Dragon the same day.”

Aegis relaxed and the sudden tension eased. “Right, sorry.”

Before we could continue, there was a commotion outside and a furious Director Piggot stormed into the room. She was followed by the deputy director, Armsmaster, Miss Militia and even Dragon, who had to duck through the door.

The director paused briefly to glance at the whiteboard, giving the information on it a quick read before dropping into one of the open seats.

“Alright,” she growled, “can someone tell me what the hell happened today?”

“We lost?” Aegis offered.
Armsmaster stepped forward. “From what I know-”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” the director snapped. “Rest assured, we will be talking about your part in this later. Now, what happened?”

She glared at Aegis, who cleared his throat and reported our mission, starting from our departure and ending when we reached the rig.

Her expression hadn’t changed, but I got the impression we weren’t the target of her anger anymore. “I assume you have video recordings?”

“U-umm, yes.”

“Good. I want copies of them and any other intelligence sent to me as soon as possible.”

She addressed the room as a whole, “I shouldn’t need to tell you that things like this make us all look bad. If we can’t even contain a half-dead Tinker, what hope do we have against real threats?”

Armsmaster tensed, flexing his hand in irritation. If the director noticed, she chose to ignore it. I just nodded and Rewind made a note to have the footage sent. Meanwhile, behind me, Dragon was reviewing the footage at high speed.

“Director?” Dragon called. “I’ve noticed a few problems I think need to be addressed.”

“Such as?”

“The Undersider’s attack was clearly prepared to counter the Wards. They knew which transport to hit, who would guard it and what route they’d take. Not to mention the level of violence used. Trainwreck was clearly targeting Taylor with an excessive degree of force, and given the side chatter from Tattletale, appeared to be off-mission while doing so.”

I felt a shiver go down my spine, and Dragon placed a hand on my shoulder. He really was trying to kill me? Suddenly I didn’t feel so bad about telling the Wards everything I knew about the Undersiders.

The director’s expression hardened. “You’re suggesting there’s been a leak?”

“Yes,” Dragon said, “even if we assume Tattletale is a mid to high level Thinker, it was only decided today which prisoner would be in which transport. I find it hard to believe they just guessed which transport had the most valuable prisoner in. That information could only have come from inside the PRT.”

“How do we know the leak is on our end?” Piggot accused. “They were using containment foam after all. Are you sure we’re not looking at another leak in your network?”

“Certainly not, I don’t know how they acquired it but it wasn’t from me,” Dragon shot back.

Before they could argue further, the report from Perceptor came in.

“They didn’t, because they didn’t use containment foam,” I said, breaking the tension and forwarding the report to Dragon, who quickly skimmed through it.
“Taylor is correct,” Dragon said. “The chemical composition is wrong. Containment foam is stored as a liquid that expands into foam when exposed to air. The foam is flexible and porous, allowing people to breathe while fully immersed, and is extremely sticky.”

“I know what containment foam is. How is that different from what they used?”

“They used a binary mixture. Two separate chemicals that, when mixed with air, create a quick setting foam. What’s more, the foam becomes hard once it sets. It’s clearly Tinker-made, but it’s not containment foam.”

“So it’s a knock off? How easy would that be, could someone like Leet could make it?”

“I have a hard time imaging Leet being able to make containment foam without getting himself trapped in it,” Dennis muttered, just loud enough for everyone to hear.

The director glared briefly at him but said nothing.

“I doubt this is one of Leet’s creations,” Dragon said. “If he could create containment foam, he would have used it by now. Possibly toybox?”

“Or a chemical Tinker?” the director asked, glancing at Armsmaster, who promptly stiffened.

What were they…- The drugs! “Are you talking about the Merchant Tinker?” I asked. “The one who made those drugs?”

“I thought he was dead?” Kid Win asked.

“Presumed dead,” Armsmaster said. “A parahuman was killed in his workshop, but we can’t confirm whether or not he was the Tinker.”

“Either way, this is not a discussion for now. Armsmaster, Miss Militia, I want a full report on what happened today on my desk first thing tomorrow morning. The rest of you? There will be a tour group coming through soon, I expect all of you to be visible, so you may want to clean yourselves up.” The director stood up and left the room. I got the distinct feeling we had dodged a bullet.

After she left, Armsmaster nodded to Miss Militia and Dragon before making his way out. The two women shared a look and Miss Militia walked over to the whiteboard.

“Taylor, can you explain this?” she asked, pointing out what I had written by Regent’s name.

“Umm, Tattletale told me it was Regent who killed those PRT guards?”

“Hmm, very well. Does anyone have anything else to add?” She went around the room, getting as much information as she could out of everyone before focusing on the fight itself. What we did right, what we did wrong.

For my part, I needed to have a long talk with Defensor. After he interposed himself between me and Trainwreck, he made my protection his sole priority. Rather than capture Trainwreck or try to stop the Undersiders, he chose to stand there and guard me. I wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that.

I also needed to check my suit’s sensors. I wanted to know just how they took my shield down and how to stop it from happening again. Not only that, I wanted to expand my armament, since
containment foam would have been useful against Trainwreck.

I was standing in the empty hanger next to my workshop three days later, running the final tests on Divebomb. In terms of wingspan, he was now the largest bot I’d ever produced.

His robot mode was loosely based on a bird of prey, and rather than give him an alt mode, I built him to convert into a backpack that could connect to my armour. Like Ravage and Laserbeak, he wasn’t sapient. Instead, I’d put all of them close to a dolphin’s level of intelligence.

The soft, matte gold paint on his wings looked good, and when connected to my armour they could extend outwards, giving me a rather impressive set of birdlike wings that were almost as wide as I was tall.

Modifying my armour to account for Divebomb had been fairly easy, and I had plans to add even more features later. One thing I really wanted to include was the pack Ravage had stolen from Leet.

It created a small dimensional pocket that could be used to store almost anything, providing it wasn’t too large. Something about the tech had been really easy for me to understand, and while it would never be mass producible. It hadn’t taken long to identify the faults in leets tech, having a rough idea what it did at the start had helped immensely.

“Ready, Taylor?” Jack called from the nearby wall. This would be my first, manned, flight test with Divebomb, and he was here to keep an eye on me. First Aid and Hotspot were on standby.

“I’m ready.” I turned my back to Divebomb and sent the command. I heard him transform and felt his weight settle behind my shoulders. For a second, I was worried I would fall over backwards, but his anti-grav unit kicked in to reduce the weight.

That was another piece of Leet’s tech. I’d examined the cameras we’d recovered from the mall and found one of them incorporated a small and surprisingly efficient anti-gravity device. It took me a couple of days to understand it all.

Originally, I’d planned to trade Kid Win for the tech. His stuff was modular after all, so making it work with Divebomb would have been easy. Of course, the problem with using Kid Win’s tech was that I couldn’t reproduce it at will. Well, okay, I could. But that wouldn’t have been fair to him and felt too much like stealing from a friend.

But Leet’s tech was fair game. It wasn’t quite as powerful or efficient as Kid Win’s, but as it was confiscated tech, I could happily do whatever I wanted with it. Which included selling it.

I actually had three anti-grav systems on my body right now: a larger one built into Divebomb that reduced his weight on the ground and could be used to assist flight, and two smaller units built directly into my armour. Those were my ‘parachute.’

They weren’t powerful enough for true flight, but if anything went wrong and I fell from a height - or someone tried to throw me across the street - they’d reduce my speed to something reasonably safe. Combined with a gyro-stabilization system, they could even flip me over so I’d always land right side up.

Walking forward, I found myself wobbling a bit. Reduced weight wasn’t weightless after all; I was still aware of how his presence also shifted my centre of balance. But I gradually acclimated as I
walked round the room for five minutes to finish calibrating Divebomb’s systems.

By the time I’d finished, the wings were shifting automatically to compensate for my movements. I’d already tweaked the sensors inside my body suit to better pick up on the nerve impulses along my back and shoulders.

The end result was a very organic look and feel to the movement of the wings as I moved through the room. Spreading my arms wide caused the wings to splay out to their full length. Jack let me look at myself through his eyes and I had to admit, the look was impressive.

One thing I hadn’t considered was Divebomb’s ‘tail feathers’. Like his wings, they were painted gold and could move freely for better flight. However, when he was combined with my armour, they hung down my back, creating what looked almost like skirt armour. Rather than look silly, I thought they were kind of cool.

“Okay, let’s try simple flight,” I said, causing Jack to chuckle. “What?”

“Oh nothing, I’ll tell you later.”

Giving him a suspicious look, I activated the flight system. The thrusters on Divebomb’s back whined into life as they switched to pre-heat. They were intended for full flight. For this test, Divebomb’s AG systems would be sufficient.

I pushed gently off the ground and felt myself lift up. I hung there, maybe a foot of the ground, even as my wings shifted gently to stabilise my flight. I also realised I was giggling slightly. This was so cool, I was actually flying!

As exciting as this was, I was sensible enough not to do anything too silly. I spent nearly ten minutes floating round the hanger, testing basic maneuverability.

Once I landed, I checked Divebomb’s fuel levels while Jack looked over the data my suit had recorded.

“Huh…” Jack muttered.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, everything’s fine.” He made to go back to work, but I glared at him. “Okay, okay. It’s just, I half expected you to go rocketing around the room, crashing into walls and so on…”

I rolled my eyes. “As funny as that would be, I know better than to test a jet pack on full power indoors.”

Still… I really wanted to know what ‘full speed’ would feel like. I’d tested everything else and I knew my AG parachute worked. Divebomb’s tank was more or less full and I knew he was getting fed up with being locked indoors.

I flipped the remote release on the hanger door. “Dispatch, this is Matrix. I’m going into the city to test my flight system.”

*Roger Matrix, do I need to look out for dragons?*
“No…?” Apparently he hadn’t forgotten about that.

Closing the connection, I walked to the now open hanger and looked out. It wasn’t quite dark yet, which would make things easier.

“Want to come, Wasp?” I called out to the small bot who had been watching everything from a safe distance.

A look of worry crossed his face. “Wazzpinator remember lazzzt time…” he muttered before flying off into the other room.

“You’re not seriously going to do it are you?” Jack asked.

Smiling at Wasp’s antics and ignoring Jack, I tried to work up the courage to jump. The funny thing about stepping out over a void, your body resists it. Giving up, I walked back into the hanger and took a deep breath. Before I could change my mind, I spun round and ran for the door.

When I threw myself out of the hanger, there was a moment of total weightlessness. I opened my eyes and saw the ocean below rushing up to meet me. I knew my AG system would kick in before I hit, but it was still a terrifying sight.

My wings snapped open and the thrusters fired into life, pulling me out of the dive and sending me rocketing skywards.

I let out a whoop of joy as I soared over the water, Brockton Bay getting closer with every second.

I’d flown on Predaqueen and I’d been carried by Glory Girl once, but neither of them compared to this. The feeling of freedom was incredible, with the city below and the open sky above.

Deciding to at least make an attempt at being sensible, I opened the throttle and timed myself as I flew forward. It looked like my top speed was around fifty to sixty miles an hour. At that speed, I could reach almost anywhere in good time.

Finally calming down, I landed on a rooftop near a fast food restaurant called Fugly Bob’s. I’d been there once or twice; the food was good, if a bit pricy.

Catching my breath, I debated what to do. I didn’t feel like going back to the rig just yet, but It would be a waste to just fly around aimlessly. Getting an idea, I texted Vicky, who called me back.

“Hey Taylor, what’s up? Is something wrong?”

“Hey Vicky! No I’m fine. Feel like going on patrol?” I doubted she would say no, but I didn’t know if she had other plans.

“Sure. Are you patrolling alone or will the other Wards be there?”

“No, just me. I’m on a roof near Fugly Bob’s. Do you know it?”

She snorted. “Of course I do. I managed to finish the Challenger.”

I smiled as I remembered the story. The Challenger was Fugly Bob’s special burger. If you managed to eat the entire thing, you got your meal free. What Vicky didn’t mention, and what Amy had told
me, was that Vicky spent the next day in bed with a severe stomach ache and their mom hadn’t allowed Amy to help until she was sure Vicky had learnt a lesson.

It took Vicky nearly fifteen minutes to arrive, by which point I’d already contacted the PRT dispatch and told them what I was doing.

I’d never been to Amy’s house, but I knew where it was, so I was able to watch for Vicky’s arrival. As soon as I could see her, I took off and met her halfway.

As we came to a stop, Vicky grinned. “Okay, that’s cool and total bullshit.”

“You’re just jealous,” I said, crossing my arms. We both kept straight faces for nearly twenty seconds before we broke down laughing.

Turning around, I started on our patrol.

“So why the bird wings?” Vicky asked as we flew. “Wouldn’t a jet work better?”

“Maneuverability,” I explained. “Fixed wings would get in the way on the ground. Besides, this is actually one of my bots. It’s easier to build large animals.”

As I explained, Vicky stared off into the distance. “Hey… think you could make one for Amy?” she asked, stopping and standing up straight in the air.

“She’d need a full set of armour first. Why?” I said, stopping nearby and switching to the AG hover mode.

Vicky shrugged. “She works too hard. I know she tries to hide it, but even I can tell she’s stressed. I’ve tried getting her out of the house more, but she just clams up. I thought, maybe if she could go flying like this she’d feel better?”

I could see where she was coming from. Flying was great and maybe it would cheer Amy up. I just wasn’t sure it would be enough.

We flew on in silence for a while until I picked up a message from Aegis. He was on patrol nearby with Kid Win and Clockblocker and was asking if we wanted to join up.

“Hey, Glory Girl, do you want to patrol with some of the Wards?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

After I told Aegis, we found them waiting on a rooftop near ABB territory.

Clockblocker took one look at me, then Glory Girl, Kid Win and Aegis.

“Really? Why does everyone but me get to fly?” he asked, throwing his arms up into the air. Despite his actions, there was no real heat to his words. “Hey! Kid, why can’t you build that jetpack I designed.”

Kid Win sighed theatrically. “well I’m sorry, but strapping a giant rocket to your back doesn’t sound like a good idea to me. Especially when you write ‘Acme’ on it.”
“Yeah, yeah. So what am I supposed to do? Run?

Nobody said anything.

“...I hate you all.”

Vicky just laughed. “I’m sure we can work something out,” she said as she floated closer. Clockblocker perked up.

“Really?”

“Of course,” she smiled sweetly at him before turning to Kid Win. “Your board can carry two people, right?”

“I. Hate. You. All,” Clock said as everyone else laughed.

In the end, Clock did end up on the back of Kid Win’s board.

We were halfway through the patrol when the Vicky remembered something. “You guys hear about the memorial this weekend? I know Dean is going, and he asked me to go with him.”

The memorial was one of the mayor's bright ideas. This time last year, a local cop was killed while off duty. There was a robbery and he’d tried to help despite being alone and unarmed.

For all his faults, Mayor Christner had always been outspoken against the gangs in the city and was now trying to build public support for his latest ‘anti-gang’ initiative. Part of that was using Officer Murphy as a martyr.

I wasn’t sure how to feel about it, to be honest. His death was a tragedy, but what the mayor was doing felt more like exploitation.

“I was thinking of going,” Aegis admitted. “I thought I would ask the others later.”

Vicky’s eyes lit up and I felt a sudden sense of foreboding.

“What if we all went? New Wave and the Wards. All of us in costume? I think it would be a good show of support.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” I said.

“Oh don’t be like that. We’re heroes, being seen at the memorial would probably mean a lot to people!”

“You have got to spend less time with Dean,” I muttered. This sounded more like one of his speeches than Vicky’s.

“Well maybe,” Aegis said diplomatically. “I’d need to clear it with Miss Militia first.”

“Just as long as Concert isn’t there,” Clockblocker complained from behind Kid Win.
Vicky looked puzzled, “Why? Are they really that bad?”

“Have you met them?” I asked.

“No, Aunt Sarah doesn’t want anything to do with them.”

“Ugh, consider yourself lucky,” Kid Win said. What followed was a long list of complaints from everyone but Vicky about the things Concert had gotten up to.

Most of the stories I already knew, but Aegis had an interesting story about his last patrol with them.

“He stank of whisky,” he said, talking about Treble. “I don’t know how he was standing. He spent the entire patrol staring at either Lightshow’s ass or her… erm.”

He gave a worried look in mine and Vicky’s direction.

“I’ve seen a picture,” she said dryly, “I get what you mean.”

“Right,” he continued. “We ended up stopping a mugging. Nothing major, just a couple of Empire toughs looking for quick cash. While we waited for the cops to arrive, a bit of a crowd gathered and he spent the entire time flirting with some blonde woman.”

Vicky and I snorted at that. That was hardly new behaviour.

“Then, to make matters worse, he started trying to teach me ‘how to play the game.’ He was convinced he knew the best way to get a girl’s attention. At the end of the patrol, he invited me and Assault to some club he’d heard about so he could give me a demonstration.”

Given Carlos was six feet tall, well built and, I suppose, fairly good looking, I doubt he would much trouble getting anybody’s attention.

“How was he planning to take you to a club without giving his identity away?” Vicky asked.

Aegis sighed. “He says he wouldn’t bother taking his costume off. Apparently, some women like it that way. He said the team’s well known enough that most places let him in. He said it’s a…” He glanced at me and Vicky again and cleared his throat. “Well, he said the costume was a chick magnet. “

“That’s not what he said,” Vicky said with a grin. “Come on, what was it?”

He started looking in every direction but ours. “Oh come on, you really want me to say it?”

I smiled under my mask. Sure, I could probably guess what he said, but watching Aegis squirm was just too much fun. “Oh yes we do.”

“Don’t do it man, it’s a trap!” Clockblocker called out, Kid Win nodding in agreement.

“Fine… he called it a pussy magnet.”

Aegis flinched as Vicky burst out laughing. From what Amy, and even Vista, had told me, all of them had heard worse.
“There, was that so hard?” Vicky said with a smile.

“Did he say what club he was going to?” I asked. “Just so we can avoid it.”

“I don’t remember, sorry.”

Rewind had been listening in, of course, and had started a search for Treble. Almost immediately, he brought up a recent post on Face Space from Treble.

“Huh. Apparently he’s at a bar called “Bad Wolf”, or at least he was five minutes ago,” I told the others.

Aegis and Vicky came to a dead stop, forcing me and Kid Win to spin around.

“What’s wrong?”

“Bad Wolf is an Empire bar,” Vicky said, looking a bit worried.

“Suspected Empire bar,” Aegis corrected, but from the look on his face he didn't believe that caveat any more than I did.

Looking up the bar’s location, I could see it was roughly south of us. It would only take a few minutes to reach it.

“Think we should head in that direction, just in case?” I suggested.

Vicky nodded and we changed direction. Kid Win and Aegis followed behind us. I could hear Aegis talking rapidly to Dispatch and Clockblocker’s quiet, “We’re all going to die!”

We were almost there when the call came in.

*Dispatch to all units, disturbance reported 29th Street. Be aware, possible cape presence.*

I sped up and Vicky did the same. As the bar came into view, we could see a crowd of people gathering in the street. At the back of the crowd was a large metal wolf. Just ahead of everything was a man in a dark bodysuit who I assumed was Treble.

From the way he was swaying about, I was afraid he’d already been injured.

Before we could do anything, Aegis caught up with us. “What are you doing?”

“Well we can’t just do nothing!” With that, I went into a dive and landed heavily between Treble and the crowd, Vicky just behind me.

Standing up, I spread my arms and wings as a shield. “That's enough! Nobody needs to get hurt. Just walk away,” I shouted, trying to sound more confident than I really was.
Aegis, Kid Win and Clockblocker landed behind me and spread out to form a line.

“This is our territory, the nigger isn’t welcome here!” Hookwolf growled from the back of the crowd.

This close up, he looked a lot bigger. His body was made up of blades and metal spikes that shifted and flexed with every movement. Every inch of him looked razor sharp.

Behind us, Treble, who had fallen over when we landed, managed to climb to his feet. “Pfft, what’s the matter chrome dome? Can’t take a little joke? Here’s a good one: why is a racist like a dog? Both mark their territory with shit!”

As he giggled, I could feel the tension increase. The crowd started to spread out, forming the beginnings of a semi-circle.

Expecting the worst, I charged my Null Ray. Against someone like Hookwolf, I wasn’t going to bother with the stun settings. The information Rewind was feeding me said his real body was buried under the blades and he could regenerate.

For extra firepower, Warpath and the Protectobots teleported in behind me.

The increased numbers gave the mob reason to pause.

A man in loose fitting pants and a white tiger mask stepped through the crowd. “Walk away, girl. The Empire can’t ignore this insult.”

He gave me the same dismissive look I’d received from Oni Lee and I felt a surge of anger. I would not be dismissed by him or anybody again.

“Warpath! Protectobots!” In response to my command, Warpath switched to tank mode and the Protectobots formed Defensor.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Hookwolf growled.

The tension increased and just as I thought it would come to blows, I saw Treble break free of Kid Win and stagger forwards. “Hey! Why wouldn't Eva Braun give Adolf a blowjob?”

Damn it, “Warpath!”

He fired and there was a stunned silence as Treble slumped bonelessly to the ground.

“There! The idiot’s down, now walk away!” I said, refusing to look back at the now unconscious cape.

A blip appeared on my HUD and I realised Dragon was closing in. Our chances of surviving the night had just improved.

Glancing past me, I assume Stormtiger saw the same thing.

“Pull back,” he ordered. “We won’t forget this, girl…” He turned and sauntered away. Hookwolf followed, slowly shifting into a smaller form.
Without support from the capes, the smarter people started leaving and the crowd quickly dispersed.

“Matrix?” Aegis said, sounding strained. “Please… Don’t ever do that again…”

Dragon circled above us in her beast mode, making sure they were gone.

*Honestly Taylor, do you have to pick a fight with every gang in town?* her voice was tinged slightly with worry.
After Dragon had arrived last night, we had been taken back to the rig where Miss Militia was waiting for us. She wasn't angry, but she was disappointed that we would do something so silly. She was also concerned about our encounter with Hookwolf.

Hookwolf was one of the Empire’s heavy hitters, a Changer who could shift the mass of blades that formed his body into any shape he desired, his favourite one being a giant wolf. He was normally in the company of either Stormtiger or Cricket and ran dogfighting rings across the city.

What made him truly dangerous, was that he had no compunctions with killing others, and he badly injured two Wards the last time they crossed paths. Most villains tended not to go that far, which was why Miss Militia had been relieved when he left us unharmed.

Thankfully, Concert hadn’t made too much fuss over me shooting Treble. A representative for NKT-Galactic did make a brief appearance at the PRT HQ, but he’d only made a token complaint. In fact, Duette had sent me a message and told me that Treble had been benched, and that he was being kept out of sight by their bosses.

However, there had been a discussion between Dragon, Miss Militia and the director about what I did. Dragon and Miss Militia both felt my actions were justified, but the director had been concerned about how it would look to others.

In the end, it was decided that everyone involved would be take part in a PR event as a mild punishment. The event was actually one of Concert’s. They were due to make a public appearance at a music shop owned by NKT-Galactic. Each member of the team had a theme song, so they would be giving away copies and signing anything that was put in front of them.

Originally, Concert had requested a Protectorate/Ward presence, but they had been denied. I assume it was to help draw more people in; fame by association and all that.

So now Aegis, Clockblocker and I were waiting in the music store for Concert to arrive, helping around as we had been dropped off early. Kid Win should have been here, but he was scheduled for an equipment review with Armsmaster and the older Tinker had refused to re-schedule.

Miss Militia and Dragon had claimed that was punishment enough, but Armsmaster had been taking a lot more interest in Kid Win’s work lately. Now that Kid Win’s specialisation had been discovered, Armsmaster had a better foundation to work from.

When we arrived, one of the cashiers asked if I could take a look at the the store's sound system. It had broken last night and they were desperate to have it fixed before Concert arrived. I accepted and took it apart, working together with Jack to repair it. Honestly, it was a simple fix. My power had let me find the fault in minutes, but as I wanted to keep that secret, I was forced to at least look like I was doing it the normal way.

“Y’know,” Jack suggested, “if we stripped most of this out, we could replace it with-”

I sighed, cutting him off. “No, Jack. You can’t go round replacing everything with Tinkertech.” It wasn’t like I couldn’t understand where he was coming from. In the last five minutes I’d thought of nearly a dozen different ways to improve the system, a couple of which I’d even noted down for
Aegis was carrying some large boxes around while the pretty young shop assistant flirted rather shamelessly with him. Clockblocker was so busy complaining about the unfairness of it that he failed to notice a dark haired girl who kept looking round the shelves at him. *She is kinda cute, I wonder what she would do if I walked over and said hello?*

The shop was closed while it prepared for Concert’s arrival and people were queuing outside. As a matter of course, I had everyone in range flagged on my interface, which was how I noticed the movement outside.

The crowd outside was rapidly thinning. Putting down my tools, I stood up and look towards the front of the store, Rewind focusing my suit’s sensors in the direction I was looking.

Six people were standing outside. I couldn’t see them and my suit’s sensor’s couldn’t give me more than a rough shape, four were closest to the building with two more standing behind them. Before I could say anything, the figures moved and molotov cocktails smashed through the window.

The first two broke the windows and spread their contents across the front of the store while the rest landed further in. Fire quickly began to spread, thick black smoke quickly filling the building and setting off the fire alarms. The sprinklers, however, didn’t activate.

“Shit, we need to get out of here!” Aegis shouted over the noise.

“We can’t, they’re waiting for us. Six of them.”

“The back door's blocked!” one of the cashiers shouted.

“So are the fire exits!” called another.

The smoke and fire was starting to spread and the staff were pulling towards us, panic written on their faces.

“No choice. Matrix, take point!” Aegis ordered. “Everyone else, follow me. Clock, you bring up the rear.”

Clockblocker and I nodded. I turned and ran for the large glass double doors, my HL-shield snapping into place. Just short of the doors, I brought my arm up and fired my Null Ray. The doors exploded outwards, showering the waiting attackers with glass and forcing them back.

I raised my shield in front of me as I crossed the threshold, just in time to block a blast of wind. The impact made me stagger and forced me to stop. Aegis flew over my head and slammed into a surprised Stormtiger.

From what I could see from the expressions on the waiting Empire thugs, they hadn’t been expecting us. There was a blue flash and Warpath appeared nearby, immediately switching to tank mode and shooting at the unpowered members.

As Clockblocker guided the staff out of the burning building, he placed a hand on the wall, freezing the building with the source of the flames time-locked, the flames to vanished.

I turned my attention to the last member: a twenty-something woman with a gymnast's build, a
blonde buzz-cut, and a metal cage as a mask.

According to Rewind, her name was Cricket and the weapons in her hands were kamas, a baton-like weapon with a small blade that was similar to a sickle. I ignored the irony of a racist using what was traditionally a Japanese weapon in favor of stopping her from killing me.

But as I found out, that was easier said than done. She danced around my shots and had closed in on me in seconds, lashing out. My HL-shield blocked the blow, but she hooked her kama around its edge and pivoted behind me, slicing across the armour on my right shoulder.

I used my HL-shield to ‘shield-bash’ her backwards, only for her to take the blow and turn it into a backflip. Enhanced reflexes and agility were apparently part of her power set. I switched my tower shield for a small buckler, as anything bigger would just be a hindrance against such an agile opponent. The HL-generator on my right arm created a baton-like weapon.

Her mask didn’t do much to hide the smirk on her face as she circled around me.

We continued to trade blows and as the fight went on, I quickly grew frustrated. I may have been stronger, but not only was she much faster than I was, she clearly had more experience.

The only thing working in my favor was my shield. Rewind was manually controlling it and most of Cricket’s swipes scraped harmlessly against it. I needed to do something to break this stalemate, but what? If I could just get her off-balance, that would probably be enough to help me knock her out. I began by making a couple of wide swings I knew she would dodge, remembering my fight against Siren.

Just as I expected, she took the bait and darted in for a strike. At the last second, I pulled backwards and caught her kama on my shoulder guard, pinning her arm. Once her arm was securely fastened, I threw my weight backwards, putting her off-balance before driving my head forwards.

Our heads collided with a crunch and her mask crumpled. In the process, my grip on her loosened and she immediately let go of her kama, jumping backwards. Her mask was still holding together, but it had buckled and was blocking her vision. Apparently she didn’t need her eyes as she continued to fight, this time being much more careful.

As we circled each other, I could see the other fights that were going on. Stormtiger was trading blows with Aegis while Clockblocker was waiting for the right moment to strike.

Warpath had taken out most of the Empire thugs. The last one standing was trying to keep a car between himself and the tank, and it was working right until Warpath switched to his grenade launcher. A well timed grenade sailed over the car and exploded, covering the gangster in containment foam.

With his last target down, Warpath tried to shoot Cricket in the back, but she dodged the blast effortlessly and began to make a high pitched noise. It was fast paced but with a regular pattern. With her hesitating to attack, I realised it must be some form of echolocation.

I was glad she couldn’t see my smile. “Rewind, white noise, loud, all frequencies,” I muttered, trusting my helmet to keep her from hearing me.

If she could use echolocation, then I was willing to bet her hearing was enhanced.
It took Rewind seconds to configure the speakers in my helmet to make the noise I wanted. With that done, he blasted it out at full volume. Cricket didn’t quite scream; it was more a strangled choking noise. I almost felt bad.

She staggered backwards, alternating between trying to cover her ears and taking wild swings at the air. I charged forwards, grabbing the hand holding her remaining weapon. I pushed my Null Ray against her side and fired.

She dropped to the ground and Rewind cut the noise.

Stormtiger bellowed as she fell, and I turned just in time to see him throw Aegis backwards and turn to charge at me. Clockblocker used Stormtiger’s distraction to dive out of cover and freeze him in place. The expression on what I could see of his face was murderous.

“So,” Clockblocker asked, “who’s going to call this one in?”

Both of us turned to Aegis, who sighed.

Behind him, the time lock on the building ended and the fire instantly reappeared. Clockblocker quickly froze it again and I called for a fire truck. There were Empire 88 tags sprayed on the front of the building, they wanted people to know who did this. *Retaliation for Treble?*

Meanwhile, Warpath placed a grenade underneath Stormtiger.

“*Blam* Fire in the *Boom* hole!” he shouted.

The grenade exploded, trapping the still frozen cape in containment foam.

Vicky could be very convincing and driven when she wanted to be. Beneath that outgoing, very impulsive attitude was a sharp mind, which was why I wasn’t surprised when she managed to get the Wards and New Wave at the upcoming memorial on such short notice.

I expect the Mayor’s office practically jumped at the request.

Officer Murphy had been gunned down attempting to stop a robbery while off-duty. His attackers were later identified as members of the Empire Eighty Eight. His wife went on to start a number of ‘anti-gang’ movements, mostly focusing on preventing the gangs from recruiting.

However, for every success, there was a dozen failures. And now, the mayor was getting involved, throwing his weight behind the organisation in another attempt to weaken the hold the various gangs held on the city.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure it would do any good. The gangs were too entrenched, too used to getting their own way for something like this to stop them. Even the Merchants were still around.

Skidmark and Mush were in prison and no one had seen Squealer since the Undersiders took her. Even without its capes, the Merchants had already reformed as a dozen smaller gangs. Each one had different tags and were starting to fight against one another.

Of course, that simply made it all the more important that we try to stop them.
The Mayor had at least been sensible enough to keep things low key, for him anyway. The gangs were starting to become restless and this memorial could be seen as an attempt to antagonise them. There had been two fights between the Empire and the ABB in the last week alone and while no capes had been involved, things could still escalate.

The road had been cordoned at either end to give everyone room and to help with security. The area around the small memorial plaque that had been placed near where Officer Murphy was killed had been roped off.

The Mayor stood in the cleared area, facing the wall. The press that had been invited were standing along the rope barrier behind him. To his left was Officer Murphy's family and friends; we had been introduced briefly and even signed some autographs for his children.

The Wards and New Wave, or at least Amy and Vicky, were to the Mayor's right, outside the cordoned off area. Lady Photon and Miss Militia stood further back, acting as additional security.

Vicky had tried to get more people to come but the rest of New Wave and the Protectorate had other duties, so it was just us. The one group none of us had wanted to see however, had turned up regardless.

Concert.

From the way the mayor's aides had acted, Concert must have been invited. They were placed at the back of the crowds with plenty of people between them and us. To my surprise, Treble was with them.

The mayor quietly placed a wreath on the ground by the plaque and stood in silence. After a minute or two, he somberly turned and approached the cameras.

“It is clear to everyone that the gangs pose a serious threat to our way of life. Their use of violence and intimidation, distribution of drugs, and all the crimes they’ve committed are ruining the lives of hardworking, innocent civilians. And it is clear that the threat they posed is steadily increasing as they gain higher levels of criminal sophistication and access to more powerful capes.”

I winced at his choice of words. While no one could deny that the increase in crime could be linked to the rising number of capes, speeches like this just tended to inflame the anti-cape groups. Most would then vent their feelings on the rogues and heroes, knowing they couldn’t or wouldn’t really fight back.

I tuned the rest of his speech out. While he had some points, he completely ignored the reason why so many people joined the gangs. The city was splitting in half: the financial, technological and tourism sectors were still going strong while the docks, manufacturing and other ‘blue collar’ areas were in steady decline.

Unemployment was still rising and many were forced into less than legal jobs just to keep a roof over their head. The older generation joined either out of necessity, out of desperation or because they couldn’t see an alternative. The younger generation joined because they didn’t see alternatives or because it looked cool, or because of peer pressure.

I could have stopped Emma, or at least Sophia, dead by simply hanging out with the Empire members at school. The gangs offered security, money, things people needed but the city wasn’t providing.
They divide themselves on imaginary lines and the city slowly bleeds. //

Shaking myself out of my reverie, I turned my focus back to the memorial.

Now that the speeches done, the mayor was talking quietly to people and the gathered watchers were slowly starting to trickle away. As I was heading back to the PRT van with the Wards and younger members of New Wave, Concert pushed their way through the crowds so they could get closer to the cameras.

Our groups met halfway and we were forced to stop, out of politeness if nothing else. Treble and Lightshow briefly gave me a dirty look, but with all the cameras that were still around, they didn’t dare say anything.

I was half tempted to charge my Null Ray just to see how they reacted. Even if I didn’t extend the barrel, the weapon made a nice high pitched whine that was good for intimidation.

“Glory Girl!” Lightshow said, purposely ignoring me while trying to knock me out of the way. “It’s so good to meet you. I’m a huge fan!”

“You can say that again,” Clockblocker muttered as the members of Concert shook hands with Vicky and Amy. It was almost funny how Amy only came up to Lightshow’s chest. She was openly staring and her expression went slack when their hands met.

Lightshow and the other Concert members moved off to the side, talking to Miss Militia and Lady Photon. Vicky, Vista and I moved closer to Amy, who was rubbing her fingers together, barely noticing our arrival.

“Well?” Vicky said with a knowing look.

“Well what?” Amy asked, still looking distracted.

“Well?” she repeated, nodding towards Concert. Or to be more precise, Lightshow.

“Oh! That… Yeah, they're real.”

“You’re kidding!”

“What the hell does she eat?” Vista hissed. Of the four of us, she was both the youngest and the least developed.

I was more focused on Amy, as she was still staring at her hand. “You okay, Amy?”

“Yeah, it’s just… Excuse me.” She turned around and quickly walked over to Concert. Politely getting Lightshow’s attention, they walked a bit further away for some privacy.

“Tay… can you hear what they are saying?” Vicky quickly whispered to me and Vista leaned in closer.

I shook my head, “No, sorry.” Actually, I could. With the directional microphones and other sensors in my armour, listening in would be easy. However, knowing how much effort Amy put into keeping people's confidentiality, I was purposefully not doing it.
“What are you three up to?” Gallant asked as he approached us.

“Girl talk,” Vista and Vicky said in unison. The look of surprise on both their faces was a picture.

Gallant chuckled, knowing he would probably pay for it in some unsubtle way later. Before he could say anything else, his head snapped around to look in the direction of Amy and Lightshow.

“Don’t!” he shouted, but it was too late.

Whatever Amy had said to Lightshow, the woman had apparently not taken it well. So much happened at once that I would later have to watch everything in slow motion to see exactly what happened.

Lightshow lashed out first, her fist striking Amy across the jaw and sending the much smaller and lighter girl tumbling to the ground. Jokes aside, Lightshow was built, her costume showing off an impressive amount of muscle. There was a brief flash of blue as Amy’s shield dispersed the impact.

Before anyone else could move, Vicky slammed into Lightshow’s back at near full speed and I heard the sickening crunch of bone as she drove the woman into the ground.

Vicky immediately straddled Lightshow and pulled her fist, only for a pair of sonic blasts from Treble to sent her flying. Vicky rolled to a stop near the edge of the crowd, staggering when she tried to stand and falling to her knees.

Treble went to fire another shot, but a blast from my Null Ray downed him. At which point, everyone moved at once. Aegis, Clockblocker and Kid Win joined Vista and cornered Bass, who went from being battle-ready to backing down when faced with all four of them.

Gallant sprinted to Vicky’s side, skidding to his knees and throwing up sparks. Duette stepped backwards, hand above her head. Before anything else could go wrong, a blast of light from Lady Photon struck the ground between everyone.

“That’s enough!” she shouted.

“Nobody move!” Miss Militia moved to keep an eye on Bass who had the good sense to sit down.

Several PRT officers ran over and, after looking to Miss Militia for confirmation, started securing Treble. Lightshow was left where she was because they were worried about her injuries. I tried to ignore the cameras that were now facing us as I walked over to Amy, who was still on the ground.

“Are you okay?” I asked Amy, kneeling down beside her.

“Y-yeah, I didn’t… I just… I didn’t expect her to attack me… ow…” Wincing, she touched her jaw gingerly. Lightshow was even stronger than I thought if that blow was enough to overcome Amy’s shield.

“I think something’s wrong with Glory Girl’s hearing,” Gallant called.

Amy tried to stand up, but I put my hands on her shoulder and kept her still. That was a bad blow to
the head and I wanted to get her checked out before she did anything else.

“You stay there. Vicky will be okay for a couple of minutes.” This whole situation was a mess and needed to be handled carefully. I summoned First Aid, who immediately scanned Amy.

“Nothing’s broken, but I’m afraid you’re going to have some nasty bruising.” Opening a compartment on his leg, he pulled out a small, chemical cold pack and snapped the capsule inside.

“Here, hold this against your jaw. Ten minutes on, ten minutes off,” he instructed.

As he walked away to check on Vicky, Amy flinched a bit as the cold touched her face, but slowly relaxed.

Vicky’s eardrums had burst from Treble’s attack and it was messing with her sense of balance. After three failed attempts to explain this to her, he took out a pen and paper and wrote the explanation down.

“Why can’t Amy just heal it?!” she half-shouted. Her aunt took the paper and wrote the word ‘evidence’ on it.

The cameras were still recording after all; we had to be seen doing the proper thing. Which was the only reason I told First Aid to check on Lightshow. He said ‘spinal damage’ and that she would need an ambulance, but the report he sent to me was a bit more detailed. Vicky had nearly snapped her in half. Unless Amy or some other parahuman healer agreed to fix her, she would probably never walk again.

I found it surprisingly hard to care, which then made me feel guilty. God, I’m a mess.

As the police were already there, they quarantined the area, forcing the crowds and the cameras back and refusing to take any statements. I guess that would be the PRT’s job as this entire situation was a cape matter.

Once an ambulance had arrived and taken official records of the injuries, Amy practically ran over to Vicky to fix her hearing. One hand holding the cold pack in place, she used the other to hold Vicky’s hand.

Vicky shuddered as her hearing returned. “Thanks Ames,” she muttered quietly, “guess I really screwed up this time.”

I think she’d finally realised the situation. This wasn’t some random gangster, but a known hero with a large company backing them. This situation could blow up on New Wave so badly it wasn’t funny.

Amy gave her sister a quick hug and walked over to where they were carefully loading Lightshow onto a stretcher. I followed along just in case Amy needed the support. After a quick discussion with the paramedics, Amy reached out and put a hand on Lightshow’s arm.

I saw the look on her face when she realised just how bad Lightshow’s injuries were.

Amy and Vicky didn’t deserve this, not because of someone like Lightshow. “First Aid said it was mostly bruising,” I said. “Nothing that wouldn’t heal on its own in time.” Nobody but me had seen First Aid’s report anyway and he wouldn’t say anything.
Amy gave me a wide eyed look and glanced quickly at the paramedics, who were carefully looking anywhere but at us. “Y-yeah. Just bruising. She’ll be fine in a few weeks.”

As she healed Lightshow, I realised the woman was actually awake, and watching us carefully. Once Amy was done, Miss Militia spoke up.

“I think it would be best if everyone came back to the PRT-HQ with us.” She gave New Wave and Concert a meaningful look, tilting her head towards the cameras.

“Are we under arrest?” Bass asked quietly.

“That remains to be seen,” Miss Militia answered just as quietly, not wanting to be seen publicly arresting another hero.

Director Piggot was waiting for us once we returned, which made Miss Militia pinch the bridge of her nose. We had all - both us Wards and New Wave - been bundled into a PRT transport and brought back to the HQ. Concert were being brought in a second transport and Lady Photon was following by air.

“One moment please, director.” She turned to the receptionist and asked, “Is Doctor Beckett on duty or is he at the rig?”

The receptionist had to quickly look the information up, but quickly confirmed he was in the building’s medical wing.

“Very well,” Miss Militia said. “Matrix, Lieutenant Faireborn, please escort Miss Dallon to Doctor Beckett and collect a statement. Could you please make sure I get a copy of the report and anything you recorded? The rest of you go with Officer Jenkins. Find a meeting room and wait for us to come.”

As she spoke, the PRT officers that were escorting Concert arrived. The director’s expression, if possible, darkened even further. Before Miss Militia could say anything, she stepped forwards.

“Take them down the holding area. I want them kept in separate rooms. If anyone from NKT-Galactic arrives, send them to me... Well, what are the rest of you waiting for?”

The last sentence was directed towards us, and the Wards immediately moved to the elevator. Vicky was taken to a separate interview room to wait for her mother.

Amy tried to follow her sister, but Lieutenant Faireborn placed a hand on her shoulder and directed us both towards a different elevator.

The Doctor wasn’t in medical when we arrived so while we waited, I walked over to the sink to get Amy a drink.

As I handed it to her, an odd thought came to me. “Huh, how about that? I get to play nurse to you for a change!”

Amy snorted, very nearly choking on her drink and we both blushed when the lieutenant laughed. We had forgotten she was there. We were thankfully saved from embarrassment by the arrival of Dr.
Beckett.

There wasn’t much he could do beyond confirming First Aid’s diagnosis, but he did offer her a small tub of light green cream that smelt vaguely of antiseptic.

“First Aid helped develop it,” he explained. “The base chemicals were taken from that regen drug. Combined with some stabilising and numbing agents, it can help speed up the recovery of small cuts, bruises, rashes and even a particularly stubborn…” He trailed off as he glanced at us and cleared his throat. “Well, let’s not worry about that.”

Taking the jar, Amy eyed it suspiciously. “You’re sure it’s safe?”

“Oh aye, it’s been fully tested and approved. It’s due to go into mass production soon.”

Amy relaxed and gave me a questioning look.

“Don’t look at me,” I said with a shrug. “First Aid and Perceptor came up with the idea and presented it to Dragon. Took them ages to get it right but it’s apparently a lot safer than the original drug.”

Pulling a small hand mirror out of a pocket on her robe, Amy gently applied some to her jaw.

“If it’s alright,” Lieutenant Faireborn said while stepping forwards, “I’d like to take Miss Dallon’s statement.”

“Do you want me to wait outside?” I asked.

The lieutenant looked at Amy. “Is it okay if she stays?” the young heroine asked.

“That’s fine,” the lieutenant replied. “Matrix, would you mind recording this? Now, Miss Dallon, tell me everything you remember.”

“When I shook hands with Lightshow, I noticed something was wrong. I didn’t have time to see what it was so I asked to talk to her about it. When I did, she hit me and Vicky… hit her.”

Lieutenant Faireborn frowned, “Could you please elaborate on that?”

“Lieutenant,” Beckett warned, “Miss Dallon has an honorary medical license, anything she saw with her power is covered by doctor-patient confidentiality.”

The Lieutenant snorted, “Lightshow lost all rights to confidentiality when she slugged a teenager.”

Doctor Beckett huffed, but didn’t respond.

“Now, could you please elaborate?”

Amy sighed. “When I shook her hand, I noticed her hormone levels were really badly messed up. There was some sort of drug in her system that I couldn’t identify but some of the affected areas of her body reminded me of something.”

Taking a notepad and pen from the doctor, she listed down the affected areas. “She reminded me of the Merchants I’ve been treating lately. Lots of them have been brought into the hospital, suffering
from the side effect from those Tinker-drugs. When I healed Lightshow, I noticed that her body's natural growth was really messed up, like she’s gone through a barely controlled second puberty.”

“That doesn’t sound healthy,” Lieutenant Faireborn said.

“No, it’s not. Her height, increased muscle mass and… well… her breasts are all the results of this drug. As a result, her hormone levels are all over the place. I expect she’s been dealing with some truly horrific mood swings. Aside from the shortened temper and increased aggression, she’s probably suffering from reduced inhibitions and the areas that control arousal are going nuts.”

“So she’s basically drunk and horny all the time and it’s making her moody?” Lieutenant Faireborn asked, making Doctor Beckett blush.

“Where would someone even get something like that?” he asked.

Amy shrugged. “Well, it looked like what the Merchants were using so maybe it came from them?”

“Right, so you realised she was using a drug and asked her about it?”

“Well, I tried to be polite about it. I mentioned that my power is always on and that I’d noticed some problems. I asked if she was on any medication and that’s when she hit me.”

The lieutenant sighed. “Right, I think that’s all we need. Matrix, could you make sure the director gets a copy of that? Oh, one last question, if we did a blood test on Lightshow, would the drug show up?”

Amy nodded. “Yes.”

As I walked Amy back downstairs to wait for her sister, I wondered what Lightshow had looked like before she took the drug. That kind of drastic change came from taking a pill? I know I’d never been particularly happy with my looks, but after hearing and seeing all the side effects, I doubt I’d be so willing to do what she did.

Director Piggot really missed the days when she could just shoot something. Things were so much easier then. You had your orders and you followed them, no politics, no ‘concerned public’ groups sticking their noses in, no fuss whatsoever.

Now she was the one giving the orders and dealing with self-important capes all day.

Currently, one of those capes was standing opposite her. “Mrs. Dallon, glaring at me isn’t going to change anything. Your daughter is being held until we find out exactly what happened.”

“You realise that she’s still a minor? You can’t interview her without me being present,” Brandish pointed out in a tough, no nonsense manner. She was standing opposite the director, both hands on the desk and arguing just as loudly.

“Only just!” Not that it really mattered; the moment Glory Girl was in the interview room, she had told the officer that she couldn’t say anything until her mother got here.

Piggot didn’t like it, but Glory Girl would be getting a pass this time. Director Costa-Brown had called shortly after everything had happened and told her in no uncertain terms not to press any
charges against New Wave.

An unofficial warning was all the director had been allowed to give. New Wave were the PRT’s largest allies in Brockton Bay at the moment outside of Dragon, who had also spoken up in the girl’s defense, and Concert wasn’t worth losing that over.

Not when all they could prove was a few bruises and a girl publicly defending her sister from a more powerful attacker. The footage of the fight had already gone viral, and she had nearly a dozen emails in the last hour alone demanding Lightshow’s head.

Emily wasn’t stupid. She’d seen the video and she knew Lightshow’s injuries were worse than Panacea and the paramedics were claiming, but there was no proof. For now, she would settle for making Glory Girl sweat it out in an interview room.

Before the argument could go any further, there was a knock on her office door. A glance at her computer told her who it was, and and she felt a moment of satisfaction. She couldn’t go after New Wave, but Concert were fair game.

The lawyer for NKT-Galactic was a youngish man with short hair and an expensive suit. Entering the room, he either didn’t notice or didn’t care about the atmosphere and strode confidently up to the director’s desk, holding out a hand.

“Ms Piggot? Good afternoon,” he said as both women watched him carefully. “My name is Jacob Hummel and I represent Concert on behalf of NKT-Galactic.”

Piggot’s eyes narrowed and she took a seat. Opposite her, Brandish settled into her own seat, “It’s Director Piggot, and this is Carol Dallon, also known as Brandish of New Wave. It was her daughter your client attacked.”

Hummel cleared his throat when he saw Carol’s glare. “Yes… Well, my client wishes to know why you haven’t released Concert yet. It was our understanding that no charges had been pressed.”

“Charges are pending until we work out just who to charge with what. Concert is under investigation and they will stay in their cells until we get to the bottom of what happened.”

“We know what happened,” he said in what he thought was a reasonable tone. “A discussion between Panacea and Lightshow got out of hand and Glory Girl escalated the situation to violence.”

“You consider punching a teenage in the face just a ‘discussion that got out of hand’?” Piggot asked in a flat tone.

Her comment didn’t faze him. “Regardless, the situation didn't escalate until Glory Girl attacked my client. I understand she has a history of aggression?”

Carol looked ready to kill him on the spot.

“You do not want to go there, Mr. Hummel,” she warned him in her best courtroom voice. “My daughter was defending Amy from a cape nearly twice her size. That’s all any court will see.” The fact both Amy and Victoria were local celebrities went unsaid.

He sat quietly for a moment, carefully looking at the two women before taking a folder with some papers in it out of his folder. “My client is prepared to sue if-”
“Have you even seen the footage?” Carol interjected. “If you think for one minute any claim you make will stand up -”

“Save it, both of you!” Piggot snapped. All this posturing was getting on her nerves.

She pointed at Hummel. “Mrs. Dallon makes a very good point. At this point we have plenty of footage from multiple angles showing the attack. Not to mention the records of the joint patrols you requested. Your team has caused nothing but problems since they arrived in Brockton Bay.”

“Capes get into trouble, that's nothing new.”

“Most capes in this city don’t get drunk and go picking fights with the Empire in their own territory,” Carol countered. She’d heard the story from Victoria.

Piggot silenced them both by placing two folders on her desk. “Funny you should mention the Empire. Of the two dozen people arrested by your ‘client’s team’, a surprising number have claimed that they were paid to commit those crimes.”

“And how many criminals claim they were framed?” he shot back, ignoring the look Mrs Dallon was giving him.

“Most of them aren’t trying to cover up a nazi sex orgy.” The lawyer paled and she pushed on. “Yes, I know about that, and no I’m not telling you how. Now let’s face it, Concert is a joke. One of your members is doped up the eyeballs on Tinker-made drugs, the other has a history of drunken and disorderly conduct. Not to mention his attempt at causing a riot earlier this week. Of the remaining two, one was kicked out of the army and the only thing we know about the other was that she was a vigilante prior to joining Concert. Do you really think you have a hope in hell in making this go away?”

He glanced at Carol, who narrowed her eyes.

“Your client assaulted my daughters. If the PRT doesn’t push charges, we will.”

“This is what’s going to happen. Lightshow and Treble will face charges of assault, while Bass and Duette will be released later today providing they cooperate. If there is nothing else, don’t let me keep you.”

Recognising the dismissal for what it was, Hummel left the office with all the dignity he could muster.

Once he was gone, Carol turned to Piggot. “I take it that Victoria is free to go?”

“Yes, but before you go, I want to make something clear. This is the not the first time the words ‘Glory Girl’ and ‘excessive’ have come up together. Get your daughter under control before she does something you can’t cover up.”

Carol sent her another glare before storming out of the office. New Wave might be one of her few allies, but that didn’t mean that she had to like them. Independents tended to irritate her more than other capes, as they thought that they were above the law, above normal people. They could simply take off their masks and vanish into the crowd and as long as they kept their identity under wraps, they could avoid taking responsibility for their actions.
At least those that joined the PRT could be held accountable. She didn’t believe for a second that New Wave stuck to the ideals that they espoused, and this meeting proved her right.

Shaking herself, she turned her attention back to the report she needed to write. She’d advise, again, that New Wave needed to be reined in, but she doubted anything would come from it. Until then, she would just have to focus on what she could do right now.
[2 days after the battle in the mall.]

Knockout hummed, carefully rotating the young man's hand so he could get a better look. He would need an X-ray to be sure, but he was fairly confident that he would never play the piano again. Picking up the Tinker-made, portable X-ray machine, he waved it over the hand and watched as the image was displayed on the nearby screen.

From the slightly unfocused look on Uber's face, Knockout guessed he was on some strong painkillers. His partner was sitting next to him, looking like a worried husband. Both men were wearing simple bodysuits and domino masks to hide their identities.

He rotated the screen so they could see it.

"The damage to your hand is… Extensive. Still, all things considered, it could have been worse," he said with a grin.

The pair gave him an incredulous look.

"How?" Leet demanded

"I've seen the footage. You're lucky he was focused on your gun. He could have grabbed your head."

Both of them paled.

"Now, as I was saying. Your hand can be repaired, but it's going to take time. While my creations can speed up your body's regeneration, the bones and tendons will need to be set correctly before that can happen. I'm sure you understand that this won't come cheap."

"Okay, how much?" Leet asked, leaning forward.

When he told them, Leet nearly fell out of his chair. "W-what?! Look, you contacted us, you said you could help!"

Knockout got the impression Leet didn't do much of the negotiating. Everything about him from his voice to his posture screamed how desperate he was for help. Uber was more reserved, sitting back in his chair and keeping his face carefully blank. Shame the painkillers were messing with his concentration, Knockout could see the boys focus drifting in and out.

"It's not that simple, I'm afraid." He pulled a green epi-pen out of his desk and held it up for Leet to see. "This stuff isn't cheap to make and with the PRT still on the lookout for Tinker drugs, prices are expected to rise. Not to mention the surgery your friend will require. I'll need to call in outside help, a trained physician that's willing to look the other way and lose any paper work…"

He let them think about that while he placed the injector back in the drawer. "Of course, you could always hand yourself in. I understand the heroes are willing to treat you both if you do."

Leet went to speak but Uber reached out and grabbed his arm.

"What do you want?" he asked, glaring at Knockout. Leet stared at both of them before he caught on.
Knockout's smile got even wider. It wasn't money he was after. "Wealth, a house in the tropics and a dozen muscled cabana boys. But that's not what you meant."

Nobody else laughed. He simply shrugged. "Tough crowd… The fact is, it was my employer who contacted you. He wants to offer you both a job, which of course, includes full health care."

"So that's it? You'll heal Uber and in return I just have to do a job?" Leet asked, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"Not quite, this is a deal for both of you. You will both receive a retainer's fee of twenty thousand a month. All our employer asks is for you to keep doing what you are already doing. Make your videos and you may receive a nice bonus if you can embarrass the PRT in the process."

"What's the catch?"

"The boss may make… Requests of you. He may ask you to build something or to go cause trouble somewhere. Nothing that would be outside your skill set."

Frowning, Uber stood up. He swayed slightly under the effects of the painkillers before Leet could catch him and started walking towards the door.

Leet hurried to catch up and the two exchanged words.

Knockout didn't even pretend not to listen in.

"You can't be serious… What other choice do we have?… If I wanted to end up in a gang I would have joined the Empire… Look… No, listen to me. this whole thing stinks. You can build something… With what money? Besides, I don't trust my tech not to go wrong."

"Gentlemen!" Knockout called. "The private sector really isn't that bad. The boss provided me with this building and everything you see in it. He also has a pipeline to Toybox. If I ever need something, I only need to ask for it. As a fellow Tinker, I'm sure you understand the importance of supplies on demand."

Knockout's new base was a two story building north of Coil's base that had been refurbished to look like a doctor's office. The ground floor was split into three large rooms: a waiting room, a consultation room – complete with bed for patients to lie on and a desk – and a storage room that held several large pieces of tinkertech medical equipment. The top floor was split into two rooms: a large workshop filled with everything he could ask for and a small bedroom with an attached bathroom.

The third floor was technically a basement. Some of it was used as storage but there was also an extra room that was soundproofed and had an operating table with restraints for when he needed to perform experiments.

Coil's men had even built an underground tunnel to some abandoned buildings that allowed people to come and go without being seen.

Knockout shared some of this with the two young men. They shared a look between them before Leet sighed in defeat. "Alright, we'll do it."

##

It was barely a week later when Knockout received his newest patient.
Trainwreck carried her in through the basement entrance, followed by the rest of the Undersiders.

"Hey big guy," Knockout said as they walked through the door. "Put her on the table and make sure she's strapped down."

He could see the tell tale signs of someone who was crashing hard. He would need to do something to make sure the withdrawal didn't kill her. He spared a glance to the other capes who were waiting nearby. Grue had Regent slung over his shoulder but the rest appeared unhurt.

"Take him upstairs and put him on the bed, I'll give him a check up. Does anybody else need anything?"

He ignored the way the blonde girl shivered. He'd never spoken to her but she apparently had something against him.

Upstairs, a quick check with a medical scanner confirmed that Regent was simply stunned and would be fine in the morning. He reminded them to call if there was any lingering numbness and sent them on their way.

Or tried to anyway, as Grue insisted on waiting for Trainwreck.

Shrugging at the boys behaviour, he grabbed a collection of medications and walked into the building's 'private' room.

Strapped to the table, which had been raised and set at an angle, the woman looked more like a corpse.

Her skin was pale and clammy and her hair was a tangled mess. She may have been fairly pretty at one point, but a lifetime of heavy drinking and drug use had done her no favours. The PRT had provided her with an orange jumpsuit that looked far too big for her, opening it so he could check her breathing and paying her body no attention beyond noting just how thin she was.

Behind him, Trainwreck turned his back. Knockout just rolled his eyes at his friend's antics.

Lifting an eyelid, he tested her reaction to light and performed a cursory examination. He found exactly what he was expecting: she was badly underweight, heavily malnourished-partially treated-, her airways looked like hamburger meat, her bones were brittle and her hair had been bleached so much he was tempted to give it its own death certificate.

"Well?" Trainwreck asked.

"I've seen worse." Admittedly they tended to be corpses. He closed up her jumpsuit and considered what she would need to recover from both the withdrawal and years of abuse inflicted on her body.

The woman shuddered and let out a cough. Opening her eyes, she gave Knockout her best attempt at a glare.

"W-w-who?" she ground out, trembling from the withdrawal. "F-fucking cock s-suckers. Where's S-skids?"

"Now, now, just relax and I'll make you feel all better," Knockout said with a charming smile.

Squealer's glare only got worse. She took a breath, ready to let rip with a volley of insults when he held up a syringe.
"It hurts, doesn't it?" he whispered. "But I can make you feel better. No more shakes, no more pain."

Her eyes were fixed on the needle and she didn't try to fight when he injected the substance into her system.

"There, it won't take long. With a little help, you'll soon feel like brand new… Maybe better. Would you like to be pretty again?" he offered. Her eyes slowly closing as he spoke.

The first injection was just a sedative, albeit a powerful one. He'd treated cases like this before. With the right mix of suppressants and stabilisers she'd soon be through the worst. After that, keeping her compliant would be easy.

He turned back to Trainwreck. "I'll speak to the boss about her later, but she's going to be useless for a few weeks. Until then, your teammates are waiting for you."

Trainwreck nodded and left the room.

##

Once the Undersiders entered their new hideout, a loft over an abandoned warehouse that was similar to their old place, Tattletale went into her room to change, ignoring the look Grue had given her.

Everything was falling apart and right now, she needed a moment to herself.

Nothing had been the same since Rachel's death. Grue and Regent couldn't be left in the same room alone, and all her plans to escape Coil had fallen apart. That one had really hurt.

He'd called her into his office and shown her pictures of some random people. Her power told her they were capes and that they were dead. He told her they were Thinkers that Knockout had been examining. Then he sat back and watched as her power filled in the rest. Bastard.

After which, he called several of his mercenaries into the room. She had tried to keep her face perfectly blank but she could tell that he knew about her plans, how she had been carefully gathering information and money, finding which of Coil's men would be open to bribes.

The five in front of her were the ones she had found and she'd been forced to watch as they were executed. He didn't need to explain his actions. All this time, he had known what she was planning and had let her get away with it. But now, the game was over.

She wasn't sure which plans were still viable but for now, she would just have to assume he knew about them all.

To make matters worse, Coil had told the remaining Undersiders that Chariot and Trainwreck would be replacing Bitch and that they had no choice in the matter.

With her bedroom door locked, she grabbed some painkillers from her dresser and swallowed them dry. They didn't do much but it was better than nothing.

Before getting changed, she braced herself and turned her power on her bedroom, looking for anything that might have been moved or messed with. There were three new bugs: one hidden in the light shade, one by her window and the last was under her bed.

Sighing, she carefully picked them up and threw them out the window. Glancing at the clock on her dresser, she picked it up and threw it out as well, along with the camera Chariot had placed there.
Now that she was confident she had some privacy, she began to change into a different outfit, taking off her wig and putting it on the stand on her dresser. Panacea had healed everything but she didn't bother growing her hair back. Thankfully, a quick glance in the mirror confirmed there were no bald spots and that her hair was growing okay. She was just considering running a brush through the wig when the shouting started.

That was another thing that had changed, and definitely not for the better. Grue, Brian, blamed himself for Rachel's death. He was the team leader, so he believed her death was his fault.

Because of that, he spent more time at the loft these days, mostly trying to get the rest of the team to refresh their knowledge of first aid and hand-to-hand combat, teaching them from scratch if it was necessary. However, it was an uphill struggle.

Regent had withdrawn from the group. He was never the most open of people, but now he barely spoke to anybody unless it was to insult them. The rest of the time, he was either in his room or on the Boardwalk.

The situation might have been salvageable if Coil hadn't interfered. Forcing Trainwreck and Chariot on to the team and ordering them all to work together, all the while ignoring the tension between Grue and Regent had undercut any authority Grue had.

Keeping a tight rein on her power, she walked back into the kitchen.

Grue was standing on one side of the table, his helmet placed next to him. He and Trainwreck, who was standing on the other side of the table, were glaring at each other. Regent was seated next to Trainwreck, swinging in his chair with a rare look of amusement on his face.

Chariot was leaning against the wall, glancing nervously at the others. Eventually, he opened his mouth in an attempt to break the simmering tension. "What do we have to talk about? We got in, we got Squealer, we got out. Simple, clean, easy."

"Except for one big fucking problem," Brian snapped. "The pair of you tried to kill a fucking Ward!"

_Frustrated, angry. Not happy with this job, too high profile. Realised he can't get out._ She tried not to snort. It was a bit late for him to realise that. When a mysterious benefactor offers to make all your problems go away, you didn't need to be a thinker to know how that was going to end.

"It's not my fault the bitch wouldn't stay down!" Trainwreck shouted back. "She kept trying to fight and she was calling in reinforcements. Or did you not notice that your darkness barely slowed her down!"

_Sonar, Brian's darkness only dampens sound._ She would have to talk to him about that later.

"So you tried to snap her in half?! Do you have any idea what they do to people who kill Wards?"

"Don't take it out on us just because you've got a hard on for her!"

The room went still.

"What?" Brian asked, his voice going quiet.

"She's the Tinker that saved your ass from Lung, right?" Chariot asked. "She tried to help when Bitch died and now you want to go easy on her."

Before Brian could say anything, Trainwreck cut him off. "Right, you saw what that thing she built..."
"What happens when she builds more of them? Are you gonna go easy on her then?"

*Target of opportunity, will kill her if her gets the chance. Thinks Coil will protect him.*

"You utter moron!" Lisa snapped. Her teammates turned in surprise, not noticing her standing in the doorway. "Do you really think the boss cares about any of us? We're *all* replaceable. If you'd killed her he would have hung you out to dry."

He frowned at her. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh don't I?" She gave him her most unfriendly smile. "You woke up in a junkyard with no memories and most of your limbs missing. You don't know who you are or what happened and it terrifies you. In exchange for you working for him, Coil offered to find out where you came from."

"Lisa, that's enough!" Brian warned, but she ignored him.

Trainwreck paled and tried to step away from her but she followed him, her smile widening. "Well guess what? He's lying. He's going to string you along with empty promises and maybe one day he'll give you a carefully constructed lie. Probably about how you were a murderer and have a price on your head so you can't. Ever. Leave. Then, once he's got no more use for you, he'll put a bullet through your head and make you into scrap."

She took a shuddering breath. Her head was pounding and she was probably going to regret this later, but it had been *so* worth it.

"You're out of your fucking mind," Trainwreck muttered. He left the room, clipping her shoulder as he barged past.

Seeing the 'meeting' was over, Regent and Chariot walked out, leaving Lisa and Brian alone.

With them gone, Lisa slumped into a seat and tried to force the headache down. She barely reacted beyond a mumbled "thanks" when Brian placed a cup of coffee next to her.

He sat quietly opposite her for a few minutes. She knew what he wanted to ask even without her powers but she waited for him to open up.

"... is what you said true?"

"Yeah. He probably already has the documents made up."

"I meant about us leaving… What's going to happen to Aisha?"

"If you try to run… She's dead. If you turn on Coil, she's dead." She snorted. "If coil has a bad day, she's dead. As far as Coil is concerned, we belong to him and she's all he needs to control you."

With a groan, Brian buried his face in his hands "Fuck!"

Lisa cringed. She couldn't stand to see him that way. "For what it's worth, he probably won’t kill her. All he has to do is cut you off. One call to social services is all it would take."

She didn't have to explain beyond that. His younger sister was a serial runaway and if Brian lost his 'steady job', his chances of gaining custody over Aisha would vanish and eventually, so would Aisha.

Just one more thing she'd need to deal with.
An: well that ran away from me… again… I really hope this isn't going to become a thing. On the other hand, I managed to avoid the words 'vulpin' or 'fox like' :D
No interlude this time as Arc 8 is going to be a serise of Int chapters focusing on diffrent charas.
two days after Concert was arrested.

Dragon sighed as she ran through the data again. A rogue with a minor healing talent had gone missing near the Mexican border.

Rogues were independent capes that used their powers for commercial purposes. The most well known rogue in Brockton Bay was Parian, an aspiring fashion designer that used a form of telekinesis to put on puppet shows.

A rogue vanishing wasn't unheard of. Typically, they were either killed or conscripted into a gang, but these incidents were few and far between. A dozen rogues had disappeared in only two months, and all of them possessed some form of healing ability, forming an unsettling pattern.

True healers were almost unheard of, as most healing abilities were derived from a different power and were often limited in some way. Panacea was one of the few exceptions to this rule, as her powers lacked these limitations. While Dragon had her own theories on how her power really functioned, Panacea was the closest thing to a true healer that Dragon was aware of.

An internal timer dinged and she put the matter to one side. She had an appointment to keep and without any leads, there wasn't much point in pursuing this case at the moment. She would make note of the pattern and warn the appropriate parties.

A quick glance back to her 'home' base confirmed that construction was continuing without issues. She had plenty of time, so she chose to leave her newest base and go for a walk.

It was such a simple thing, walking down the street, but the novelty still hadn't worn off. Having a true body was so different to simply inhabiting a suit of armour. Just feeling the wind on her face as she walked was still an experience she wasn't used to.

Walking also had another advantage. At nearly eight feet tall, she cut an imposing figure, which made it very clear that this was her territory. Ever since she bought and started refitting the building that would become her base of operations in Brockton Bay, there had been quite a few attempts by the local gangs to either get inside or set up surveillance.

After making a couple of arrests and singeing some of the braver ones, they got the message and crime in the area closest to her base had dropped considerably. Now, when she looked out a window, there wasn't a drug dealer or gang tag in sight. The few gangsters that remained in the area kept out of sight and left people alone.

Of course, there were always someone who never learned. Dragon passed a small store on her way to the factory, where she saw a man with a bandana over his face point a gun at the clerk.

With a sigh, Dragon quietly opened the door and eased herself inside, taking care not to hit anything with her tail and wings.

The robber was so busy shouting he never noticed her. The clerk saw her first, stopping what he was doing and looking up in awe.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" the robber shouted before turning his head. He stared at her chest before looking up at her face.
"Oh… shit."

Smiling politely, she carefully took the gun from his unresisting hand and crushed it. There was a trickling sound and a dark stain spread across his pants.

It took no effort to take him by the back of his clothes and walk him out of the store. She made him sit on the pavement while they waited for the police.

###

Arriving at her factory, she was glad to see Danny Hebert waiting outside for her. His truck was parked nearby and a quick ping on her tracking systems showed that Taylor was on her way.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Mr Hebert. It's good to see you again," she said once she reached him, holding her hand out.

He smiled and took her hand without glancing at her long, talon-like fingers. "You too and please, call me Danny."

It was one of the few drawbacks to her new body. Between the spikes on her armour, her claw-like hands and fanged smile, some people found her intimidating.

For his part, Danny certainly looked better than he did the last time Dragon had seen him, just after Saint's attempt on her life. The dark rings under his eyes were faint and his clothing was clean and unrumpled.

"I'm glad you could be here today, would you care for a look around?" she offered just as Taylor came into view.

"Please."

She led him into the factory and began to give him a tour. The factory had originally produced car parts, but the company had long since gone out of business and the land was left vacant. When she bought it, she had gutted the building and rebuilt it and the attached storage from the inside, designing it to produce the forcefield technology Taylor had created for vehicles and personal use.

She had also bought the building next door and once it was completely renovated, it would be producing the medical items First Aid had created. As the building had been in better condition than the factory, renovation would take less time to finish and production could officially begin in a week's time.

First Aid had certainly been busy preparing for that. Dr Beckett helped him identify what tinkertech he would like to see and between them, they had created an impressive list that First Aid was slowly working his way through.

In theory, it sounded simple. Take any tinkertech that could be safely used or mass produced, make any changes necessary and start production.

In practice, it was much harder. Medicine developed by Tinkers was much more prone to random side effects than normal medicine and even if it could be mass produced, it required a lot of testing before it could be cleared for public use and the requirements were very strict. The medicine had to work in the first place, it had to be safe to use and a detailed explanation on how the medicine worked had to be submitted as well.

Which was a problem when most Tinkers didn't even know how their tech worked.
The tinker-drug 'regen' was a good example of 'dangerous side effects' in action. It sped up the user's natural healing process, but the body would still need raw materials. Without a nutrient drip or at least a very large meal, the body would start to cannibalise itself, which was exactly what happened to the Merchants who overdosed on it. The pictures had made her fuel tanks churn from nausea, another novelty of her new body.

By making it into a topical cream for minor injuries, First Aid was actually reducing its effectiveness, but in turn, making it much safer. The user was protected from an overdose as the effect was limited to only a small space and the addictive properties had been removed.

His medi-gun, however, would never go into production. It needed some rare materials in its construction and required constant monitoring while in use. First Aid had one built into his arm, but it had almost an entire sub-system dedicated to it. Without that or an VI, the gun could cause rampant growth in the patient's cells. She wasn't sure how the original Tinker had dealt with that problem but she suspected he simply ignored it.

This was the same Tinker after all, that used the medi-gun to perform open heart surgery on a patient while they were awake.

The next project First Aid had taken on himself was prosthetic limbs. Between, him, Taylor, Wheeljack and the odd bit of help from Dragon herself, they had managed to improve the response of myoelectric prosthetics.

Improved pickups that were similar to what Taylor used in her armour could be fitted into the socket, giving the user a greater degree of control over the limb that was practically innate. No surgery was required either.

The servos and actuators that made up an Autobot arm or leg had also proven a good starting point for lightweight joints that had a realistic level of movement and required very little maintenance.

Most people wouldn't find that as exciting as she did, but it would be life changing for so many people.

Still, most of that was still in the developmental stages. The prototype limbs would be fitted to volunteers in the next few days for clinical trials.

As for the shield generators, most of the work in the factory would be automated, but the packing and final inspections would be done by hand. Workers who had experience with electronics would do quality control and testing.

The rest of the workforce were acting as security, which would be overseen by a VI of her creation. She planned to outfit the security team with containment foam sprayers and shield units of their own while they were on duty.

Once Dragon was finished explaining her plans to Danny, she stopped and faced him, a smile on her face.

"Thank you, again. The work force you've provided has certainly helped get things ready in record time. They've been working hard ever since they arrived."

Danny nodded, returning her smile. "They're just glad for the work. With the way things are going, I don't see the docks lasting more than another two or three years."

Her predictions gave the docks a year and a half, at best, but she kept that to herself. After she had purchased the factory, she approached Danny, hoping to use his contacts to get a somewhat
trustworthy workforce who would be willing to do manual labor.

The response had been surprising. Danny had sent nearly two dozen people her way inside of a week. They ranged in age and experience and she had quickly filled most of the positions. Speaking of which.

"Actually, Danny, while you are here, I would like to offer you a management position."

She had been planning this for a while now. He knew most of these men and they trusted him, so having him in charge would help put them at ease. He was more than qualified for the position as he'd been all but running the Dockworkers Union for years.

That it also put him in a place where she could keep an eye on him was only a bonus. Taylor was, more or less, safe. She was publicly thought of as a Ward and the Autobots kept a close eye on her. If anything happened to her, any one of them could reach her in seconds.

Danny, however, was vulnerable. The docks weren't safe, and between the gangs pressing in and the lack of work, it was only a matter of time until somebody tried something. That was why Taylor was currently outside, fitting a car-mounted shield unit and tracker to his truck.

Danny listened patiently as she outlined what the job would entail, the pay and benefits.

"If nothing else, the extra money would help you provide for Taylor." Danny flinched slightly. While she felt bad about it, she wasn't above using a bit of guilt on him.

As she lapsed into silence, Danny stared off into space, lost in thought.

"Can… Can I think about it?" he eventually asked, staring at her.

"Of course, take your time. In the meanwhile, I want you to have this." She picked up a thin armoured vest and handed it to him. It was a low profile version of the flak jacket, designed to be worn under the shirt and protect the wearer from small arms fire.

"I still have some time before my next appointment, so would you care to see my new workshop? I will be meeting Taylor there."

"Sorry, but I can't. I have to be back at work soon. Thank you all the same."

"I understand. Perhaps some other time."

Danny smiled. "I'd like that." Then he left.

Dragon wasn't too worried about Danny rejecting her offer. In fact, she had expected he would be reluctant. The man had devoted most of his life to the docks, and she was asking him a lot to give it up and walk away. She could almost understand where he was coming from. She'd been a hero most of her life and it had given her purpose after Andrew Richter's death. It was something she wasn't sure she couldn't live without.

##

Dragon landed in front of her workshop and transformed back into her humanoid form. Taylor was there, and she approached her.

"Did you get everything set up?" Dragon asked.

"Yeah, but I only got out of sight just before Dad came out."
Dragon smiled warmly. "I don't understand why you had to hide it from him in the first place."

"Dad really likes his truck. The last time I offered to fix it, he went kinda pale and said 'We'll see'."

"Remind me to tell you about the time I gave Armsmaster some suggestions on improving his bike some time." Dragon led Taylor into the new workshop. Predaqueen was currently sleeping in a small room near the back of the building and Dragon set a reminder to wake her up before Taylor left.

Unfortunately, Taylor's mask hid her expression but Dragon got the impression the girl was speechless. The new workshop was smaller than her base in Vancouver, but that made it no less impressive.

The inside was filled with machinery that could churn out anything Dragon could think of. Multi-axis mechanical arms hung from rails on the ceiling, each with interchangeable 'hands' that could be hot-swapped for different tools. A miniature foundry, auto-lathes, CnC machines and 3D printers that could use metal or plastics had all been set up as well.

And those were just the mundane tools. She also had a wide selection of tinker-made equipment, including devices Taylor and Wheeljack designed.

"And, if I'm not available, all of it is overseen by VI... Predaqueen calls her Romie," Dragon explained to Taylor. She had taken her helmet off and was looking around in barely restrained wonder.

If Dragon said she wasn't taking some pride in Taylor's reaction, she would be lying. Most of the Tinkers she interacted with regularly were her equal in age and experience and as such, would barely react to her new workshop. Taylor's honest awe was satisfying.

"T-this is incredible, I could build a dozen protoforms in less than a week!" Taylor stated, finally finding her voice.

Dragon nodded. "Don't forget, I will be using this facility as well, so building cycles will have to be shared."

Taylor looked briefly disappointed before what Dragon said sank in. "Wait, shared?"

Dragon handed a memory stick that contained the communication protocols she would need, "Yes, shared. Wheeljack has already been briefed and the native VI has everything it needs to fabricate your designs. They will still need to be vetted by me, but you can upload any completed designs to Romie and they will get added to the queue."

"Actually, I was thinking about making myself power armour."

"Really? Do you have any ideas?"

Putting her bag down and taking a seat on the nearby chair, Taylor pulled out her tablet and opened a work file. The tablet, like most things Taylor built, was running on a variation of the Teletraan system and Dragon had incorporated enough of it into her workshop systems that the two were compatible.

Taylor placed a hand on the image and flicked it off the screen and into the air. Hologram projectors built into the workshop caught the image and displayed a scaled down scan of Taylor's body and a suit of power armour.

"Half the posts discussing me on PHO talks about how my stuff transforms, so I thought I might as
Taylor tapped the image, which converted the power armour into what looked like a three-wheeled motorbike. The main body of the bike was similar to that of a high-end sports bike; there was a single wheel at the front, while the back split into two prongs, each with its own wheel.

In armour mode, the backend would encase Taylor's legs, forming the boots and lower body. The rear wheels would be held in place via maglev technology, letting her choose between walking normally or skating on her wheels.

The front half of the bike would cover her upper body and arms with the front wheel being magnetically held to her back. As a full suit of armour, Taylor wouldn't need to worry so much about weight and had equipped upgraded versions of her Null-Ray on both arms. There were also some notes on how Taylor planned to incorporate her anti-grav tech, HL and normal shield systems.

Humming, Dragon imposed the image of the armour over the image of Taylor. "I'm impressed."

"Thanks. It's also going to be compatible with my current armour," Taylor said, almost bouncing in her seat. "That way, I can wear my old set to protect me while it's in bike mode. See the connectors on the back? That's so Divebomb can still connect to it."

Dragon rotated the image. "Electric motors, powered by an energon derivative. Gyro-stabilisers… What are the extra data ports on the arm for? And you are aware you'll need to pass a driving test before you can take this on the road?"

Taylor deflated slightly. "I… was worried about that. The list of rules was a little ambiguous about it."

"The PRT typically asks that any Tinker-vehicle passes a series of tests before it goes on the road. Most independents don't bother and it leaves them open to all sorts of trouble. Still, I don't think it will be too much trouble to get it through. Although, I want you to take a course in driving a motorbike before you even think about getting on this thing."

Dragon had friends in the police department and she could ask one of them to give her some lessons. Strictly speaking, Taylor was too young to drive but she could get her special dispensation for that.

Moving into what passed for Dragon's office, so they could sit down as they worked, they spent a good couple of hours discussing the bike/armour before they were interrupted by Predaqueen.

"Taylor~!" the small dragon shouted when she caught sight of the teenager. She half-ran, half-scrabbled across the smooth floor.

Leaving them to talk, Dragon moved off to get some drinks. She poured some energon from her personal supply into a large glass for herself, and made a sippy cup for Predaqueen. Then, she used a water heater to make some tea for Taylor.

When she returned, Predaqueen was still talking enthusiastically to Taylor.

"And then, and then it flew away! I tried to chase it but it went over the wall and, and big sister said I have to stay inside unless she's there!"

Watching the two interact, Dragon placed the tray of drinks on the table. As they sat down to enjoy their drinks, Predaqueen carefully gripped her cup between her foreclaws and rolled onto her back.
"I'm glad she's doing well," Taylor said. "Has she tried to transform yet?"

"A couple of times. I think she's almost worked it out."

Transforming was an odd experience. It didn't hurt, in fact it was almost pleasurable. But it wasn't something you could really describe. When she transformed, her head was hidden in her chest and she 'looked' through her dragon mode's eyes. Both heads were real and they were both hers, but the sensation was just odd.

Even so, the transformation was seamless, and both she and the other Autobots could transform on a whim. Predaqueen couldn't, however. Her mind was developing slowly, almost mimicking a human child's growth. Part of that it seemed, was needing to learn how to transform, like a child learning to walk. The best they could come up with, was that it was simply a quirk of her creation.

Taylor watched Predaqueen in silence for a few minutes before she spoke.

"Dragon, can I talk to you about something?"

"Of course."

Taylor handed Dragon a black notepad from her bag. Taking it carefully, Dragon flipped it open. The designs inside were surprising. Most of them weapon designs of varying sizes and power and even a cursory glance showed they would be much more powerful than anything else Taylor had ever built.

"Every now and then, I get ideas for things like these. I can't build most of them, they are too large and are far too dangerous. But lately…" She sighed and ran her hands through her hair. "You'll probably think it's silly but I've been having some bad dreams and they made me realise that I can't just ignore these. There are things out there that can wipe out entire countries and even if I don't want to build them, these designs could help."

She sighed again. "Sorry, I'm not making much sense."

Dragon put a hand on Taylor's shoulder and pulled the young girl closer. "Not at all. Even the weakest of tinkers can cause a lot of harm, so having a little caution is a good thing. As for these, thank you for trusting me with them. I'll take a look later and see if anything can be done with your designs."

Until recently, Dragon had never placed much stock in 'dreams'. Maybe it was because she herself was incapable of having them? But her new body actually required sleep, a couple of hours each week. It wasn't much, but in that time, she had experienced several dreams.

Most had been pleasant but a few had shaken her to her spark. The worst involved darkness, Saint and broken bodies.

Taylor looked relieved and some of the tension eased out of her shoulders. "Thanks."

"Any time."

AN: I think this chapter nearly drove my beta to murder :D
Wheeljack checked Laserbeak to make sure he was focused and recording before he positioned himself by the latest experiment.

"Okay. Project 452774277, attempt twenty… five?" He checked the notes in front of himself and nodded. "Sorry, twenty six. Start, now."

This was actually Rewind's idea. He insisted they should record all the tests and experiments to help show people just how much work went into even the simplest of projects. There was a long running myth that testing always went without a hitch but in truth, most engineering projects could take dozens of attempts to succeed.

True engineering wasn't getting it right the first time. True engineering was continuing on until you got it right, even if it took a thousand tries.

He also suspected Rewind was using him to build a blooper reel.

Carefully, Wheeljack poured the first half of the mixture into a bottle and gave it a gentle stir. Satisfied, he took the second half and slowly added it to the first. There was a bit of smoke but that quickly subsided.

He reached for the aerosolizer. Just as he lowered it into the mixture, it started to smoke and hiss violently.

"Down!" he shouted as he dived away from the mixture.

Detecting the reaction, Teletraan encased the experiment in a force field that contained the blast while extraction fans pulled the smoke out of the room. There wasn't much in the way of damage, just some scorch marks on the desk and bottle fragments scattered about.

"Hmm, I wonder where it went wrong?" Jack asked himself as he stood up.

"Catastrophic failure was caused by a cross reaction between the ingredients and the plastic of the aerosolizer…" Perceptor said. "I am certain I warned you against attempting to mix them without the appropriate stabilising elements –"

Rolling his eyes, Wheeljack tuned Perceptor out. The bot was one of his closest friends but sometimes he just didn't know when to stop.

By this point, he was long used to his experiments going wrong. Experimental engineering required him to use tools and machines in ways they were not intended and this often resulted in unexpected results. However, it did mean that when his idea finally worked, it worked well.

It also meant that he'd gotten very good at cleaning up the resulting mess. He'd rather something blow up in his face now than in someone else's later.

His internal chronometer pinged and he realised he was running late. Quickly cleaning up, he grabbed a flask of energon that he shoved into his dimensional-storage system and took off.

Meanwhile, Perceptor shook his head in amusement as he watched his friend leave, before opening up a video line. "Good morning, Solution, I hope you have been keeping well."
As he walked down the halls, Wheeljack had to resist the urge to transform. He'd already collided with one person in the past and he wasn't keen for a repeat. In addition to the Protectorate's capes, the Rig was home to a large amount of support staff. Not only was a full PRT squad kept on base at all times, the Rig also had a cleaning crew and staff that manned the kitchens. Most went home at the end of their shift, but some liked to stick around.

The few people he passed were long used to the sight of the Autobots and barely reacted to his presence. Once he reached what was supposed to be an empty room on the east side of the Rig, he knocked twice and entered. Assault was seated at a round table shuffling a deck of cards, along with a group of PRT officers.

"Sorry I'm late, I had to clean up," Wheeljack explained as he walked in.

"Is that what that bang was?" Assault asked with a grin. Wheeljack laughed. There was no way they heard the explosion from here. It was far too small.

"Don't worry about it, we haven't been here long anyway. Meet Privates Jenkins and Marinus. You already know Lieutenant Cadell."

Jack nodded in greeting as he pushed his chair over. It was a specially made high chair with a ladder on the side so he could sit comfortably at the table.

"Wait… We're going to play against a robot? Isn't that kinda unfair? It doesn't even have a face!" Marinus protested.

"I'm a he, not an it," Wheeljack replied patiently. Most people rarely needed correcting more than once. Watching people react to Windblade however was always fun.

Yes, she was a robot and yes, she was a woman. How hard was that to understand?

"Oh come on, how cool is that!" Jenkins said. He was a fresh faced young man and was practically bouncing in his seat.

"Take it from me, he has just as many tells as you do." Assault's tone of voice made it clear there would be no argument on the subject. "Now, before we start, does anyone need a drink?"

As he placed a couple of beer bottles on the table, Wheeljack pulled his flask from storage and poured some into a glass.

"What's that?" Jenkins asked, eyeing the glowing yellow liquid.

"Hmmm? Oh, this? This is Engex," Wheeljack said as he placed a straw in the drink. "Perceptor made it by adding some stuff to Energon and distilling it. It's got a nice taste and creates a similar response to alcohol."

"So you've made robot beer and you're gonna drink it through a straw?" Assault asked with a grin. He shared a look with Marinus and grabbed the deck of cards. "Okay gentlemen, nothing fancy. We'll be playing texas hold' em under house rules. That means no powers."

He dealt out the cards and everyone settled down for the game. During the first game, Assault kept glancing at Wheeljack who decided to act oblivious. By the second round of betting, the curiosity had apparently gotten the better of the cape.
"Hey Jack, did you change your colours or something?" Assault asked. "You look a little different."

Wheeljack laughed, his fins lighting up with amusement.

"Not quite. I finally found time to finish my upgrades. Dragon put the base frame together and Matrix did the swap. My body is almost nothing but tinker designed materials now. I'm not as tough as Warpath is, but I'm not the most fragile bot around either."

He stopped himself from rambling on; not everyone was as interested as he was about engineering. His body had most of the same tech that Taylor's armour was carrying, with some additions.

Jenkins stared at Wheeljack. "So, you can just swap bodies whenever you want?"

"Not quite, there are limits to size and of course, the swap itself is much more involved than simply changing clothes."

"How much more?" Marinus asked despite himself.

"Hmm, I think it took Matrix and Kid Win an hour to swap everything over." Removing his spark chamber and processor without breaking the connection between the two was the most time consuming part. Not that he would tell his audience that, as Taylor and Dragon didn't want too much information on sparks getting out.

Glancing at his cards, Wheeljack folded. It was a bad hand.

Three hours later, Private Jenkins walked away with the pot.

"Go easy on the new guy," Assault parroted as Jenkins left. "I can't believe we fell for that."

Wheeljack laughed. "Ah, go easy on him." Watching Jenkins crush Assault at the last minute had been great fun.

##

"Are you sure thizz izzz a good idea?" Waspinator asked as he followed Windblade and Rattrap to the nearby vent.

"What's the matter, scared?" Rattrap teased.

"It'll be fine," Windblade said, stopping the argument before it could begin. "I do this all the time. I've nearly got the whole building mapped out now." With that said, she gently pulled the vent cover loose.

She liked to explore, and at their size, the crawl spaces inside the rig were giant caves full of hidden places and all kinds of forgotten things. So far, she'd found two watches, a wallet and an old magazine.

Taylor had gone scarlet at the sight of it.

Ducking inside the vent, she called up the small holographic map she had been making. Sure, she could have simply downloaded the data from Teletraan, but it was more fun this way.

"I want to start at junction six; there's a side passage that I want to explore. We'll have to walk most of the way though. There's some loose wiring and nasty updrafts."

Rattrap switched to his rat mode. "Ehy, that's fine with me. Some of us can't fly, after all."
Wondering, again, why she brought him along, Windblade turned on her running lights. It wasn’t much but it gave enough them enough light to see by. Things were much easier when Waspinator copied her; his alt-mode had more lights on it.

Checking her map again, Windblade led the way. The vent they came in through was at the ground level so they followed the duct as far as the second junction. The dust on the floor was thick enough to muffle their footsteps and Waspinator would occasionally grumble about it getting into his joints.

Occasionally, she would spin the fans on her wings to keep them from getting clogged up. Waspinator tried to copy her at one point but his much larger fans kicked up so much dust the three bots were forced to wait out the resulting dust storm.

"You’re an idiot, y’know that?" Rattrap snapped between coughs.

"Wazzpinator said sorry!... Ratbot should be used to filth..."

"And what’s that supposed to mean?"

Rolling her eyes at their bickering, Windblade checked to see if any of her systems had been affected by the dust. Everything seemed to be working, but she would need to have a long bath later.

With that cleaning solution and her favorite armour polish, she promised herself.

At the second junction, they needed to go up. This wasn’t a problem for her or Waspinator but the smooth metal walls would be a hard climb for Rattrap. The final solution was for him to switch back to robot mode and let Waspinator carry him.

"Ratbot needzzz to loozze weight," he complained.

"Ehy, you wanna start something?"

Windblade sighed in exasperation. "Will you two give it a rest?"

They did, and their trip to the top was spent in silence. As soon as they reached their destination, Waspinator got tangled in some wiring. While they tried to free Waspinator, he and Rattrap bickered the entire time.

I am never taking these two anywhere again, she swore as they continued to argue.

The wires Waspinator was tangled in were connected to an odd looking cylinder and just as he gave a sharp jerk, it lit up.

The cylinder was bigger than they were and it was sealed at both ends, a small LED screen set in the middle. Glowing blue lines crossed its surface and there were wires coming from it and into the walls.

"Rattrap, do you have any idea what this is?" Windblade called.

"Not a clue, it looks like something the boss or gear head would make," he said as he walked around the device, tapping it in places.

"Who carezz! Wazzpinator still stuck!" Waspinator cried, giving the cables another tug. The blue glow shifted to yellow and the LED screen lit up. "Uh oh."

"Is that bad?" Windblade asked.
"How should I know?" Rattrap snapped. "We're in a building filled with mad scientists, who knows what's in these walls! This could be a bomb for all we know!"

Waspinator's struggling got more frantic, causing the colours to darken. "Wazzpinator don't want to explode!"

"Aww man, we're gonna die!"

"Shut up, Rattrap!" Running forward, Windblade grabbed Waspinator and held him stationary. "Hold still!"

Nobody moved.

Eventually, Windblade relaxed and connected to Teletraan. "Teletraan, is Armsmaster available?"

[Armsmaster is currently in his workshop,] the computer replied.

"Good, can you connect me to him?" She waited, hoping he wouldn't ignore the call or brush them off.

"Yes?" She sighed in relief after hearing the man's voice.

"Armsmaster? This is Windblade. A couple of us are stuck in the crawl space with what looks like a bomb… and it's ticking…"

She'd been expected shouting or an alarm, instead, Armsmaster simply sighed.

"I see. Can you tell me where you are?"

It took him nearly ten minutes to reach them, set up a platform and open up the ducting. Windblade spent the time keeping Waspinator calm.

A section of the duct was cut away and Armsmaster's head and shoulders came through. Turning, he faced the device.

"I thought so. You three can relax, it's a fake. It'll take me some time to extract it though."

"So… it's not gonna blow?" Rattrap asked.

"Let me guess," Miss Militia's voice floated up, "another one of Ryan's jokes?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure how he got it up here. I may have to dismantle most of the ceiling to get it out."

"Oh please, I can have it out in no time." Rattrap walked over to the device, switching back to beast mode. "You're sure it's safe?"

Armsmaster nodded. "Completely."

With a shrug, Rattrap started biting through the wires.

The moment he was free, Waspinator stormed off, muttering darkly as he went. He reached the opening Armsmaster had cut and jumped out, transforming and flying off.

"Excuse me, but who is Ryan?" Windblade asked, shaking her head at Waspinator's behaviour.
"He was a Tinker that worked with us a few years back. He was very fond of practical jokes. Eventually he was sent to a containment zone."

"I remember hearing about that," Miss Militia said. "Did he really use a live aardvark?"

"No, it was stuffed," Armsmaster said before turning his attention back to supervising Rattrap.

Windblade decided to follow Waspinator and jumped through the gap. Right now, all she wanted was a nice warm soak.

##

The weekend after Concert's arrest.

Dragon checked the last of the boxes and smiled. She couldn't wait to see the looks on the Wards' faces when they arrived and saw the surprise she had waiting for them. They were being brought here in a van with darkened windows and a tent corridor had been set up between the van and the doors.

Their masks kept most of their expressions hidden but Clockblockers 'holy shit' had said it all.

The building they were in had once been a warehouse of some description but now it was an indoor go-kart track.

Dragon had recently stumbled onto this place while patrolling. It was just inside what she was beginning to consider her territory and the owner had considered closing it down. Between the rising crime rates and increased gang presence, business had dropped off to almost nothing.

When Dragon had approached him, the owner had been so grateful that he'd agreed to her deal without hesitation. The place was more or less hers for the day.

The track took up most of the space and had a number of tight turns to fit in the space, which made it more challenging. It even had a bridge.

"With everything that's been going on and your handling of Stormtiger and Cricket, we felt you could do with a reward," Miss Militia said to the collected Wards.

Stepping forwards, Dragon started handing out boxes. "We know some of your costumes are not exactly suitable for this, so I had these made."

Inside each box, was a racing suit, gloves, boots and helmet. Each was coloured to match their costumes and the helmets were tinted so their faces couldn't be seen.

"Who are those for?" Aegis asked when he noticed there were some boxes left over.

"Ah, those were supposed to be for Glory Girl and Panacea," Dragon said.

"They're coming as well?" Clockblocker asked, looking at Gallant who sighed and shook his head.

"No, they're both grounded," Gallant said. "Brandish was really upset with them."

Most of the Wards winced in sympathy. Concert's arrest hadn't exactly been discreet and public opinion was still mixed. On one the one hand, Lightshow had assaulted Panacea, a local celebrity and known non-combatant, and so Glory Girl was defending her sister.

On the other hand, the consensus was that Glory Girl could have handled things better. Several
cameras had recorded the threats she made against concert. The fact she was publicly seen to be injured at the time helped soften the fallout.

Even Dragon herself was torn. She could understand the complaints about excessive violence but now, after her restrictions had been removed, she could honestly say she'd probably have done the same thing if it had been Taylor or Predaqueen who got hurt.

Shaking herself, she pointed to a nearby set of changing rooms. "Boys on the left, girls are right."

"As always," Taylor muttered, stunning most of the Wards. They all broke down laughing.

"Was that? Did Matrix just make a joke?" Clockblocker said in mock surprise. "I'm so proud of you!"

Dragon and Miss Militia chuckled as the guided the teens to the changing rooms. By the time they had gotten changed, the Autobots and Predaqueen had teleported in.

Most of them were large enough to safely drive on the same track as the go-karts. Those that couldn't, such as Predaqueen, would be watching from the sidelines

With everyone dressed, they took up their positions on the grid, Vista was in pole, followed by Matrix, Clockblocker, Streetwise, Kid Win, Wheeljack, Aegis, Groove, Warpath, Gallant.

Hotspot and First Aid had chosen to sit the race out and were helping Perceptor keep an eye on Predaqueen. Rewind, however, had plugged himself into the buildings music system and started playing some old 80's hair metal.

"Where does he find this stuff?" Miss Militia asked Dragon.

"I have no idea," Dragon said with a shrug.

As the music started, Windblade hovered over the racers, holding a flag in her hands.

"Racers! On your marks! Get set! GO!" She waved the flag and flew upwards as the Wards and the Autobots took off.

Wheeljack quickly took first place on the opening stretch.

As they raced, the adults retired to the small waiting area that also doubled as a lunchroom. It gave them a decent view of the track so they could keep an eye on everything.

"I have a couple of cameras recording everything if anyone wants to show it to their parents," Dragon said to Miss Militia.

Parents weren't allowed to come to help protect the Wards' identities. She hoped this would be a good compromise.

"Thank you, I'll let them know. Do you think any of them would mind if we used some of the footage?"

Dragon nodded. "I doubt it." Being able to show the Wards having fun together would be a good way to encourage more people to join.

On the track, Groove and Wheeljack were fighting for the lead with Clockblocker closing in fast. Windblade was following the track from the air and Waspinator had tucked himself into Vista's harness. The little bot screamed as she slipped between Gallant and the wall moments before the
"Oh relax!" she shouted at him, putting the kart into a slide.

Wheeljack would end up winning the race, his rally car alt-mode giving him an advantage. Streetwise would come second, followed by Vista and Matrix.

"Oh come on, he's got an unfair advantage! He turns into a race car!" Clockblocker complained as he climbed out of his kart. Despite what he said, his words had no real heat to them.

"Don't be such a poor loser!" Vista chided. She hugged Wheeljack, whose fins flashed pink with embarrassment.

"We have the building for the day, so there's plenty of time for you to try again," Dragon said. "The next race will be just for the Wards. When we break for lunch, the Autobots will be free to use the track."

The Wards cheered, and after a quick break, rushed back to the karts.

##

**Autobot encrypted messaging system excerpts:**

Wheeljack: Huh… that's interesting!
Matrix: Define interesting?
Rewind: Oh god, oh god, we're all going to die?
Perceptor: TAKE COVER!
*Signal lost*

*signal restored*
Waspinator: What wazz that?
Groove: I'm in the rec room, we felt that from here!
Perceptor: Medical alert! Wheeljack is down and there is a small fire!
Hotspot: OMW!
FirstAid: I'm coming, try to keep all his pieces in one place.
Waspinator: Waspinator found his hand!
Wheeljack: I'm O~kAy!
Matrix: What are you lot up to now?!
Wheeljack: NotHing!
Perceptor: Nothing!
Hotspot: Nothing!
FirstAid: Everythings fine!
Waspinator: Glitch-head blew up desk again.
Wheeljack: TraitOr...

##

*Steeljaw has joined the channel*
Steeljaw: HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!OMW!
Hotspot: Okay, who tried to fit Steeljaw with a com? FirstAid?
Steeljaw: HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!HI!OMW!
Waspinator: Make it stop! _
FirstAid: It wasn't me!
Matrix: I've fix the issue and shut down the com. Jack? don't ever do that again.
Wheeljack: Sorry!

##

Wheeljack: First Aid? Y'know Medhall is trying to get hold of your regen cream formula? (Btw, you really need a better name for that.)
FirstAid: Really? I'll speak to Dragon. (And what's wrong with the name?)
Dragon: *sigh* I am aware of the issue. It's not a major problem but how did you find out?
Wheeljack: ...It was just something I heard?…
Dragon: Jack, do you know what 'espionage' means?
Wheeljack: Oh come on! It's not my fault they need better security!
8.4 Interlude Arc

Amy sat quietly in the back of Carol – her mother's – car. Even after ten years, she still had to occasionally remind herself to call Carol her mother.

The atmosphere in the car was tense and nobody dared to speak. Carol was driving and visibly fuming. Sarah sat in the passenger seat and would glance around every now and then, clearly worried. Vicky was seated next to Amy, but she was busy looking out the window.

Once they were home, Amy and Vicky followed their mother as she stormed inside and pointed to the kitchen. She waited until both girls were seated opposite her at the kitchen table before she began.

"How many?"

Vicky shifted uncomfortably. "Mom, what was I supposed to do, she attacked Amy –"

Carol slapped a hand on the table. "Don't give me that! How many people have you nearly killed?"

"It wasn't like that! They were accidents!"

"Did either of you stop to consider what would happen if this got out? Even without proof, the media would tear New Wave apart! And neither of you thought to tell me? I had to find out from the PRT! Director Piggot has made it clear they will be looking into everything we do from now on. So tell me, how many?"

Vicky didn't answer, but Carol didn't press the issue, focusing on Amy instead.

"Amy, how many?"

Amy flinched under her gaze. Not wanting to make eye contact, she stared at the table.

"Amy."

"It was seven, they were just accidents! Amy only healed them because I asked," Vicky said quickly.

"Six, that Merchant was trying to kill you," Amy corrected quietly.

Carol tried to stand but before she could say anything, Aunt Sarah placed a hand on her shoulder and shook her head slightly. Still fuming, Carol sat down and let her sister speak.

"Do either of you remember what New Wave stands for?" she asked in a calmer tone.

"Accountability. We're not the government, we're not the police. We have to hold ourselves to a higher standard. And now there's footage of you publicly assaulting someone –"

"She attacked Amy!" Vicky said. "What was I supposed to do?"

Carol went to speak but Sarah held up a hand and continued in the same calm tone. "Hold her down? Pin her arms to her sides and lift her off the ground?"

Vicky blushed and looked away while Amy fought the impulse to hug her sister.

"I… I didn't think. I saw Amy go down and reacted… But… what if it had been you or Mom who got hurt? You would have reacted the same way!" She had started quiet but her voice rose in volume
as she regained some of her confidence.

"How we would react isn't important at the moment. Now, tell me about the others?" Carol asked, having calmed down. "I want to know everything."

Both women sat quietly as Amy and Vicky told them everything they could remember about Vicky's 'accidents'.

"What about Lightshow?" Carol asked. "The PRT said it was just some bruising. Was that the truth?"

Amy didn't trust herself to say anything. It was bad enough she lied, but Taylor and the paramedics were now caught up in it. To her relief, she didn't have to say a word.

"At this point, I don't think it matters," Aunt Sarah said, sighing. "I think the two of you should go get some rest while your mother and I decide what to do."

Carol shook her head. "Either way, you're both grounded until I say otherwise. No patrols, no mall and no hospital." Amy barely kept the look of relief, and the flash of guilt that followed it, off her face.

When they rose to leave, Carol stopped them. "Leave your phones here."

Amy placed her phone on the table but Vicky looked mulish. For a second, Amy thought she would argue. But, with a sigh, she handed over her cellphone.

Walking up the stairs, Amy racked her brain thinking of something to say, anything to cheer Vicky up, but her sister beat her to it.

"Hey," Vicky said quietly, giving her a quick hug. "Don't worry about Motorboat the Wonder Whore. I'm sure once mom calms down, she'll forgive us."

Forgive you maybe. "Yeah, but what about the others?"

Vicky sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I… don't know."

"Vicky, I warned you –"

"I know, I know. I need to be more careful. I'll try, I promise."

##

"Victoria had a point, you know," Sarah said after both girls left the room.

"What?"

"If it had been you or me getting hurt. We're experienced enough to know better. At their age? You would've killed that woman."

"That's different," Carol argued.

"Is it? God knows how many fights we've been in. We've seen each other take worse hits. But Amy? When was the last time she went on patrol or had to do any fighting?"

"She doesn't like to fight," Carol pointed out before running a hand through her hair, sighing roughly. "I thought she had more sense than this. Going around covering up crimes?"
"Glass houses." Sarah said bluntly. "How many people did we put in hospital before we got our act together?" She didn't mention how many of them had been caused by her sister's then-legendary temper.

Carol glared at her sister, but didn't say anything.

"The important thing is to stop this from happening again. I think we can agree that Victoria can't go on solo patrols anymore. From now on, she patrols with one of us. If that doesn't work, we may have to look into counseling."

_Possibly for both of them_, Sarah thought to herself. Amy looked almost relieved when she was told she couldn't go to the hospital.

Carol frowned. "Victoria doesn't need counseling. She just needs to be more careful!"

Sarah shook her head. The idea of getting psychological help had always been a hot button for her sister.

Dealing with Victoria was only half the problem as the rest of New Wave wasn't in a much better state. The New Wave motion had died before it could start and while the team was still officially together, they had been increasingly inactive lately. Victoria did the majority of patrols these days. Shielder was still too young for solo work and Laserdream was, understandably, more focused on her education.

"I think… I think it's time for a family meeting. We've become complacent and we need to sit down and talk about the future. I'll see what everyone else has to say then, but if it goes the way I expect, I'll draw up a proper time table. Fixed patrol routes, team training for all members, Amy included. Maybe even some joint patrols with the PRT."

Once upon a time, Amy would have been able to dodge that hit. They needed to redrill some self-defence into the girl. Sarah knew she was friends with Matrix, maybe they could get her to build Amy some equipment.

Despite everything else, Carol almost smiled at her sister's enthusiasm.

"Oh? You planning on relaunching the New Wave movement?"

In the past, Sarah would have agreed with her, but now she knew better.

The New Wave movement had been a mistake. The idea had been simple, capes without masks. No more hiding behind anonymity, all capes on both sides would be held accountable for their actions. Flushed with success at bringing down Marquis, the Brockton Bay Brigade had tried to be the forerunners of the idea and publicly unmasked themselves.

It was only later she realised how naive they had been and poor Fleur paid the price for it.

"No. At least, not right now. Right now, the city needs heroes more than it needs a PR stunt."

First, they would focus on getting New Wave back into shape. Then they could look adding new members to the team. New Wave was never intended to be a 'family-only' team. If they could encourage more people to join, to unmask, then maybe the New Wave idea could finally catch on.

##

A gentle knocking pulled Amy from her sleep. She had been dreaming about something, something
important, but with that knocking, she couldn't remember. What was it?

The knocking stopped, but then the door opened and a voice whispered, "Ames, you up?"

"Vicky?" Her sister poked her head into the room and grinned mischievously. "I thought Carol said —"

"I talked to her and Aunt Sarah again," Vicky interrupted as she flew into the room. Her grin swept away the doubts that had begun gathering in Amy's mind. "Once they cooled down, they understood. I messed up, yeah, but it's not like I hurt anyone who didn't deserve it. They were criminals, and if that gets them hurt, it's not my fault. It's not yours, either. I mean, you healed them! They should be thanking you."

//Life is cruel, but so very precious.//

Her mouth twitched. Not a smile, not a frown, but something in between. And why had Taylor's face popped into her mind? "I guess."

"Nope!" Vicky dropped onto her bed beside her. "No 'I guess', no 'maybe'. Come on, Amy. Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do. It's just…" An arm wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her close, and she couldn't help but laugh. "All right, fine. Yes, you're right."

"You bet I'm right! It's cause I'm just awesome like that." They both giggled at her fake bravado. "But seriously, I'm only as good as I am because I have you right beside me." Vicky's smile slid off her face, and she looked down so her hair fell in front of her eyes. "I never thanked you for all the ways you've helped me, have I? I just took you for granted."

A flush lit up her cheeks. "Vicky, it's nothing like that."

"Yes, it is! How many years have I ignored everything you do for me?" She sniffed. "And you never said anything. I've been blind."

Vicky's hand fell off her shoulder and slid down her back. Amy shivered when it came to rest upon her hip. Had she…? Was she…?

"I've been blind to a lot of things lately," Vicky muttered. Her eyes rose to meet Amy's, and then they fell to stare instead at her lips.

//Broken trust can never be repaired.//

"You don't mean that," whispered Amy.

Vicky scooted closer, close enough that Amy could feel the heat from her sister's body warming her own. "I know what I mean. Ever since the fight in the mall, I can't stop thinking about you. Is that… Is that wrong?"

"I… Guh…" She couldn't get her words out. Licking her lips, she tried again. "But we're sisters."

"Adopted sisters," the blonde gently corrected, and then she laughed faintly at Amy's surprise. She continued blithely before Amy could interrupt. "And if we're not sisters by blood, then there's nothing to stop us from doing what we both want to do, is there?"

"But what about Dean—"
Vicky's lips pressed gently against hers.

//It is our choices that define who we are.//

The sudden kiss startled her, but Vicky did not pull away. She pushed herself closer, instead, until she was all but lying on top of Amy. "You're my sister." A kiss on her cheek. "You're my best friend." A kiss on her nose. "You're more than just family." A kiss on the curve of her jaw. "I don't know what I would do without you."

Amy's eyes drifted closed as she relaxed into the next kiss, and she opened her mouth to let it deepen. Arms slipped around her waist and pulled her closer, so she wrapped her own around Vicky's neck. They fit perfectly, just as they had whenever she dreamed of a moment like this.

Vicky's lips slipped down her neck, but another pair descended to cover hers before she could whine about the loss. Hands caressed the outsides of her thighs, and another played with her hair. Kisses drifted from her knee up the inside of her leg and back down. Playful lips nibbled at her toes.

//Open your eyes. See what your choice has wrought!/!

Amy blinked her eyes opened, and then she let out an ear-piercing scream.

"Didn't you enjoy it?" Vicky's disembodied mouth asked her. The mouth was attached to a long neck like a swan's, and that in turn was connected to—

She shoved herself away from the monstrosity, pulling off the too-long arms that circled her like branches of a tree. What was this?! What had happened?!

What had she done?!

"Don't you think I'm pretty?" asked Vicky while an unholy chorus echoed her every word. She pitched forward over the edge of the bed, and the head and torso growing out of her back continued, "I've seen you watching me. At school. At home." A multitude of legs unfolded like the world's most grotesque spider. When she put her weight on the limbs, the head of the body that had fallen to the floor splattered like an egg, yet Vicky didn't seem to notice. "Did you really think I couldn't feel you undressing me with your eyes all the time? I'm giving you what you want. Why aren't you happy?!"

Amy's back hit the wall. "Not like this," she whimpered. "I didn't want this. I didn't mean to do it."

Vicky's eyes narrowed. In her head. On her hands. From the mass of flesh in the center. One hundred pairs of eyes glared at her. "This is your fault!" one mouth roared. The puddle of limbs and torsos tumbled over, flailing wildly yet still creeping inexorably toward her, and the once-unified voices turned into a cacophony of rage.

"I trusted you!"

"I gave you everything you asked for!"

"I loved you!"

"You threw it away!"

"Threw me away!"

"I hate you!"

"Hate you, hate you, hate you!"
Arms grabbed onto her and pulled her into the confusion. "Let me go! Please! Let me go!"

"Just like your father!"

"You're a monster!"

"We don't want you!"

"You're worthless!"

"Just kill yourself!"

"Monster!"

"I'm sorry!" Amy wailed. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!"

Two hands wrapped around her throat, and she felt herself be pulled up to stare into blue eyes that held no love, no warmth, just cold disgust. "Monsters don't get forgiveness," Vicky snarled as she squeezed. Amy panted in need, but each breath was as elusive as the last, and she could feel her arms and legs going numb. "Villains don't get mercy."

Black crept in around the edges of her sight.

"You should all just die."

Amy woke up screaming.

She could still feel the pulsating flesh wrapped around her neck, slowly choking her. In a panic, desperate to escape the fingers that were still clawing at her, she tried to fight her way free.

Before she could free herself from the tangled bed sheets, Vicky crashed through her bedroom door.

"Amy!" she shouted, flying to her sister and trying to calm her down.

Amy felt the warmth of Vicky's aura wash over her but it panicking her further. Pulling the covers away, Vicky tried to reach her sister only for Amy to pull away, she couldn't let Vicky touch her. She couldn't trust herself, the moment their skin touched she could feel her power surge –

Growling in temper, Vicky dived forwards and pinned Amy's arms to her side and holding her from behind. Amy struggled briefly but it was a wasted effort. Eventually, her struggles gave way to sobs and she turned in Vicky's arms so she could face her sister, the fear of her power forgotten as she let Vicky comfort her.

By now, Carol and Mark were standing at the door, looking tired and confused.

"What happened?" Mark asked, looking more focused than Amy had seen in a while.

"I think Amy had a nightmare," Vicky said, and Amy felt like she was six again.

Mark sighed and ran a hand down his face. With no danger, he looked aimlessly around the room.

"Do you girls want some hot chocolate or something?"

Amy choked out a laugh and Vicky smiled. "That would be great."
Nodding, Mark left. Carol lingered a little longer in the doorway, staring thoughtfully at Amy before she left.

It only took Mark a few minutes to make the hot chocolate and return. Putting both cups on the bedside table, he gave Amy a comforting smile and left them alone. He paused briefly to look at the ruined door.

Vicky blushed at his questioning look, "Sorry?"

Giving them a rueful smile and a shake of his head, he left the room.

Amy was on her bed, being held by Vicky, and she slowly realised that she couldn't see her sister's body. Both of them were wearing short sleeves and there was more than enough skin touching, but her power wasn't responding.

Frowning, she focused on trying to look calm.

"It's okay, Vicky, I think I'm okay now."

"Are you sure? I can grab my quilt and we can camp out together again like when we were kids."

Amy shook her head. Right now, she didn't trust her powers not to do something while they slept. "With the way you fidget in your sleep? I'd probably end up with another black eye," she said with a faint smile. It was only a half-lie, as Vicky really did move around a lot in her sleep. Combined with her strength, it made sharing a bed with her dangerous.

"Alright, if you're sure. If you need anything though, come and get me?"

"I promise." She ignored the twinge of guilt she felt for lying to Vicky. Part of her desperately wanted to curl up in bed with Vicky, to feel her arms wrap around – *too-long arms that circled her like branches of a tree. Countless eyes glaring at her*

She shuddered and fought back the urge to heave.

"Amy?"

"Sorry, bad mental images. I'll be fine, I promise."

She clearly wasn't convinced, but Vicky downed her now lukewarm drink, helped Amy straighten out her bed and left. Once she was gone, Amy finished her own drink and fell back on her bed. Her room suddenly felt cold and empty.

The images wouldn't go away, could she really do something like that to Vicky? She tried to tell herself no, but some deeper part said yes. She had never really experimented with her power but she suspected that it would be easy.

She shuddered at the thought.

Why couldn't I see her? Now that Vicky was gone, she could feel the background sensations of the bacteria against her skin, so it wasn't like she'd lost her powers.

Could that even happen?

She knew there were some Trumps who could suppress powers, but unless something weird had
happened, neither Vicky or her had that power.

Of course, she knew what the real problem was. Her feelings for her sister.

She wasn’t quite sure when they had started, only that at some point she had stopped seeing her sister Vicky and started seeing Vicky, the beautiful young woman. She knew it was wrong and that it would never happen, but she couldn’t seem to move on.

Idly, she considered calling Rung. The little bot had been so genuinely concerned about her that she had agreed to take his number. They hadn't really talked much, but he did mention the risks of burnout amongst medical professionals and things snowballed from there. He was surprisingly easy to talk to.

Maybe it was the eyebrows?

Still, even if she wanted to speak to him, Carol had her cellphone.

Frowning slightly, she climbed out of bed and picked up her laptop. Taylor didn't need sleep, maybe she could email her?

From: Panacea
To: Matrix

Hey, you awake?

From: Matrix
To: Panacea

Always.

Are you okay? You know it's... two in the morning. Normally, it's just me, Dragon and Miss Militia who are awake at this time.

Regards
Matrix

Her mouth twitched into a brief smile. Taylor was the only person she knew who tended to use complete sentences and correct grammar in her texts and emails.

Before she could reply, a small window popped up on screen.

Autobot encrypted messaging system:

Private channel:

Matrix: Hey. I thought this would be faster than e-mail.

Panacea: Did you just hack my laptop? :O

Matrix:... Maybe? Sorry.
Amy sighed in amusement. Her laptop had one of the most highly regarded consumer-grade firewall systems. Trust a tinker to casually ignore it.

Panacea: don't worry about it. While you're there, think you could give a check up for me?

Matrix: Sure.

Matrix: So, what's bothering you? Don't worry, nobody but us can see or read this.

Panacea: Bad dreams

Matrix: want to talk about it?

Amy smiled, even if it was a bit weak. It wasn't as good as a phone call, but it would do for now.

##

AN: Special thanks goes to 'Silently Watches' who wrote the nightmare scene. You should check out his stuff.

AN2: Unfortunately, this chapter had a lot of formatting that A03 doesn't support (this story was written for a forum after all.) so sorry about all the lines.
8.5 Interlude Arc

Sitting in his office, Danny Hebert forwarded the details of another worker to Dragon. While the worker didn't have a lot of qualifications, but he wasn't a gang member and he was strong enough for manual labor, had two kids and was desperate for the work.

That done, he turned his attention to allocating what little work the docks still had.

The docks were not completely abandoned after all. They were one of the few places in the city built to handle large amounts of freight. This meant they had the necessary equipment to handle large shipping containers, offloading them from ships and loading them onto trucks or trains.

The ships were mostly gone, but trucks still came through. Long haul deliveries from places like Boston would stop off here to unload. It wasn't much, but it was just enough to keep the docks running.

As he shifted in his chair, he felt the body armour he was wearing move in response. He knew it wasn't easily visible, but he was always aware of the weight. He understood the need for it; though. There had been at least three different people – that he knew about – who'd tried to follow him since Taylor's first outing as a Ward.

There had also been a recruiter for the Empire Eighty-Eight, two reporters and one loon hanging around near his office.

Still, despite everything, he couldn't be more proud of his daughter. Her grades at school had improved drastically, she was laughing more and she was helping people.

Now if she would just stop getting into fights, he'd sleep better.

The night the police called to say they had found her in that locker had been one of the worst in his life. It brought back painful memories of the day Annette died.

Then Hannah had called to tell him Taylor had gotten into a fight with Lung. Lung of all people! Then, just as things were settling down, she was grabbed by a lunatic and shipped off to Canada.

He wasn't sure how much more he could take.

Watching Taylor slowly recover from the locker had been heartbreaking. It wasn't just the attack, but that she had no one but him to keep an eye on her. She had always been a chatterbug, even if she was a bit shy with new people. He'd noticed Emma had stopped coming by, but he'd never realised just how isolated Taylor had became.

*And don't you just hate yourself for that.* He ignored the voice. He was still having weekly sessions with that robot Taylor made, Ring… Rong? He never could remember its name.

He was slowly dealing with the guilt, and Taylor had friends now. She was always talking about, or to, Panacea, Glory Girl or the other Wards. After the kidnapping, the pair of them had even skipped out of school to keep an eye on her.

 Watching Glory Girl lie about school had made him think about his own teenage years. Had he been as transparent to his parents? Still, he let them have their way. Knowing there were people with her had made it easier to go back to work.
A knock at the door brought him out of his thoughts as he glanced towards the doorway.

"Yes, Frank?"

Frank Bogdan was young – or at least younger than him – probably around his late twenties, with dark hair and watery eyes. He was fairly unremarkable, just another cog in the machine. The only thing even remotely interesting was his tendency to wear long sleeves, no matter the weather.

"H-Hey Danny!"

Frank’s sudden nervousness set alarm bells off in his head as Danny casually reached under his desk for the large crowbar he kept there. It was a holdover from the old days, when the docks were important and the gangs paid them more attention. In those days, as much as he hated it, authority sometimes had to come from a big stick.

"I-I… There was some talk about jobs… you're sending people to help with some tinkertech? M-my friends wanted, that is I wanted to see if I could-"

He held a hand up. "Frank, stop, you're just embarrassing yourself. Now, if this is supposed to be about your friends in the Empire, just turn around and walk away. Tell them you asked and I'll consider it."

"T-the Empire?" Frank asked, failing to look innocent.

"You're not that subtle or clever, Frank. I know about the tattoo on your arm and I know someone pays you for information on shipments. I also made sure you never learned anything important until it's too late." It was also why he had refused to forward the man's application to Dragon.

Dockworkers passing information on shipments had been one of the quickest ways to earn a few bucks in the past. The only thing that topped it was smuggling. A dockworker was in the perfect place to slip a couple of packages into an unsecured container, after all.

Both practices were heavily punished, of course, and with the decline of the docks it wasn't as lucrative or as wide spread as it used to be but it still happened.

Frank unconsciously covered his forearm with his other hand. "If you knew, why'd you never say?"

"Cause I also know you have an ex-wife and a kid to support."

In the old days, Danny wouldn't have hesitated to throw someone like Frank out on his ass, when there'd been plenty of work and the union had a reputation to protect. These days, with the way things were, he tried to be more understanding.

Realising he wasn't getting anywhere, Frank tried changing tactics.

"Look Danny, think about Taylor. She's already upset the Empire. A bit of Tinker-tech would go a long way to-"

Danny's face went wooden and Frank paled as his brain caught up to what he said.

"Oh shit! Danny, that wasn't a threat, I swear!"

Slowly, to make a point, Danny pulled the crowbar, stood up and placed it on his desk with a thud.

"Get out," he said quietly.
"Danny, I'm sorry, you know what the Empire can be like!"

"Get. Out."

"You don't understand, I need this -"  

"Get. Out!" Danny roared, grabbing the crowbar.

Frank ran out of the room so fast his feet barely touched the ground.

Once he was gone, Danny slumped back into his chair and tried to get his temper under control. How dare that piece of shit try to bring his daughter into this. He wouldn't have actually hit Frank. Scare him a little maybe, but never hit him.

He was still fuming when his secretary walked in with a cup of coffee. She had been at the docks almost as long as he had and barely spared the crowbar more than an amused glance.

"Should I warn the boys?" she asked, her voice light.

"Yeah, tell them to keep an eye out for Empire colours," he said as he ran a hand down his face.

This was hardly the first time he'd sent one of their members running. The dockworkers were getting desperate, and every few months, the Empire would send a recruiter or two. Most of the time they were politely, but firmly, sent away. Occasionally, they had to be rebuffed in a more forceful manner.

Still, he should probably warn Dragon that the gangs were looking for an 'in'.

That night, after a quick change and a shower, he was sitting at the bar he used to visit when Annette was still alive. Before he could get too lost in his memories, a voice broke him out of his musings.

"Sorry I'm late, I had to tuck the children in."

Turning, he smiled at his friend's excuse. "That's alright, Hannah. They giving you trouble?"

She was dressed nicely but, as was her habit when out of costume, she tried to play down her appearance. It helped distance her from her cape persona.

Slipping onto the stool next to him, Hannah shook her head. "Nothing I'm not used to. I just had to make sure they understood the rules."

Danny chuckled and waved the bartender over. Taylor was spending the night at the rig with most of the Wards. She had mentioned not watching one of the latest movies and it had quickly snowballed into a Wards-only movie night at the rig.

"How have you been?" she asked before ordering her drink.

"Not too bad, I think things are finally getting better. There was a bit of trouble at work, though," Danny replied.

"Oh?" she asked with a frown.

"Yeah, the Empire are sniffing round. Trying to get people into Dragon's factory. They put pressure on one of the guys at the docks. I already warned Dragon, but I thought you might like to know."

She sighed. "Thank you. I'll make sure to pass it along."
The sat in silence, just enjoying each other's company before Hannah laughed quietly. "Tell me, Danny, do you still keep that crowbar under your desk?"

"Do you still keep a gun under your pillow?" he shot back with a grin. They both laughed at what was an old joke between them.

"You know, I will never forget the look on his face when you hit him," she reminisced.

"Heh, stupid bastard should have been more careful. I think he still has the limp," Danny said proudly. In the early days, people thought capes were invincible. He knew from experience they weren't.

They had first met each other when Danny had wandered into the middle of a cape battle. He'd been smart enough to take cover, but when the villain, a low-level blaster, had gotten too close, Danny had been quick to take advantage. He cape never saw it coming.

They kept their voices low, and to anyone else in the bar they looked like nothing more than old friends catching up. He told her about Taylor's first - and only - attempt at flambe cooking and she told him about Armsmaster's last, attempt to go without sleep.

"Of course, MP found out and thought it would be funny to mess with him," she added as Danny laughed. "She ended up with a black eye and both of them ended up in Master/Stranger isolation."

The fell into silence, still occasionally chuckling.

"Tell me… Do you ever think about that night?" she asked quietly during the lull.

She didn't need to say which night.

"Yeah… You?"

"Sometimes." She tilted her head in thought. "It was certainly an… experience."

Danny chuckled, "Did Annette ever tell you it was her idea? It was something she picked up from Lustrum."

"No, we never spoke about her. If she ever told me anything about Lustrum, I would have been bound to report it."

He held a his glass towards her. "To old memories?"

Smiling, she clinked her glass against his. "To the 'crowbar kid'."

The rest of the night was spent reminiscing about the past and enjoying each other's company.

_The day after the Go-karting._

Standing on top of the Rig, Kid Win ran another diagnostic on his Mark 2 hoverboard.

During the fight with the Undersiders, one of Chariot's drones had managed to attach itself to his board. He never noticed until it exploded, splitting the thing in half and dropping him to the ground. Thankfully, he hadn't been too high up at the time.

He'd managed to fix it, but it was a rush job at best, and he'd been distracted by all the improvements he could make. The upgrades, however, would have been so extensive that it was easier to build a
new one instead.

The mk.2 was larger than his old board and more powerful. It could lift more weight, travel at higher speeds and had plenty of ports for attachments. One of those attachments was a remote control unit that let either him or his VI, EVA, control the board remotely.

This would be its first flight and he was looking forward to it. He'd copied her 'anti-grav parachute' system - with Matrix's permission - and added it to his armour.

Once he was confident everything was working, he synched the board up to his suit's systems and let it fall, where it stopped a couple of inches above the roof and stayed there.

Stepping onto it, he felt the magnetic clamps in his boots lock on. Nothing was getting him off his board unless he allowed it.

Just to be sure, he did a couple of laps around the rooftop, pitching and rolling the board to see how everything reacted. Once he was satisfied, he tapped his radio.

"Dispatch, Kid Win. I'm taking my new board on a test flight across the bay."

*Acknowledged Kid Win, I'll sign you out. Make sure to stay in contact.*

Spinning to face the city, he kicked the speed up a notch and took off. At his current speed, it would only take a minute or two to reach the Boardwalk. From there, he could head north and skirt the docks before heading south again.

"EVA, playlist six," he ordered as he dialed up the speed. He'd made this playlist just for occasions like this.

~Wanna join me? Come and play…~

As the tempo jumped, he banked hard, skimming the fronts of several shops and weaving past a lamppost at a height of ten feet. Rising up over the buildings, he put his board through its paces. Banking and ducking around, over and even under obstacles.

He'd enjoyed skateboarding even before he triggered, and right now the rooftops were his skate park. Air conditioning units, aerials and pylons were things to dance around. Trying to keep in time with the beat only made it more fun.

Eventually, the playlist ended and he glided down to a nearby rooftop. He'd doubled back at some point and gone a little further than he intended, but he wasn't too worried. He wasn't in gang territory or anything so he should be fine.

No sooner than he thought the words than there was the sound of breaking glass.

Placing a hand on his gun, he drifted towards the edge of the roof and looked down while cursing himself for tempting fate. Below, Rune and some Empire thugs were throwing rocks at a storefront. It was, or had been, a fairly new sporting goods store.

He knew he should probably call it in, but they would probably order him to pull back. But a few unarmed thugs weren't really a threat and Rune was one of the 'safer' Empire capes.

He pulled out his pistol, checked that it was set to stun, and dropped off the rooftop.

Before they knew he was there, he was already on top of them. Two of the thugs went down while
the others ran. The rocks Rune was still levitating shot towards him and he was forced to roll sideways to avoid being hit.

By the time he was the right way up, the remaining thugs were out of sight. Rune, however, ran forwards and slapped her hand on a snowboard that had been sitting in the window.

"Catch me if you can!" she shouted, jumping onto the now flying snowboard.

Without thinking about it, Kid Win clipped his gun to his hip and took off after her.

She had gotten a head start, but he quickly closed the distance. He doubted she had any real destination in mind as she weaved through alleyways and between buildings in an effort to lose him. She certainly wasn't heading towards Empire territory.

He had a small map on his HUD with last known gang territories highlighted. So far, Rune was sticking to neutral areas. From her occasional laughs, he got the impression she was having fun.

So was he, if he was honest.

Coming to a stop in mid-air, Rune turned to face him. Her costume was a red and black hooded robe and a mask that covered her upper face. The PRT estimated that she was close in age to the Wards, but couldn't get more specific.

"Not bad, let's see how you deal with this!" Going into a dive, she skimmed a rooftop, her hand lightly touching the brickwork.

Before he could reach her, nearly a dozen bricks had pulled themselves free of the roof and were floating in the air between them. With a gesture, Rune sent some of them flying at him.

Pulling back for some space, he drew his gun and fired, bricks shattering as he desperately shot them out of the air. It was only later he noticed that only a few of the bricks had been aimed at him. The rest were sent in wide arcs or increasingly elaborate loops, hitting nearby walls.

When the last one was reduced to rubble, Rune gave him a slow clap.

In response, he grinned. "That all you got?"

Her wide smile sent shivers down his spine.

Another gesture nearly doubled the amount of bricks in the air.

_Crap! _"EVA! Drone attachments!" he shouted as the swarm of bricks moved towards him.

Throwing himself off his board, he pulled his spare pistol and started firing even as his anti-grav parachute kicked in. Above him, his board split into two pieces. Power boosters, barrels and power cells were teleported onto pre-assigned ports, converting the pieces of his board into two small drones.

Even as he landed in a crouch on a the roof, the drones were already firing. In a matter of seconds, the bricks were nothing but rubble.

"Okay, _that _was impressive!" Rune said as she jumped off her own board and joined him on the roof. "I suppose I should give you a prize."

EVA positioned the drones by his shoulders, both set to non-lethal and tracking her movement.
"How about you let me take you in?"

"Aww, not even our first date and you want to put me in cuffs?" she said with a salacious grin.

Kid Win could feel himself blush as he tried to stutter a denial. The mental images weren't helping.

"Aww, come on, I promise to be gentle," she purred.

"What?" He absolutely did not squeak.

Mostly it happened to the 'bigger' guys like Aegis and Gallant, but a few girls had tried to flirt with him while he was in costume before. He'd never really known how to handle it. He was always too worried about embarrassing himself.

Having a villain flirt with him was definitely a first.

"Okay, if I tell you something, will you let me go?"

"Tell me what?" He tightened his grip on his gun. He wasn't stupid enough to let his guard down.

"They're black lace," she said in a stage whisper. Before he could work out what she meant, she threw herself backwards off the roof. He charged forward, but she had already summoned her snowboard.

This time, she took off towards Empire territory at full speed.

He didn't bother chasing her. Instead, left alone with his thoughts, he considered what she had said and then blushed when it merged with the other images.

*Clockblocker can never know about this!*
Closing the report, Armsmaster tried not to grimace.

He took pride in leading Brockton Bay's Protectorate branch, but the unending paperwork was something he could do without. It kept him from more important things, like working on his latest project or going out and making a difference.

Instead, he was in his workshop, looking over the latest personnel reports. If he was honest, it made for rather grim reading.

There were nearly a dozen black marks on his file from this year alone. The raid on the Merchants, the prisoner transfer and, of course, his unauthorised rescue mission when Dragon was attacked were simply the latest.

While nobody else was blaming him for the Wards getting hurt during the raid, it had still been his decision to launch the attack before they had all the necessary information. He had been facing pressure from the mayor and had made the mistake of underestimating the Merchants.

And while he wasn't directly blamed for the prisoner transfer fiasco, he was still the team leader and the failure reflected poorly on him. He'd spent hours with Dragon checking the network for leaks, and while they found dozens of potential issues, they had yet to pinpoint how the transfer information had got out.

Most of these issues were silly things. Human error, mostly: connecting unsecured devices to the PRT network, keeping passwords where people could see them, or losing memory sticks.

Then there was the attack on Dragon.

Dragon was important and her rescue was definitely a good thing, but that didn't mean he could defy orders to run off and save her. Some of the more bureaucratic or politically motivated members of the PRT had demanded an investigation into his actions.

The investigation had dragged up every mistake or bad call he'd ever made and Director Piggot had been ready to throw him to the wolves. While they couldn't publicly punish him for his actions, more than a few people had called for him to quietly resign.

In the end, Narwhal chose to take the fall. She made a public statement, stating her intention to stand down as head of the Toronto Protectorate and devote her time solely to the Guild. Currently, they were chasing the remnants of the Dragonslayers.

After that, the matter had been dropped and a remark about 'ignoring orders' was added to his file.

The other black marks were smaller things, but they added up, painting a bleak picture of his future as head of the Protectorate East-Northeast. He'd never really bothered with politics; it wasn't something that came naturally to him. He would rather be out there fighting or in his workshop.

At the end of the day, he wanted to feel like he'd made a difference. He wanted to be spoken about in the same tones as Hero or Legend.

Okay, maybe not quite the same tone as Legend. He chuckled quietly to himself.

However, his position required that he deal with politics. So he did what he had to, tried to say the
right things to the right people and get the results they wanted. Of course, it was only a matter of time before he said the wrong thing or upset the wrong people and received another black mark on his file. There was one case where he'd been issued a restraining order.

He still maintained that the man had punched himself in the face.

When he'd first been assigned to Brockton Bay, he'd assumed it would be a temporary placing. That he could quickly earn a bigger team. Instead, he'd stayed in the Bay for fifteen years. He didn't mind that his temporary placement had become permanent, but he felt like he was hitting a wall.

He trained harder than any other member of his team, but had long ago reached the point of diminishing returns for his efforts. He couldn't make himself any stronger or faster no matter what he did, and he refused to consider chemical aids.

Oh, he'd heard the jokes about his suit injecting him with caffeine and tinker drugs, but that was a dependency that would only hurt him in the long run.

It wasn't helping that others were starting to overshadow him. Dauntless was being hailed by some as the future leader of the team as his power allowed him to grow stronger over time without apparent limit.

Which was preposterous. If anyone was going to take over from him, it would be Miss Militia. She was well known, respected by many, dealt with people better than he did, and even had the PR benefit of having been one of the original Wards.

His computer beeped as a report arrived from Kid Win. He'd finalised the designs for his newest hoverboard and had sent them to him for review.

Glancing over the file, he made a few amendments before signing off on it. Ever since he found his specialisation, the boy had been working like mad to improve his gear.

Armsmaster couldn't fault him for that. He still remembered his earliest days, when everything he built was new and his combat ability jumped with every addition to his arsenal. He expected Kid Win to go far, as his power had a lot of potential and his ideas for teleporting equipment to himself in the field gave him a good tactical advantage.

And doesn't that hurt? Some small part of him asked. He ignored it and turned his focus back to his work.

It bothered him that it had been someone else that helped Kid Win discover his niche. It wasn't immediately noticeable, but the boy's tech showed some of the influence Matrix had had on his development.

Her own tech stood a chance of being a major game changer. Right now, she was limited by size, an issue he knew she was working to fix. Being able to build even half a dozen Manton-protected AI would be a major advantage regardless of their size.

That she could reverse engineer tinker-tech and even mass produce it was simply unfair.

Still, he was a grown man and being jealous of a pair of teens was beneath him.

On the collection of monitors around him, various projects sat in different stages of completion. The predictive software scrolling across one of them was one of his biggest projects. It compiled all the data his suit could record and used that to extrapolate likely actions.
It was designed to assist him in combat, but he hoped to expand the system into an early warning system for approaching Endbringers. Right now, it was running a model of the city and the current situations with the gangs. If it was working correctly, there was going to be a rise in gang violence soon.

The loss of the Merchants had eased some of the tension between the gangs, but fights were already starting to break out. Dragon's presence was beginning to look like one of the contributing factors.

She had quickly pushed most of the criminal element out of the area around her base, which was putting more pressure on the gangs, making them more likely to act out.

Maybe he could act first and stop the fighting before it began. He had more than enough data to create a model of himself, and he could insert it into the simulation and try out some ideas. If nothing else, the first shipment of personal shields would be arriving soon. He could use the simulation to work out the best distribution of manpower.

Before he could get too invested, there was a knock on his door.

"Enter!" he called out, even if he already had a good idea who it was.

##

Dragon entered Colin's workshop, taking care not to catch her appendages on anything.

"Good evening, Colin," she said with a smile. "You said you had something you wanted to show me?"

She knew he expected her to simply patch into his computer, but it was nice being able to talk to people 'face to face'.

"I did. I had a couple of projects I wanted to get your feedback on." He smiled at her and waved a hand at the screens in front of him and she took it as permission to access the system.

Leaning her side against the wall, she crossed her arms and turned her attention to the projects.

While she looked over the projects, she noticed the open personnel report. She had to suppress a smile as she skimmed through it. There were some issues: his lack of tact and often abrupt demeanor tended to rub people the wrong way. But the report was mostly good. He'd stopped several major fights and was credited with forcing Kaiser to retreat on several occasions. But she knew him well enough to know that probably wasn't how he saw it.

Putting that to one side, she turned her attention to his predictive software. He'd asked her to look over it in the past, even when he thought she was human, he'd always admitted she was the better programmer.

"It looks accurate to me. It certainly matches up with what I've seen."

"That's what I thought." He frowned. "I'll submit a report to the director about it tomorrow. Maybe we can get ahead of this mess before it happens."

"Yes, but for now I'll start running my own patrols. I want to test out a new hivemind VI and if it's successful, I'll talk to the director about bringing more of my suits into the city."

"Hivemind VI?" he asked, intrigued at the idea.
"Taylor and Wheeljack designed it. A single VI is distributed across multiple drones. In theory, the complexity of the commands the drones can follow is proportional to the number of drones networked together. Right now, we're testing it with a dozen insectile drones. Wheeljack calls them Insecticons, they're useful for getting into small places and doing delicate jobs."

She was vaguely aware of her tail waving in excitement as she talked about the project.

"I assume there are measures to stop the VI from getting too advanced?" he asked with a bit of concern, which wasn't unfounded. There was a quarantined city in the south that had been taken over by an out of control robot army. "What tests are they currently undergoing?"

"Taylor is confident in her ability to keep the VI under control but yes, there are plenty of failsafes in place. I could send the design specifications to you if you wish."

He nodded and she quickly connected to Teletraan to send the data.

"As for the testing, at the moment it's just simple stuff. Go here, pick this up and so on. Taylor plans to gradually increase the complexity of the commands over time."

He made a note on one of the dozens of papers on his desk. She could see it was a rough sketch for some new device, so she let him work while she looked over the other projects.

One of them made her frown.

"Colin, what's this?"

She brought the project up on his main screen. He'd titled it the 'manton field generator'.

"Oh, that. It was my finalised idea for an anti-shaker weapon. It created an energy field based on the one given off by the Autobots."

She remembered that project. Four projectors would be placed around the target and create an energy field that would, in theory, prevent Shakers or Strikers from using their powers.

The project file was marked as 'discontinued'.

"Why didn't you build this?"

He sighed. "I did. Or at least, a prototype. It never made it to testing. A Thinker in DC claimed the idea was too risky. He said that with the wide variety of powers, there was no way to predict how they would all react to the device and that there was no way to shield allies from its effect."

Sitting in the reinforced chair he'd built her opposite his desk, she winced at his problem. The risk of friendly fire was always a problem when it came to regulating tinkertech. If it had any chance of hitting friendly targets, then getting it approved became an uphill battle.

Seeing his frustrated expression, she decided to change subjects. He always got a bit… pensive when the personnel reports were released.

"You know, we never did talk about Saint's attack."

"I didn't think there was a need to."

She tried not to let his tone bother her, but something must have shown on her face as Colin pinched the bridge of his nose.
"Sorry, that didn't come out right… You are who you are, and your situation doesn't change that. More importantly, you're my friend. I think that's all that matters."

There was a faint wirr as her systems flushed with heat and cooling fans activated.

"Thank you, Colin. That means a lot to me. I never meant to hide it from you, but I was worried what would happen if word got out. Saint made a habit of using my restrictions against me..." and I was scared you would do the same went unsaid.

"There was one thing I keep meaning to ask you. Saint mentioned a woman. Do you know what he meant?

Sitting back, Dragon stared at the ceiling in thought. "I'm not sure. I think… When Saint first attacked me, he had two people with him, and one of them was a woman. But after the fourth or fifth fight, I stopped seeing her."

Normally, she remembered every fight she'd been in. But Saint's abuse of her restrictions left holes in her memory that scared and infuriated her in equal measure.

"Because of how Saint beat me each time, I normally had to restore from backup, which means that I don't remember most of the fights or what happened... But I think there was a woman at one of those fights. She was badly injured, and by the time I reached her it was already too late. The authorities were never able to identify her body."

Her wings dropped slightly. Had she been important to Saint? Had there been more to him than just the hateful man she'd seen?

Colin opened a drawer, taking out a bottle of whiskey and a glass tumbler. She recognised the mostly full bottle. Hannah had bought it for him two years ago, and she knew he liked a small glass every once in awhile.

"Do you want me to have some Energon sent down?" he offered as he poured himself a drink.

"No, thank you."

Colin began to drink, looking Dragon in the eye after he finished."I want you to know that if I'd known what was happening, if you had ever told me, I would have tried to help you in any way I could."

When he lowered his glass, she reached out and placed a hand on his.

"Colin, you came for me. That's all that matters."

They sat in silence for awhile before Dragon pulled up another one of his projects.

"I've never seen this project before..."

An: Oops, forgot to post this here. I actually posted this on Spacebattles yesterday, but it's still Sunday here so my one chapter a week still holds.

That being said, there probably wont be a chapter next week. (Christmas etc.)
I saw the van roar down the road from my position in the air, and I could hear the tortured scream of its engine as I followed it.

From the rumble of its pistons and the way it sagged low on its suspension while it accelerated, I assumed it had been heavily modified. If it was anything like the last Empire van I encountered, it probably had armor plating, an engine turbocharger and hydraulic gears.

Which made sense, as the van belonged to a group of Empire thugs who'd just robbed a suspected ABB front.

Given the half dozen ABB members fleeing the scene when we arrived, we could probably cross out the 'suspected' part.

I'd barely gotten a shot off when the Empire members had bundled into a van and taken off. Either they were running scared, or someone had told them not to mess with capes.

The van leaned worryingly to the side as it darted through traffic. For a moment, I thought it was going to roll over, but the driver managed to get it back under control.

"We need to stop them before they kill someone!" Vicky said, touching the throat mic she was wearing. We'd been on patrol together when the call had come in.

"I know!" I paused to run some ideas through my head. The van's low suspension would keep it on the main roads since the side streets had too many sharp corners and uneven surfaces.

If they turned left at the next junction, they would be on one of the city's main roads.

"Can you make them turn left?"

"I think so," she called back.

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but at this point I didn't have many other options. We were moving too fast for me to teleport any of my bots in and if the van made it to Empire territory, we risked having to deal with their capes.

With a nod, Vicky went into a dive, pulling level with the van. Just before they reached the junction, she backhanded the vehicle's right side. The armoured metal made a loud clang and dented inwards.

The driver swerved away from her, forcing him to take the left turn.

Flattening my wings, I put on a burst of speed and dove. I was barely ten feet off the ground when I leveled out ahead of the van, brought my Null-Ray online and fired an EMP round into the engine. The Electromagnetic Pulse fried the vehicle's electronics and the engine guttered out.

I jerked sideways while the van began to slow, taking up position on the left while Glory Girl took the right. The driver tried to sideswipe us, but Vicky simply pushed them back on course.

The van was quickly losing speed as we maneuvered ahead of it and placed our hands against the hood, reducing its speed to a much more manageable level. Between Divebomb and my strength-enhancing exoskeleton, I could almost pass for an Alexandria package. The metal frame buckled slightly but their armour reinforcements kept it together.
Rewind snapped a picture of the driver's stunned expression as the van slowed.

Once it reached a walking pace, I let go and flew up to the roof while Vicky hovered to the front centre of the van and continued to slow it down.

On top of the van, I reached behind me and pulled a containment foam grenade from my dimensional pocket. It had taken a lot of effort to reverse this particular piece of Leet's tech, but it was so worth it.

Realising something was going on, the people inside started shooting at me through the thin metal roof. I ignored the bullets that pinged off my shield and punched a hole in the roof. I had a brief view of the gang members inside before I dropped the grenade.

There was some muffled cursing, followed by a loud bang.

I climbed down, landing next to a grinning Glory Girl as she tore off the back doors.

The inside of the van was a gooey mess of money, thugs and containment foam. The two closest criminals retained enough mobility to point their guns at us.

On reflex, I brought my HL shield up while Glory Girl just stood there smirking.

I knew my second shield could easily handle the small caliber rounds as easily as Glory Girl's could, but there was just something unnatural at simply allowing people to shoot me.

When they finally ran out of ammunition, the smarter of the two dropped his gun while the other threw his at Vicky, who simply caught and crushed it.

Lowering my shield, I turned to Glory Girl. "Seriously, why do they throw the empty guns?"

Vicky just shrugged, still smiling. "No idea. One of these days, I'm going to play along and fall down just to see how they react."

I chuckled quietly at the image. While Glory Girl opened the other doors and checked for any useable weapons, I walked away and called dispatch.

"Dispatch, Matrix. I've got five Empire and a van that needs collecting. They're being held in containment foam."

*Right, I'll let them know. Are you two coming back to the rig? Aegis needs to talk to you.* Kid Win was on console duty tonight.

"Yeah, we should be." I cut off the line before I yawned. I didn't need sleep but I could still feel tired. It had been a hectic couple of weeks.

Walking back to the van, I could hear one of the bangers cursing at Glory Girl.

"You fucking nigger loving cunt! When Hookwolf gets hold of you, he's gonna split you in two!"

Glory Girl just rolled her eyes. "I'm invulnerable, moron. Now shut up!" She snapped, destroying the last of the guns. Most were stuck fast in the foam, so she was simply crushing any exposed weapons, barrels or triggers she could find.

The police might complain a bit about that, but it was better than risking them opening fire the moment they were free.

"Pickup should be here in few minutes. Find anything interesting?" I asked.
"No, just drugs, guns, stolen money and the same old insults. Seriously, you guys need to learn new words. How about incarceration? Do you know what that means?" she taunted.

The mouthy thug chose that moment to spit at Glory Girl, hitting the side of her face. Diving forward, I was able to catch her arm before she could pound the idiot into next week.

"Don't!" I warned. "Come on, he's not worth it."

Vicky looked at me and then at the laughing thug. "What about lawsuit? Do you know what that means, bitch?" he taunted.

Glaring at him, Vicky pulled her arm free and floated away from the van. I let out a sigh and followed her.

I suspected Aegis put me and Vicky together because I was one of the few people strong enough - in armour anyway - to make her hesitate. I couldn't really stop her if she wanted to hurt someone, but it was safer for me to try.

Before I could say anything to her, a PRT van rounded the corner. They must have rerouted a nearby patrol for them to get here so quickly.

##

Vicky continued to quietly stew while I quickly gave one of the officers a rundown of events. We were halfway back to the rig before she spoke again.

"You know, I'm really getting sick of this!" she said as she came to a stop and floated upright in the air. "He's the third asshole to try and get a rise out of me in as many weeks, and to make it worse, I'm stuck on permanent babysitting duty with the Wards!"

"You're welcome," I said with all the sarcasm I could muster as I floated level with her. I knew she was just venting, but it still stung a bit to think she had such a low opinion of me.

Vicky must have picked up on it, as she stared at me for a second before pulling her hair with a frustrated growl.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I'm sorry, Matrix. I didn't mean it like that. It's just… I've been more or less doing my own thing for ages, now all of a sudden I can't be trusted to patrol solo."

"Don't worry about it," I said, shaking my head. "But look at it this way, you get to spend time with Gallant."

She snorted, "I wish. Aegis won't let us patrol together and Mom still won't let me go out on a date with Dean."

I forced myself not to laugh at the way she was pouting.

The situation with New Wave was complicated. They had a big family meeting the other week, where they drew up a new, strict timetable. New Wave now had fixed patrol times, mandatory training sessions -Amy was not happy with those- and restrictions had been placed on both Vicky and Amy.

Amy was only allowed to spend a few hours a week at the hospital at most, barring emergencies. She was now scheduled for two evenings a week at the hospital and no weekend work. Lady Photon was apparently worried she was being taken advantage of. The downside of course, was that she had
to attend self defense lessons with the rest of New Wave. She now spent most of her free time either with me or worrying that she wasn't at the hospital. If nothing else, it was nice seeing her smile more.

Vicky, however, wasn't allowed to do anything alone any more. If she wanted to patrol, she needed to either be with another member of New Wave, the Wards or even me and Dragon.

Lady Photon had approached Dragon and the PRT to set up joint patrols between them and New Wave. Officially, New Wave was conducting joint patrols to further cooperation between the groups. Unofficially, this was Vicky's punishment for screwing up.

Honestly, with the way things were in the city at the moment, we were glad for the help.

"I get it, but they have a point. You nearly killed Lightshow." I hated playing devil's advocate, but Vicky did need to learn.

"I know that!" she snapped before catching herself. "Sorry… And I know I screwed up and I'm trying to do better but..." she sighed. "It's not just the patrols. I hear them whispering about me at school. Half of them think I'm going to go Carrie, even people who've known me for years, and Mom won't even let me spend time with Dean…"

She sighed in frustration again and I looked down at the city below us. We were quite high up and the city looked peaceful, I could almost forget the constant violence of the past week or so.

There was nearly a dozen red flags on my display showing different problems all over the place. The Empire and ABB were really going at it. I could see a plume of smoke in the distance, close to where the Empire/ABB border was last time anyone had checked. Rewind helpfully flagged it as a house fire and Teletraan confirmed that firefighters were already on scene and had everything under control.

"Do you want to get some ice cream or something?" I asked, hoping to distract us both.

Vicky laughed, "No, I've eaten enough of that this week… Come on, we better get back."

Nodding, I turned and we continued on towards the rig.

We were just landing on the roof when Vicky spoke again. "Oh, Taylor? Sorry for ranting back there, but thanks."

"Don't worry about it."

##

Once I was inside, I called Kid Win to let him know we were back.

*Okay, I'll sign you in. Aegis got called into a meeting with Miss Militia. He said he'll meet you in the rec room in half an hour.*

"Great, just enough time for a shower," I replied. I'd barely had time to clean my armour this week; if I'd still needed sleep I'd never get anything done.

Vicky gave me a saucy grin. "Well, I'm going to go find Dean. See you later!" With that, she floated down the corridor, faster than a walk but not quite a run.

I needed to pass through the rec room to reach my assigned quarters. I didn't spend much time there but I used it to store a couple of changes of clothes, a spare set of glasses and my shower bag.
The TV was on as I passed through. A brief image of me and Vicky caught my attention, so I turned to watch.

"There was more violence in the streets today as the gang war between the Empire Eighty-Eight and the Azn Bad Boys entered its second week. Official sources assure us they have the situation well in hand, but critics claim that the police and PRT forces are struggling. Even the local Wards have been called in to support the beleaguered forces. We're getting reports that a recent fight between the gangs, which left several dead, was halted by the arrival of Matrix and Glory Girl. Their intervention resulted in a dramatic high speed chase through the city."

As she spoke, shaky phone camera footage of me and Vicky pushing that van to a stop played on screen.

The screen then switched to the co-host.

"The recent violence started with an ABB drive-by shooting that left twenty people injured and five dead. Among the injured was Kayden Anders, ex-wife of Max Anders, CEO of Medhall. Less than twenty-four hours later, the Empire retaliated with another drive-by on a busy Chinese restaurant that was believed to be a front for the ABB.

"Mr Anders has not been available for comment, but Miss Anders was apparently moved to a private medical facility at his request."

They showed a photo of Kayden Anders; she had a pretty face with brown hair and eyes. It was an older photo, taken at some event or other, if her dress was anything to go by.

Shaking my head, I turned and left the room. Five people had been killed and all the media cared about was the ex-wife of some rich guy.

##

Stepping into the shower, I tapped the earpiece I was wearing.

"Hey Jack, any updates?" Jack didn't like to bother me with updates while I was on patrol and I still needed to talk with Aegis after my shower, so I figured I would talk to him now. Besides, it was surprising how many ideas I came up with while in the shower or bath.

*Hey Taylor!* he called back, cheery as ever. *We figured out what was wrong with the alloy you designed.*

"Really? What was it?"

*Turns out, it was the supplier. The materials we asked for were supposed to be at least 60% pure, but what they sent was 50% on average. So some batches were 60% while others were only 40%. That's what caused the crystallisation. Dragon is getting more from a different supplier and if all goes well, it should be here in a day or two.*

I let the water run over me, considering how long it would take to refine, test and assemble the new materials. It was going to be another week before my new power armour was finished.

I'd planned to have it finished by now, but I'd specified a rather finicky alloy for the armour. It was lightweight, extremely strong and could handle the stress of transformation. Unfortunately, the aforementioned crystallization issue resulted in a metal that shattered on impact.

"Anything else?"
Yeah, the Sentinel project got the go-ahead, Dragon is manufacturing the drones as we speak. She did mention needing to build an energon converter at her base, so I let her have the mark two design. It should be ready by the end of the week. OH! Chromedome wanted to speak to you about Wyvern, he said it was urgent. And the first batch of shield units will be delivered to the PRT headquarters later this week. And on a related note, you just became the richest Ward on record.*

"W-what!" I said, sucking in water from the shower and choking.

"Yeah, preorders just opened up on the Myoelectric Prosthesis you and Dragon designed. Between that and your share of the toy sales, which are flying off the shelf by the way, your trust fund just set a new record."

"B-but they only just went on sale!" I protested. "And Dragon said she wasn't making a profit from the prosthetics!"

*She's not. The profit from the limbs is being split two ways. The majority of it is being fed back into one of the many charities that help less privileged people purchase the limbs, while the rest goes to you. Not to mention the new plastics we developed for the project are now being used for standard prosthetics.*

I wasn't sure what to say, I knew Dragon had patented everything we made, and it made sense to market as much of the tech as possible, but did it really add up to that much money?

What would I even do with it all? Money had stopped being an issue weeks ago. Dad had resisted, but Dragon and I had eventually talked him into accepting some of the money my toys made, which was already a lot.

The toys of my bots were really popular, especially when it was expanded to include the concept designs of bots I would build once I had the time.

Still, there was no point worrying about it. I trusted Dragon and it was nice to know I didn't need to worry about a college fund any time soon.

##

By the time I finished my shower and got dressed, Aegis was already waiting for me in the rec room. It was nearing the end of the day and patrols were winding down, so the Wards were slowly trickling back in.

Vicky was sitting with Dean on one of the couches. They weren't quite making out, but that might just be because Vista was sitting nearby giving Vicky evil looks.

"Sorry, I had a bit of… unexpected news." The Wards knew I had a good deal with Dragon, but it didn't feel right to brag about it.

"That's okay," Aegis - Carlos - said as he pulled his mask off. The final tour group of the day had already been through, so he didn't need to keep it on.

"I need to ask a favor. The BBPD have asked if we could send a Ward to keep an eye on a group of people doing community service Saturday, and with everything that's been going on…"

He sighed loudly, running a hand through his hair. "I screwed up. I normally assign this sort of job on rotation, which made it your turn, but I forgot you're not actually a Ward. So I put your name down without thinking and nobody realised until Miss Militia caught it…"
He trailed off, giving me a helpless look.

"Okay? So where do I come in?" I asked, not quite seeing his point.

"Well… because you work for Dragon, I'm supposed to ask you before giving you that kinda job. You can refuse, but we'd need to send someone else, and right now I don't know how to make the rotations fit. The Youth Guard rep is already pitching a fit about all the fighting this week and if I assign someone a double shift she's going to flip."

"Youth Guard rep?" Vicky asked from the couch.

A shudder went through the collected Wards.

"It's a new thing," Dean explained. "There was an… incident with the Texas Wards-"

Vista cut him off with a snort while Dennis, who had walked in during Carlos's explanation, laughed.

"What he means is a Ward was caught banging a Protectorate cape," Dennis said with a laugh.

Without even standing up, a blushing Missy slapped Dennis up the back of the head while Vicky gave Dean a look somewhere between scandalised and amused.

"How did I not know about that?!" Vicky said. "That sorta thing would be all over the news!"

Carlos cleared his throat. "The PRT managed to kept things quiet. It helped that they're only a few years apart in age. The problem is, he's still legally a minor."

Vicky leaned back in her chair. "Well depending on the age difference that's not really a big deal… unless… Oh! If she's in the Protectorate, that makes her one of his direct superiors, which makes it a possible abuse of power… what?"

Missy and Dennis were giving Vicky rather shocked looks and even Dean looked a little surprised and her sudden understanding of the law.

"I've been thinking of studying law," Vicky said, rolling her eyes and probably resisting the urge to hit someone.

Dean shook his head. "Anyway, Youth Guard got involved and now any city with Wards stationed in it has to have a Youth Guard representative."

"The old cow tried to have me taken off duty," Vista muttered darkly. The rep had argued Missy was too young despite being one of the most experienced Wards. Director Piggot forced her to back down in the end, but she made it clear she was watching us.

The rep had already inspected the rig and anything else she wanted to stick her nose into. She'd tried snooping through my workshop, but Wheeljack had locked her out, telling her she needed Dragon's permission to enter. In the end, Miss Militia had been forced to put her foot down when the woman had demanded to know the civilian identities of all the Wards.

"Okay, so you need me to agree to watch some people work for a couple of hours?" I clarified. Truthfully, I'd rather not. There were better things I could be doing after all, but Mrs. Doubtfire, as Dennis called her, had been giving everyone a hard time.

"Don't worry, I'll do it," I said. "But why did the BBPD ask for a Ward anyway?"
Relieved, Carlos shrugged, "They do it every now and then. I think it's supposed to be motivational. To be honest, I'd rather you be the one to do it anyway, Taylor. If anything kicks off, you'll have the Autobots to back you up."

"Hey, is it alright if I tag along?" Vicky asked.

"Well, I can't actually ask you, but nothing's stopping you from turning up," Carlos admitted.

"Cool. I guess I'll see you there?" she asked me.

"Yeah, company would be nice." Then afterwards, I could go meet up with Amy.

With that taken care of, the 'meeting' slowly broke up. I still needed to stop by my workshop so before I left, I made sure to get the time and place from Carlos.

I had barely left the rec room when the alarms sounded and Miss Militia came through the other door at a run.

AN: No, it's not an Endbringer.

Aaand I'm back. I originally planned to have this posted last week but I didn't get it finished till late Sunday night.
A disused two story parking garage surrounded by worn down apartment buildings would not be his first choice for a meeting place. But it was squarely in neutral territory and the apartments that flanked it on three sides would let both sides set up watchers, without the need for subterfuge.

*Besides, the dirty, squalid conditions would put Lung and his rabble at ease.*

Of course, if he listened to some of the more vocal members of his organisation, this meeting wouldn't be happening at all. He'd be crushing the savages for their actions. Good, innocent people had been hurt by their crass behavior.

Letting out a breath, he forced himself to calm back down. While the idea of using force certainly had merit, this was not the time.

When he heard Kayden had been injured, he'd moved quickly to secure her. Kayden's powers allowed her to live on nothing but sunlight and even included a limited regenerative ability. He couldn't risk her abnormal healing being discovered, so he had moved her to a private location, ordered Othala to gift her with regeneration, and placed her in a bright, sunny room.

Her daughter had been safely at home with his son while she'd been shopping.

If there had been one upside to the attack, it was that Purity was once again willing to serve him. Her loyalty had been a blessing in their youth, and he now more than ever need it again.

Through the last few months, his forces had grown unruly. The common rank and file going off and causing trouble without his approval or permission. Even the capes under his command were becoming restless.

There was no single incident, just lots of little ones adding up to one conclusion. Someone was subverting his forces.

Lung obviously must have noticed the same thing, or he would never have agreed to this meeting.

*ABB van spotted entering the parking garage* Viktor's voice filled his ear. He was posted in one of the nearby appartments, keeping watch over anyone who came or went. On the roof of the same apartment were Krieg and nearly a dozen armed men, while his more unstable followers had been sent on errands elsewhere around the city.

He expected Lung to honor the parley, but that didn't mean he trusted the man.

Crusader opened the door of the unmarked car and Kaiser climbed out. Summoning his armour, the metal blades grew and shaped themselves around his body with practiced ease.

He had always appreciated the aesthetics - the image - of a knight. A warrior ethos, knightly piety, and courtly manners all conspired to establish a notion of honour and nobility which was useful for his public image.

To the people in his lands, he was their stalwart protector, shielding them from the unwashed masses. To his enemies, he would be the sword that showed them their rightful place.

There was movement on the roof of the building opposite. Viktor confirmed it was Lung's men getting into position.
The van carrying Lung reached the roof and several armed men climbed out, followed by Lung himself.

Lung was taller than most of his people, whether that was natural or an effect of his power was unknown. His torso was bare, showing the tattoos that covered his upper body, and an ornate mask covered his face.

*At least he had the courtesy to be on time.*

"Good evening, Lung," Kaiser said, inclining his head. You had to respect a power like his, even if you didn't like him.

"Kaiser," Lung rumbled, his accent as thick as ever.

That was probably all the courtesy the Asian mongrel was capable of providing. The Aryan leader continued, "I suspect we're both here for the same reason. Certain actions-"

"Ambush! It's a trap!" someone screamed out from the darkness, cutting Kaiser off. He shared a brief look with Lung, who looked just as confused when someone started shooting.

The shots rained down on the roof, three of them catching Lung in the chest and causing him to stagger. His men broke and ran for the van.

In that moment, Kaiser made a mistake he would never forgive himself for. He turned his back on Lung, trying to spot the attacker, only for gunfire to hit him in the back.

He was unhurt, his armour easily deflecting the bullets, but next to him Crusader's ghosts appeared, surging forward.

That was when Lung exploded.

###

(Taylor)

I had to sprint through the rig to reach my workshop and quickly pull on my gear. Jack had thankfully intercepted the alert and made sure everything was ready for me.

Sliding to a stop behind a holographic screen, I pulled off my clothes and climbed into my bodysuit.

"I don't suppose I can convince you to stay here where it's safe?" Jack asked without much hope.

"No," I said bluntly. "Is divebomb still good to go?"

"Yeah," Jack responded with a sigh as I started clipping my armour in place, "I topped up his tanks while you were in the shower."

"Thanks, you're a lifesaver Jack. Did you finish the weapons I asked for? I'm going to need support as soon as I get there."

He nodded and said they were already in my storage unit as I ran into the hangar next to my workshop, shouting my thanks.

Everyone was meeting on the roof, but it would take too long and be too difficult to run back through the rig with Divebomb strapped to my back. Instead, I was taking the 'express route'.

The moment Divebomb was locked into place, I opened the hangar door and flew out and up. When I reached the roof, the dropship was already landing.

The Wards who had been sitting in the rec room minutes ago were all there and Vicky was off to one side, shouting something on the phone.

It was one of Dragon's older designs, she'd sold it to the PRT years ago. It was more or less a flying box crossed with a helicopter, with a cockpit at the front and some wings with thrusters on the sides. What it lacked in looks, it more than up for in armour plating.

The side slid open and the Wards began clambering in

"Kid Win, Matrix; I know you can keep up, so I want you and Glory Girl to fly alongside us," Miss Militia ordered.

Before she could climb on board, Vicky ran over to her. "Mom and the others are on their way. They'll meet us there! Amy was at a nearby hospital, they're on standby for wounded."

Miss Militia nodded and climbed aboard.

The three of us let the dropship get underway before we followed along.

Flying too close to the dropship was difficult because of the wash from its jets, so we flew slightly to the side. In the distance I could see a plume of smoke already starting to rise.

Despite his reputation, Lung didn't really fight that much. He didn't need too. Most fights against him ended quickly, usually with his opponents dead or retreating. This meant he never really reached the higher levels of his power.

On the few occasions he did fight seriously, the damage to the surrounding area was catastrophic.

The idea of intentionally flying towards him wasn't exactly comforting.

*Not that I'm complaining or anything,* Clockblocker said on the radio, *but why can't we just let them fight it out?*

It was a common tactic when the more powerful capes went at it. Let them fight it out, keep people out of the way, then arrest everyone afterwards.

*We don't have a choice, the fight is in the middle of Paradise Rise,* Miss Militia replied.

Paradise Rise had been an urban development project from years ago. In an attempt to rejuvenate an area of the city, three high end apartment buildings were commissioned. The buildings were to be linked together, along with a small mall and greenery areas all in the same 'block'.

The developers made a big deal over how great it would be, but Dad had fumed at how much money the city had fronted on the project. The costs were supposed to be split between the city and the future tenants. But prices had been sky high and a single small apartment sold for ridiculous amounts of money.

Too much money as it turned out. By the time the apartments were completed, only a third of them had been sold or rented out. As a result, the Mall was scrapped, with construction never even starting, and the 'greenery' was a small patch of grass that turned to mush every time it rained.

Eventually, the developer went bankrupt and was forced to sell the the complex. It changed hands a
few time and was now just another rundown street of apartments in the heart of the city, only the
name stuck. The only good thing about it was it's location. The building was in a small band that was
considered neutral territory.

Up ahead, the plume of smoke was growing bigger and Rewind was picking up chatter between the
emergency services.

*I want everyone to remember,* Miss Militia said, *you are NOT to engage Lung. When we arrive,
I want you to focus on getting people out the line of fire. If you see Lung, I want you to fall back,
understand?* Her tone of voice made it clear, she was not messing about.

There was a chorus of yeses over the radio, including my own. I hated to admit I was relieved to hear
I could avoid Lung.

###

Not able to risk getting us too close, the dropship hovered over a building further down the road. The
moment it was close enough, the side door opened and the Wards jumped out. There was a blue
flash as Laserbeak and Waspinator teleported into the area.

"Remember what I said," she shouted, "stay clear of Lung and get people away from here!" She
called as the dropship continued on towards the fight.

"You heard her!" Aegis shouted, "Matrix, can you tell me what's happening?"

With a command, I sent the two flyers over the fighting, taking care that both stayed high. While they
flew, I projected an image on a nearby wall.

The three apartment buildings were built around a central multi-story parking garage, the top of
which was a forest of blades. My bots were high enough to see people moving between them.

Zooming in, I could see Crusader's ghosts walking unharmed through the forest, swarming anyone in
ABB colours. Kaiser was there as well, controlling the blades with the movement of his arms. In the
middle of it all was a steel box made from overlapping blades.

From the way it was starting to glow with heat, I could guess who was inside.

Below, the street was a war zone.

Cars were blocking the road and people in gang colours were running between them firing at each
other. As we watched, a man in Empire colours ran forward, ignoring the bullets slamming into him.
Reaching a car the ABB were using as cover, he reached underneath and began to lift.

The car slowly lifted onto two wheels before rolling over, forcing the gang members behind it to run.
I cut the feed as they were gunned down by rival gang members.

The Wards all spoke at once.

"Fuck!"

"Was that?"

"They still have surge?"

"Alright!" Aegis called, "Kid Win, Matrix, Glory Girl; Can you three reach the other end of the
road? Good, Matrix, you'll be in charge. We'll move up from here and try to pin them in between us.
It looks like some of them have tinker drugs, so keep your eyes open. Remember, protecting civilians is your top priority."

With that, we split up. Before I left, I teleported Warpath in to support Aegis and the others.

##

Flying high and fast, most of the people below never noticed us. The knowledge that Lung was nearby still scared me, but now I knew what I was doing, I had something I could focus on.

"We need to keep this mess contained. Vick- Glory Girl, see those cars, can you move them? I want you to set up a roadblock." I said pointing at some cars that had been abandoned by the road.

"On it!" Glory girl called. Diving down, she braced herself against the side of the first car and pushed. Turning both cars sideways, she pushed them nose to nose to form a small blockade.

While she was doing that, Kid Win and I started taking pot shots at the fighters below. Rewind was using my armour's sensors to scan for civilians, but it looked like the area was already clear. Anyone who lived in Brockton Bay learned to get out of sight when a fight broke out. Those who didn't tended not to live long.

Just as she was pushing the last car into position, Armsmaster come into view on his motorbike.

Swerving through the gap between the cars, he barely slowed down. He continued to push forwards, weaving between the fighters and obstacles. His goal was obviously the multistory parking garage. Just as he vanished out of sight, Dragon flew overhead, heading for the same place.

I felt a brief burst of reassurance from her as she flew overhead. We had never really spoken about my connection to her spark, but I was glad it was there. I could see through Laserbeak as she went into a dive and tried to tackle Lung as he emerged from his, now molten, metal coffin.

Turning my attention back to the fight, I had the Protectobots teleport in behind the new roadblock.

Hotspot had them form Defensor. Pulling his new rifle out of its D-storage, the large bot waded into the fight. Almost immediately he came under fire, but most of the fighters were only armed with small caliber weapons that could barely scratch him.

Keeping my HL-shield raised, I took a couple of shots at anyone who tried running away from him.

With a small flash, Wheeljack appeared on a nearby rooftop. He was carrying his shoulder mounted containment foam launcher.

As he started to shoot down at the gang members, I pulled a semi-automatic grenade launcher out of my own storage. It was a simple thing, almost like a scaled up revolver.

"Vicky! How's your aim?" I called and threw it towards her. "Containment foam grenades with impact triggers. Aim for their feet or the walls next to them."

Catching it, Glory Girl broke into a wide grin and started firing at the people below us.

Realising what we were trying to do, Kid Win dropped behind the barricade and holstered his pistols. There was a flash and a large rifle appeared in his hands. A number of small modules appeared in his hand and he quickly clamped them onto the rifle, anything he discarded was immediately teleported away.
With the three of us moving forward, raining containment foam and stunners from above while Defensor picked off anyone who tried to seek cover, we slowly started to push the gangs back.

The now besieged criminals quickly changed targets. Instead of shooting each other, they were focused entirely on us, but nothing they had with them was strong enough to get through our shields.

I could see the other Wards in the distance. Vista was tangling anybody who tried to run in a maze of warped spaces, while Aegis and Gallant dealt with anyone they could reach. I could see the occasional glimpse of Clockblocker as he darted out of cover to tag the few people who got past Vista.

On the roof, things were starting to change. Lung was over ten feet tall and tearing his way through the forest of blades as he battled Dragon and Armsmaster. Dragon was in robot mode, her left arm in its gun form while Armsmaster tried to keep him occupied.

It was surprising how fast he was. Every time Lung tried to hit him, Armsmaster would already be somewhere else.

I couldn't see Kaiser, and I couldn't spare the time to look for him.

I was just starting to think we were winning when a horde of ghosts flooded out of the multistory garage. They were dressed in armour and carrying swords and spears.

Above them, Rune flew out of the second floor riding on a car she was lifting with her telekinesis. Spotting us, she sent another car flying in our direction. Kid Win and I moved, flying over and under the car. Vicky meanwhile dropped her launcher and attempted to catch the thing. It hit her with the pop of crushed metal and pushed her backwards into a nearby building. I could hear her muffled swearing over the mic she was wearing.

Kid Win dropped his rifle, letting it teleport away automatically, and switch back to his pistols. Rune used the car she was riding to shield herself, ripping the roof off as a platform and using the rest as a shield.

A wave of her other hand sent a small motorbike homing in on me, forcing me to continuously dodge rather than return fire.

"Waspinator Terrorizzare!" Flying right into Rune's face, Waspinator fired a stream of pepper spray at the Empire cape. It was an upgrade I fitted him with last week, when it became clear he refused to just sit back and watch me fight.

Screaming, Rune frantically swatted at the bot as she lost control of her powers. The motorbike trying to hit me and the car pinning Vicky dropped out of the sky while the piece of metal Rune was standing on dropped out from under her, sending her plummeting several stories. I made to dive after her, but Kid Win got there first.

He managed to catch her before they hit and put her gently on the ground near the other Wards before zip tying her hands behind her back.

Elsewhere, Defensor was holding off Crusader's ghosts. Crusader had the power to make duplicates of himself. From what I knew, they could pass through inorganic objects, but not organic ones. It seemed the Autobots registered as alive to Crusader's power as well.

Their weapons - swords and spears - were doing little to no damage to Defensor, but he was able to knock them around with relative ease.
In the distance, I could see Clockblocker spraying a frozen Alabaster with containment foam. Fighting with Rune had forced us closer to the ground, so I landed while a pissed off Glory Girl landed next to me.

Above us, the top floor of the multistory garage exploded. A dark shape was thrown clear of the building, and when it crashed to the ground I realised it was Lung.

He was nearly ten feet tall and continuing to grow. As he climbed to his feet, I could see his injuries already healing. His body was almost entirely animal in appearance and he was walking on all fours. There were two bloody stumps where his wings should have been.

Around me, everyone was running to get clear. Glory Girl grabbed my arm and took off, pulling us both into the air until Divebomb took over. Those gang members who could still move, ran.

Lung was barely on his feet when Dragon landed on him, forcing him back down. She was in her beast mode and landed on his back. They rolled over as the two of fought for dominance. She tried to sink her teeth into his neck and he retaliated by tearing off one of her wings.

I flinched at the sound. I couldn't really feel her pain, but I knew it had hurt and that she was definitely angry. Gunshots rang out as Miss Militia hit Lung with increasingly large rifle rounds from her position on one of the apartment roofs.

Lung continued to wrestle with Dragon. Her Autobot body was tough and strong, but he was beating her through sheer size and weight. Eventually he managed to pin the now smaller dragon. Opening his mouth, he tried attacking her throat.

With a surge of anger, I switched my Null-Ray to it's lethal setting. I'd never used it on a person, but I'd tested it enough to know how much damage it would do, and doubted it would do Lung any lasting harm. Charging the shot, I disabled the safeties and pushed it beyond it's normal limits.

Before my weapon could destroy itself, I opened fire.

The shot had enough force to push me backwards slightly in the air and hit Lung with the force of a speeding train. The blast punched clean through him, exposing the bone and muscle under his silver skin.

Lung roared in pain, his head snapping up and swiveling to face me. Using the distraction, Dragon fired an energy blast from her mouth, scorching Lung and knocking him off her. Lung was slow getting back to his feet, and I considered trying for another shot.

*All Wards, grab whoever you can and fall back immediately!* Miss Militia barked over the radio. I wanted to argue, but there really was nothing else I could do.

Glory Girl and I dove down quickly to grab some thugs who were out cold and carried them off as we joined the other Wards.

##

The fall back position was a large rooftop up the road where the dropship was sitting.

In the distance, I could still see Dragon still fighting with Lung. Armsmaster had joined her again, along with most of the Protectorate.

*Taylor, are you carrying any of those 'gravity disks you created?* Dragon asked. The calmness of her voice made me realise I was talking to the copy of her that was still in Canada.
"Yeah, why?" I said.

Dragon didn't answer, instead she transmitted the schematics for the dropship and it's engines. Catching on to her plan, I pulled one of the devices out of my storage.

It was a small frisbee like thing, a bit bigger than my hand. I also pulled out a small containment foam sprayer. It was only about the size of a can of spray paint, but it was usually enough to stick someone's hands together.

I passed them both to Vicky as I explained, "When I give the word, can you stick this on Lung? it doesn't matter where."

"Yeah, but why?"

"No time, just be ready," I shouted as I flew over to the dropship, waving for Kid Win to follow me.

Lung was nearing fifteen feet long and Dragon was pushing well beyond her limits.

The only reason he hadn't destroyed her yet was because his power appeared to prioritise healing damage. He actually stopped growing while his power was working on his injuries.

The hole Taylor had blasted in his side was still healing and it was definitely slowing him down. Dodging to the side, she raked her claws through the still open wound and ducked under his retaliatory strike.

Armsmaster had been forced to pull back. It just wasn't possible for anyone who wasn't fireproof to getting close to Lung at this point. Instead, he had given her access to his suit's sensors and predictive suite. It was a bit disorientating, but she was using Armsmaster's program to predict Lung's movements.

A car sailed through the air, probably Assault, slamming into Lung's head before a blast from Duantless's spear caused it to explode.

She knew her other self was planning something, she just wished she'd hurry up.

*Stand clear!* the other her warned.

Glory Girl dove in at top speed and slapped something against Lung's side. Almost immediately, a small anti-grav field surrounded him, drastically reducing his weight. It wasn't enough to lift him off the ground, but it didn't need to.

Charging forward, Dragon barely had time to sink her claws and teeth into Lung's hide and lift. The weight reduction helped, but it was still hard to find leverage.

Lung was only just off the ground when the Protectorate dropship slammed into him at near full speed. Small grappling hooks fired from the front into his flesh and anchored him to the ship.

Dragon ducked as the dropship propelled itself and Lung skywards as it continued to accelerate.

Tapping into the onboard computer, she could see the multitude of warning messages. Taylor and Kid Win had managed to overload the engines, upping the top speed.

It took barely 60 seconds to carry Lung out over the bay. Dragon shifted painfully back to robot
mode and smirked as she triggered the ship's self destruct. Taylor's gravity disc was destroyed in the explosion and Lung hit the water like a brick, his newly regenerated wings shredded by the destroyed aircraft's shrapnel.

It wouldn't kill him, but in the absence of anyone to fight, he should power down by the time he reached the shore… again.

##

Seeing the explosion in the distance, Clock turned to me. "Okay, that was crazy."

I shrugged, "Sometimes, crazy works."

Below us, the emergency services were starting to arrive. Police in riot gear and PRT officers were gathering up the fallen and I caught a brief glimpse of Panacea's white costume as she climbed out of an ambulance.

AN: to make up for missing last week, I decided to do a double post this week.
It was nearly midday, and I was jogging towards Arcadia with Ravage and Steeljaw following along beside me. Up in the air, Windblade was circling around us, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious.

It probably wasn't necessary, but it was thoughtful of her.

After the big Empire/ABB fight ended last night, we had been forced to wait for a PRT van to collect us and take us all back to the rig. Clockblocker had been laughing and joking most of the way back about me 'blowing up our ride'.

Gallant had tried to stop him, worried about upsetting me, but I'd promptly stuck my tongue out at him. After everything that happened, I needed to laugh. It helped relieve the tension. By the time we made it to the Rig, most of the Wards were joining in.

After that came the paperwork. Everything we did, said and saw had to be written down and submitted to the director. I'd included video footage from myself and the Autobots out of habit.

By the time I finished, it was so late it was almost early.

Because of that, Miss Militia told us we could skip school today if we wanted. Which would have been great, except I needed to talk to one of my teachers. He had some problems with the homework I'd submitted and wanted to talk to me about it.

I probably could have rescheduled, but I wanted to get it over with. Besides, Miss Militia made it clear that she didn't want to see any of us around the rig until this evening at the earliest.

I was just considering sending Windblade home when I rounded the next corner and thought better of it. Further up the road, a girl with short spiky hair dressed in ABB colours gave me a dirty look before stepping out of the way.

She glared at me as I got close and I made sure to keep an eye on her in return. Steeljaw made sure to growl as he passed her. I didn't quite know where the sound came from. It was almost organic and close enough to a real lion's, with an electronic flanging that could be pretty terrifying when he wanted to be.

The last person he roared at in the dark needed clean pants.

She wasn't the only gang member I passed. The fight had been all over the morning news, with conflicting reports over who started the fight and why. In response, gang members were walking around in their colours, trying to be seen in some attempt at solidarity.

Still, I doubted anyone would dare pull anything. The news had made it clear that the gangs had started the fight, but the PRT had finished it. Someone had even managed to get footage of Lung being rammed by the dropship. Animated gifs and screenshots of it were quickly becoming a meme on PHO.

Still, it wasn't all doom and gloom. Gang members weren't the only people on the streets. An old woman stopped me to make sure I was alright after last night and a couple of small kids with their mother asked for my autograph at a crosswalk.
Seeing how their faces lit up when I let them pet Steeljaw helped me ignore that ABB girl. The gangs were a problem I intended to deal with eventually, but for now I'd settle for doing what I could.

##

I reached Arcadia just as lunch was starting. I'd planned to meet with the teacher and then attend my afternoon classes. I figured he would be eating his own lunch and I didn't want to bother him, so I decided to stop by the cafeteria and grab myself something to eat first.

Leaving my bots at the gates, I walked to the cafeteria, standing at the queue I looked around and was surprised to see Vicky and Amy were already sitting at a table. It was kinda hard to miss Vicky, she tended to be the centre of attention no matter where she was. Soon enough, she glanced around and spotted me, waving me over.

I wasn't even halfway there when a guy stepped in my way. He was big, a wall of muscle with dark hair. His face was kinda plain but he had a nice smile.

"Hey… You're Matrix right?" he started, an easy smile on his face.

I felt my stomach drop.

"Some friend and me were planning to go see a game this weekend," he continued while I stared at him like a deer caught in headlights. "So, I was wondering if you were free this Saturday."

I tried to keep my face calm. It wasn't like he was asking me out in front of the whole school or that he didn't bother using my real name.

Oh wait! He was and he did.

What was I supposed to do in a situation like this? I'd never been asked out by anybody in Winslow, and even now I kept mostly to myself. My circle of friends was limited either to my bots or other capes.

"I'm sorry, but I'm busy this weekend," I said, trying to keep my voice level and ignoring everyone looking at us. Looking quickly past him, I could see Vicky struggling not laugh, while Amy was glaring daggers at his back.

"That's a shame," he said with a shrug, and what he probably thought was a charming smile. "What about after school, then?"

"I'm sorry, but I really don't have much free time these days. I'm sure you understand." *Take a fucking hint!*

I tried to slip into that same calm I had when fighting, but between the blush on my face and the crowd of students watching us, I just couldn't make it work.

Finally, looking a bit put out, he gave up. "Alright, some other time maybe?"

"Yeah… Maybe." *Never.* Trying to smile politely, I edged around him and forced myself to walk calmly towards the table.

The moment I sat down, I buried my face in my hands. "Fuck my life!"

Opposite me, Vicky lost her battle and broke down giggling.

"Vicky! That's not nice," Amy said, scowling at her as she swapped places with one of Vicky's
friends so she could put a hand on my back.

"I-I'm sorry," Vicky said between giggles, "but… Oh god, your face!"

There was movement on my other side and I saw Lori sit down next to me and give me a sympathetic look.

I tried to glare at Vicky, but that simply let me see the message from Rewind on my glasses.

"Oh god," I groaned and tried to bury my face again.

"What's wrong?" Amy asked.

"Rewind just told me people were recording that."

"Ouch, sorry about that. That's the price of fame?" This time, Vicky looked genuinely sympathetic. "For what it's worth, you handled it well and I'm sure it will all blow over quickly."

"Really?"

"Sure."

I had to assume Vicky was talking from experience. All of New Wave were local celebrities, so they probably had to deal with this at some point.

"How could you turn him down though?" Stacy, one of Vicky's friends, asked.

"Really not my type," I mumbled.

"Oh come on," Tiff, another of Vicky's friends, pressed, "Tall, dark and muscular. What's not to like?"

I refused to look back at him, "Muscle is one thing, but he's built like a cartoon character."

"Taylor's right," Lori said. "A bit of muscle is nice, but It's kinda gross when they go over the top."

"Plus he's a member of the Empire," Amy said, shooting him another glare.

"What! How do you know?" Stacy said, sitting forward in her chair. Vicky looked past me and frowned while Tiff just looked curious.

Amy shrugged, "I think I healed him once."

"Oh… Well there goes that fantasy," Stacy mumbled, slumping down in her chair.

Looking to change the subject, I focused on Amy.

"I'm surprised you're here today. You were still at it when we left."

Amy shrugged. The bags under her eyes weren't as dark as I'd seen them in the past, so she must have gotten some sleep.

"I wasn't there for long. I made sure no one was in any danger, then went back to the hospital. Vicky picked me up about an hour later."

Huh. I knew Vicky had left the rig after giving a statement. She must have picked Amy up on the way home. I suppose being independent meant they didn't have to worry so much about paperwork.
Actually... "What happened to New Wave anyway?" I asked quietly.

When we'd left the rig, Vicky said New Wave would meet us there. But Vicky and Amy were the only two I'd seen show up.

Normally, I wouldn't discuss things like this in public, but Vicky more or less told Tiff and Stacy everything anyway. She never told them identities or anything really important, but she had no problem discussing a fight.

"You didn't hear? There was a zombie outbreak on 3rd last night."

I had just been about to take a drink and her nonchalance almost made me choke. "What?"

"Uber and Leet," Amy said blandly.

"Wait, Lung goes nuts and those two idiots decide to stage something?" Tiff said.

"Wasn't just them," Lori said. "PHO said the Undersiders attacked a jewelry store last night as well."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. While I appreciated the change of subject, I wasn't sure if this was a better one.

"I'm surprised Uber showed up," Lori said. "Didn't he get badly hurt last time?"

That's… huh, she was right. "Yeah, Defensor crushed his hand. That should take weeks to heal, right?"

I turned to Amy who made a so-so gesture. "I could probably fix it in a couple of minutes. But left alone? He's looking at months to heal the bones, possibly multiple surgeries to complete nerve and tendon repairs. It all depends on how bad it was."

"Well, mom said they never saw either of them," Vicky said. "Just some kinda solid holograms that vanished if you hit them hard enough. They had the video for sale on their site this morning. Looks like they were selling it cheap."

I'd have to look into that later. "If they were suddenly cutting prices, does that mean they need money for something?" I was thinking out loud so I didn't expect Amy's reply.

"Probably. If Uber's hand is really messed up, they might need money to get it looked at. Villains don't really get health care after all."

It surprised me how little Amy seemed to care. She always worried about helping people, yet when it came to criminals she was surprisingly cold.

Though, to tell the truth, I wasn't that shaken up about it myself. What happened to Uber was… unfortunate, but he brought it on himself.

"Oh! Taylor, have you spoken to Aunt Sarah yet?" Vicky asked. "She wanted to ask about commissioning some gear for Amy."

Aunt Sarah? It took me a moment to connect the name. Sarah Pelham, leader of New Wave. "You mean Lady Photon?"

"Yeah. She thought Amy could do with a weapon or something."

I looked at Amy, who was blushing. "I think I can do that. Can you stop by the rig after school? You
can look over some stuff and I can finally show you my workshop."

Vicky looked to Amy who nodded. "Sure. We'll meet you by the gates?"

The conversation broke up a bit at that point, with Vicky and her friends talking about something fashion related and me, Amy and Lori discussing a new book.

I'd finally finished the last book in the 'League of Elements' series and wanted to talk to her about it.

Stacy overheard and turned towards us. "Oh, that reminds me! I gave that book you and Amy were talking about a look? Y'know, that 'League of Elements'?"

I tried not to look too shocked. Neither of Vicky's friends were stupid, but they weren't really big readers either.

"And?" I asked.

"It was okay, a bit wordy in places, but…" She shifted uncomfortably and I shared a knowing look with Amy and Lori.

"Well?" Lori pressed.

"Okay, fine, you two were right! I tried to read Shades afterwards and it just felt… flat," Stacy admitted with a pout.

I laughed at her expression. I'd feel sorry for ruining her favorite book, but honestly, that thing needed to die.

"By the way," Stacy said once everyone had finished laughing at her, "when I was finished, my tablet suggested a similar book, but I wasn't sure if it was any good."

"You read on a tablet?" I asked. E-books were still a relatively new thing after all.

Amy smirked. "Face it, Taylor, print media is dead."

Unable to think of a good argument, I stuck my tongue out at her, causing her to laugh.

"The book was called 'Sunstone'," Stacy continued. "Have you read it?... What?" She looked between me and Amy.

I could feel the blush slowly creeping up my face and a glance at Amy showed the same thing.

"Umm... Well... that is… I'm not sure you'd enjoy that one," I stammered out.

Vicky gave me a suspicious look and glanced at Amy, who was trying to hide her face.

Realisation dawned and Vicky broke down laughing.

##

After school, we got on the bus heading towards the Rig. Vicky had offered to fly us there, but trying to carry two people at once was a little awkward.

The meeting with my teacher had been a joke. The problem he'd had with my homework was a simple misunderstanding that could have been discussed any time.
We mostly sat in silence on the ride. A couple of people snapped pictures of us, but I ignored them. I was too busy going over what equipment I could give Amy while Vicky was glaring at the two guys in Empire colours at the back of the bus.

I wasn't worried about them. Vicky could handle them if she needed to, and if that wasn't possible, Ravage was laying on top of the bus while Windblade sat on Amy's lap. Steeljaw had been teleported ahead of us and was waiting at our stop.

As the bus drove along, I was brought out of my musing by police cars shooting by us. Looking out the window, I noticed more gang members than this morning. Right, it was just normal day-to-day violence while they recovered from last night, but it wouldn't be long before the fighting resumed.

"Hey Vicky? Who are the guys in green?" I'd spotted the red and blacks of the Empire, the red and green of the ABB and even a few people still in Merchant blue. The guys wearing green were new.

Vicky turned away from the guys at the back and looked out the window. "I think they're Merchants. A couple of Skidmark's lieutenants took over when the capes went down and what was left sorta broke into smaller groups."

Amy pulled a face. "Different look, same gang. I had to treat a guy they nearly killed with an overdose because he wouldn't join them."

"Without any capes to back them up, they're not much of a threat, but they're still a nuisance," Vicky commented with a shrug.

I guess it was naive to think the Merchants would disappear once the capes were dealt with. Would that happen if Kaiser or Lung were arrested?

The PRT had new procedures for dealing with capes after the last breakout. Cricket and Stormtiger had been moved to a holding station between here and Boston, along with Multiplayer. To avoid another breakout, they'd been transported in a modified PRT dropship.

Rune had been the only cape captured last night and she vanished in the confusion of Lung's attack.

Rewind beeped at me and brought a PHO page up on his screen. Reading through it, I couldn't stop myself from grimacing. Apparently, it hadn't been Dragon who limbed Lung, but Kaiser.

The post was from an Empire member, with pictures, that claimed Kaiser was currently planning on mounting Lung's wings on his wall. "Oh that's gonna piss Lung off," Vicky said when I showed her and Amy the page. Dragon was already shutting the thread down, but the pictures were out there now.

A message from Wheeljack confirmed the post was also on Stormfront, a Neo-Nazi forum.

"Yeah, no way Lung can ignore that," Amy agreed.

We were still discussing Lung's possible retaliation when we reached my workshop.

Swinging the door open, I turned to face my friends. "So, what do you think?"

This was the first time I'd been able to show them my workshop and I wasn't disappointed by their reactions. Both were looking around in awe.

The workshop was a bit of a mess, but that was to be expected. Almost every flat surface had some project or another sitting on it. Robotic waldos hung from the ceiling. Some were idle but most were
helping to assemble one project or another. Holographic displays showed works in progress, designs and random ideas, news feeds and other information.

The cleanest area was the corner that Perceptor had claimed as his own. Chemical analysis machines and vials of experimental liquids sat in neat, orderly rows.

On the other side of the room was a large bed/table with the human sized protoform housing Wyvern laying on it. Chromedome was standing by her head, connected to her systems as he tried to examine her code.

Perceptor kept working at his desk, but he waved in greeting. Wheeljack was in the middle of the room waiting for us; there were new scratch marks on his chassis, so something must have gone wrong recently.

"Okay," Vicky said, "I'm impressed." Next to her, Amy nodded.

"Thanks," Wheeljack said, walking forwards to shake hands. "It's good to see you two again."

"Go ahead, have a look around," I insisted.

Watching them poke and prod at the different projects was fun. I never really got to show off my workshop these days, since most of the Wards were either used to Tinkers - thanks to Armsmaster and Kid Win - or stayed away from the workshops.

"Why are you building insects?" Amy asked, looking at a small glass terrarium. Inside, were three small insectile robots, the biggest of which was only three inches long.

"They were an experiment. I was trying to create a hive minded VI that could handle lots of input. Those three are the prototypes, but we've got more in storage. Go ahead, pick one up, they're safe to touch." I'd programmed them with some basic responses, trying to keep them as close as possible to real insects.

Wheeljack had picked three different insect shapes so we could test the VI in multiple types of platforms: a cricket, a rhinoceros beetle and a stag beetle.

Carefully, Amy picked the rhinoceros beetle out of the terrarium. It gently probed her hand and fluttered its small wings.

Vicky watched over Amy's shoulder. "That's kinda cute. You ever thought about selling them as pets?"

I nodded. "I did, but there's a lot of red tape involved. Not to mention the cost. Building things on this scale is expensive. It's actually cheaper to make my robots bigger."

"Can they transform?" Amy asked as she put it back into its tank.

"No, too small. No spark either, so they're expendable."

The next thing Vicky asked about was a small rectangular drone, just under two feet wide and a little under half that deep.

"That's a Sentinel drone." I said, powering it up. It hovered a few feet above the workbench. "These are what I built the Insecticons to test. The idea is to have dozens of them being coordinated by a single VI."
"So, what does it do?" Vicky asked.

"At the moment? Mostly it creates shields. Each drone is fitted with a shield generator that can interlock with the others. Depending on how they bunch up, the shield can be focused to deal with different threats. We're also trying to install a search and rescue function. The idea is, they can fly in, pick someone up with a hard light projection, then use anti-grav tech to carry them to help."

"That sounds like you want to use these against an Endbringer," Amy said, moving to get a better look at the drone.

"Something like that, yeah. It's also going to have a Null-Ray built in so it could be used against normal people, but we had to scrap that."

"Holy…" Vicky muttered. "Why haven't you used these yet?"

I shrugged. "Technical issues mostly. They've been okayed for Endbringers, but the PRT is worried about using them against normal people. There's been some problems with the VI that we're still trying to fix and well… They're really expensive to build."

"How bad?" Vicky asked

"A full set of custom fitted power armour is cheaper than one drone," I said blandly. The anti-grav tech especially didn't scale well. The energy costs increased drastically with weight and while it could be countered somewhat by swapping out the metal in the AG core for a different, more reactive material, it only upped the cost.

Scraping the weapons helped, but it reduced the drones to a purely defensive role. In the end, Dragon had built maybe a dozen with weapons and the rest were being built without them. The armed drones were now guarding Dragon's workshop and my home.

Dad didn't know about that yet.

The rest of my projects were upgrades to my gear or bots and I kept my power armour designs hidden. I wanted that to be a surprise.

The last major project to show them was Wyvern.

"Okay, I've got to ask, why is that one wearing your clothes?" Vicky asked with a grin. "Is there something you're not telling us?"

"No, no," I said as I laughed. "Wheeljack thought it would be funny to dress it up."

They looked at Wheeljack, whose fins flashed pink with embarrassment.

"That's Wyvern. She's the AI the Dragonslayers used when they tried to kill Dragon," he said.

"And you kept it?" Amy asked, shocked.

"She tried to help me when Saint had me locked up," I explained, "The Dragonslayers didn't build her, they found an AI that another Tinker had built and tore it apart. They stitched the remains back together and tried to use it against Dragon."

It wasn't the complete truth, but it was close enough that I didn't feel too guilty about lying.

"So what's that one doing?" Vicky asked, pointing at Chromedome.
"He's trying to fix her," I said. "The Dragonslayers made a real mess and I'm hoping to fix it."

Chromedome was one of my smaller bots, maybe twice Rewind's height. His alt-mode was based on a vehicle Clockblocker showed me, something called the 'Tumbler'. I'd built a connector into the fingers of his hands that let him tap directly into the processor in any of my bots.

While connected, he was more or less dead to the world. It could be hours before he moved again, so it was best to just leave him be. I'd talk to him about Wyvern later.

"Right," I said, trying lighten the mood. "You came here to look for some equipment, right?"

They nodded and I grabbed a handheld 3D laser scanner. "First things first… strip!" I commanded.

I'd barely closed my mouth when I realised what I'd just said. Amy and I went scarlet.

"Wow, you move fast!" Vicky said before she broke down laughing.

"I-I mean we need a full body scan to make sure everything fits! Right Jack?" I pleaded.

"O-of course," Jack said, his voice strained as he tried not to laugh. Past him, I could see Perceptor's shoulders shaking. Even Windblade was trying to cover her mouth.

_Traitors!_

Forcing myself to calm down, I created a holographic changing screen and I tried again.

"Can you please step behind this screen so Teletraan can take your measurements? You can keep your underwear on and no one will be able to see you."

Still blushing, Amy nodded and ducked out of sight without looking me in the eye.

By the time Teletraan was done, Vicky had almost calmed herself down, although she ended up laughing again if she looked at me or Amy for too long.

Ignoring her, I had Teletraan create a full sized image of Amy in her regular costume, in the centre of the room.

"Right, I was thinking you could do with a bodysuit like mine." Calling up an interface, I had her robe replaced with a bodysuit. "This would fit under your normal costume so no one would even know it's there."

"What would that do?" Amy asked, looking at the hologram with a light blush.

"It can enhance the wearer's strength by up to three times. It would make it easier for you to fight off an attacker or lift an unconscious patient. I might even be able to fit you with a dimensional-storage unit. That would let you carry extra supplies or a weapon without anyone being able to see it." A small backpack appeared on her hologram, highlighted in a different colour.

"Is that where you pulled that grenade launcher from?" Vicky asked, having finally calmed down.

Amy snorted. "I think Carol would flip if I brought home a grenade launcher."

"How about something a little more discreet?" I suggested. "I have a few smaller weapon." I pulled up a hologram. It was an upgraded version of the stun gun I'd built and that Lung had destroyed. "This one's a breach loaded pistol that fires taser rounds. I took Lung's eye out with one once."
I tried not to shudder at the memory.
"Wasn't that the night Dragon brought you to the hospital?" Amy asked quietly.
"Yeah," I said, my voice wooden.
"Do you want to talk about it? You fought Lung again last night, and that can't have been easy," Amy offered.
"It… It's alright. I don't really remember much of that night anyway. Most of it's hazy now, probably the concussion. But some things stand out better than others. What really stuck with me was Bitch."
"Who?" Amy asked.
"The PRT called her Hellhound," Vicky offered.
I nodded. "Yeah. Lung killed her. He just grabbed her and moved on. Like she was nothing, like it didn't matter he'd killed her… Once the fighting started last night, I didn't really have time to think about it. There was just so much going on. At the end, when he was fighting Dragon… I realised that he never once glanced in our direction. We didn't matter, we weren't a threat."
"Is that why you shot him?" Vicky asked.
"No… well… not entirely. Mostly, I wanted to help Dragon. But… I suppose I needed to know if I could hurt him. That shot burned out parts of my Null-Ray, but they've already been replaced and upgraded. The thought of seeing Lung again doesn't scare me as much anymore."
Moving over, Amy gave me a quick hug.
"I still don't like the smell of pork." I complained, only half joking. Perhaps realising that I was either gonna laugh or cry, Vicky and Amy chose to laugh weakly.

Later that night, I huffed and fell backwards onto my bed. Not needing to sleep was weird at times. I still got mentally and physically tired, and it wasn't like I had unlimited stamina. Instead, all I needed to do was sit or lay down and rest for a little while.

I could go to sleep if I wanted to. I just didn't need to. Most nights, I either worked on new designs or caught up on my reading. Tonight, I'd been working on a handheld medical scanner.

It was similar to the scanner I'd built into First Aid. It would create real-time bone and tissue scans of a patient and send the images to a tablet or computer. This could let doctors or EMTs get a quick diagnosis for most common injuries, such as cuts and broken bones.

Once I was done with the finishing touches, I bundled it up with a list of equipment for Amy and sent it to Dragon, who would talk to New Wave about pricing.

As I understood it, New Wave was supported by donations and their various day jobs. They weren't exactly rich, but money wasn't a big worry either.

Personally, I would have just given her everything, but Dragon didn't want people thinking they could take advantage of me.

I was still staring at the ceiling, lost in thought, when Rung climbed onto my bedside table.
Sitting on some furniture I'd found for him in an old doll's house, he turned to me. "So, why don't you tell me what you've been up too?"

We did this about once a week. Rung would ask me about my day, or what I was working on. Mostly, he just listened, but sometimes he offered advice or another point of view.

At first, I'd tried to deflect, or to change the subject. Eventually he would either win and I'd tell him everything, or he'd give up, give me a sad look and leave me alone. Usually, I'd end up feeling guilty and I'd talk.

Now, I went with it. Rung wouldn't judge me and I felt better afterwards. I told him everything that had happened today. About being asked out, my discussion with Amy and Vicky. I even told him about my faux pas with Amy.

Looking back on it, it was kinda funny. I didn't even realise I was smiling until he pointed it out.

"Well, I'm glad you're doing well. It's good you're making friends again. There is one last thing I wanted to ask you about?"

"What's that?"

"The Dallons, Amy in particular. You mention her a lot and I was just curious as to how you feel about her."

"I suppose…" Did I really talk about them that much?

I spent my lunches at school with them and if I wasn't in the workshop or on patrol, then I was usually with one of them. Mostly it was Amy. Vicky was great, if a bit exhausting, but she had her own friends.

Amy and I shared a lot of interests, so we spent most of our time together. Besides, once you got her to stop sulking, she was cute…

 Wait, what?

Where did that thought come from? I mean, the hug earlier was nice, which was a bit odd. Aside from Dad, I wasn't that comfortable touching people. Something else I could probably blame on Emma.

Oh hell.

Sitting up, I thought back. All the little touches. The comments. 'I get to play nurse this time'. The knowing looks from Gallant and Vicky. How could I not realise! he was an empath! He probably told Vicky.

Oh, Hell!

"Taylor, Taylor calm down!"

Taking a shaky breath, I turned to Rung. "Calm down? I'm crushing on my best friend!" Again!

"I understand this can be confusing, but there's nothing wrong with it. Gender lines don't have any real-"

I waved him into silence. "I don't care about liking girls!" I hissed.
With no one to talk to, I'd turned introspective. When Emma first turned on me, I thought she'd found out. That she hated me because of it. Then she started using Mom's death against me, along with every secret I'd ever told her. But the one thing she never used was my preference.

It became my last secret, something Emma couldn't take from me. I'd had plenty of time to come to terms with it. Even if I never told anyone.

Burying my head in my hands, I groaned. "Now what do I do?"

"I'd suggest talking to her."

I glared at him. "And what if she's not interested? I don't even know if she likes girls. What if I'm just reading too much into it?" I was starting to get worked up again.

"Taylor! Calm down," Rung repeated, a bit more firmly. "Yes, you have been starved for affection, but if this was simply a case of you latching onto the first new friend you made, then wouldn't Victoria be a more likely candidate? Now, as I was saying, I think you should sit down with Amy and talk to her. Clear the air and see how she feels. Either way, it's better than letting things get out of control."

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head. "I-I'd rather leave things alone."

"Taylor…"

"I'll think about it, alright?" No I wouldn't. Amy was my friend. I wasn't going to mess that up over a silly crush. For now, I'd let things be. Maybe, I'd try and see how she felt. See if she was at least interested. Then, maybe, I'd talk to her.

Or maybe I'd just get over it.

Rung sighed. "Alright, Taylor. That's enough, no more for today."

I recognised his tone. He knew I wasn't going to say anything.

Getting up, I figured I might as well try getting some sleep. After I pulled my pajamas on, I climbed back into bed.

My dreams that night were filled with flesh tones and freckled faces.

When I woke up the next day, I swore I was going to murder Rung for putting those images into my subconscious.

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An: mostly a cool down chapter after all the fighting, but the gang war is far from over. This arc's going to be a long one so I'll probably break it up with some Ints. I'm sure I'll get some flack for this chapter but... oh well.
I went to the rig early on Saturday morning since I had a lot I needed to do. I had to be at Hamilton Park to help keep an eye on some people doing community service. After that, I had an appointment at BB Central Hospital. My medical scanner tech was due to be demonstrated, and Dragon thought it would be good for me to be there.

I also needed to talk to Chromedome. Between the gang war and everything else, I'd never found time to talk to him about Wyvern. Hopefully I could do that this morning.

But first, I needed a shower. As I didn't have time before leaving the house, I'd decided to combine my morning jog with my trip to the rig.

Stopping by my quarters, I grabbed my shower bag and bodysuit, going to the showers soon after.

There were four showering facilities on the rig: one set for base workers and another for capes. They were split for men and women and rumor had it there was a lead plate in the walls. Unlike the low-pressured thing I had at home, the showers on the rig felt like standing under a scalding fire hose on its highest settings.

Inside, the room looked a lot like the changing rooms at a swimming pool, just a lot cleaner. There was a row of sinks against one wall, with a large mirror fixed to the wall above them. Opposite the sinks were a row of showers and changing cubicles.

I didn't expect to see Missy already there. She was standing in front of the sinks, frowning at her own reflection. Ignoring how little she was wearing, and the rather large bruise on her shoulder, I looked away and coughed.

Out the corner of my eye, I saw her turn. She made a strangled squeak that wasn't quite a scream and wrapped her towel around her body.

"T-Taylor! Don't do that! You scared me half to death!"

"S-sorry, I didn't expect anyone to be here this early," I said as I ducked into an empty cubicle and pulled my clothes off.

"Late patrol last night," Missy said, sounding calmer. "It was easier to stay here rather than risk traveling at night."

I could see her point. Things were safe enough in the daytime provided that you stayed out of certain areas, but at night the gangs were out in force.

Making sure my towel was covering me, I moved from the cubicle to a shower. Missy had taken the time to pull a shirt on, but now she was examining her face in the mirror. I could see her putting some cream on what looked like another bruise on her arm as I walked past.

"Anything happen?" I asked as I started the shower.

"Yeah, the ABB tried raiding an Empire safehouse. We ended up getting in the middle of it. No capes - thank god - but one of them snuck up on us."

"And how badly did you hurt him?" I called with a chuckle.
"Not nearly enough," Missy said, and I could almost see her pout. "He shot me in the arm, Clock took two to the back and one to the head. Dean got the guy before I did."

My amusement vanished and I stopped what I was doing. Despite the heat, the shower felt cold.

"Was everyone alright?"

"Yeah, he's got some bruises but he's fine. The one on his face is huge!" Missy said with a giggle. "You might want to avoid him for a while though, he said something about wanting to kiss you."

I shuddered theatrically, even if Missy couldn't see me. "Well, remind him that I still have a taser!"

While she laughed, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was glad Dennis was alright. Even with the shields I'd given the Wards, a blow to the head could still be risky.

Range was Clockblocker's biggest weakness. He was no stronger or more durable than anyone else, yet needed to touch things to freeze them and couldn't use his power on himself. He'd found a workaround by freezing his costume and making it indestructible at the expense of being unable to move for a random length of time.

Maybe I could build something that let him work from a distance… or maybe an invisibility system? The idea was intriguing, and at the same time terrifying.

"Hey Missy, what do you think would happen if Dennis could turn invisible?" I called out as I rinsed the shampoo out of my hair.

"Oh god, don't even joke about that! He's enough trouble when we can see him! We'd never be able to use the showers again."

In truth, for all his joking, I doubted that Dennis would be that bad. But I still wasn't going to hand a teenage boy the power to turn invisible.

Turning the shower off, I made sure I was covered and ducked back into the cubicle where I'd left my clothes. Pulling my body suit on, I stepped out and found Missy still frowning at her reflection.

"You okay?"

She sighed, "Yeah… It's just… Do I look okay to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm one of the smallest girls in my class, I'm thirteen and I feel like I've barely grown," she complained.

I wasn't really comfortable with this conversation, I didn't have a clue what to say and I wasn't exactly much to look at myself. Things had been better since I'd got my powers, the appetite I hadn't even realised I'd lost had returned. I was eating more and exercising every day.

Slowly, I'd filled out a bit more. The building muscle giving me a more athletic look compared to my formerly beanpole physique. I was still slim, lacking much in the way of curves, but at least I didn't look like an upright frog anymore.

"You'll get there," I said, deciding to go with something safe. "You're already cute, so give it some time."

"I don't want to be cute. I want to look my age, to be taken seriously, to not be the fucking team
mascot…” she muttered the last with a sigh.

Turning around, I leant back against the sink and spoke quietly. "Nobody thinks you're the team mascot. You're what, the most powerful Shaker in the city? I've seen you twist an empty lot into an Escher painting."

Okay, I was exaggerating slightly, but Wheeljack nearly blew a diode trying to work out how *that* one worked.

"It's not just the Wards!" she said while throwing her arms up. The movement pulled the bruise on her back and she hissed. Ignoring it, she continued, "It's everyone. I can hear them talking at school, 'Oh, Vista's so cute, she's adorable.' It pisses me off!"

She rotated her shoulder, wincing.

Frowning, I picked up the pot of cream she'd been applying. It was one of First Aid's healing creams, good for bruises and sprains.

I moved behind Missy, who'd gone back to glaring at herself in the mirror. Even if she didn't look her age, she had the moody teen part down.

"Right, first things first. Can you lift your shirt or do you need me to do it?"

"I'm fine," she said, not meeting my gaze in the mirror.

"Bullshit, I saw that bruise. If you want to be treated like an adult, you need to act like one. That includes letting people know when you're hurt and asking for help."

"Fine… C… Can you help me?" she mumbled, still not looking at me.

Smirking, I lifted the back of her shirt high enough that the bruise on her back was exposed. It was bigger than my fist and an angry purple. Putting some cream on my hands, I carefully spread it across her back.

Missy tried to hide her flinch at the cold cream on her back.

"So, how did this one happen?" I asked. Bruises took a couple of days to turn purple, so I doubted it was from last night.

"Rune nailed me in the back with a brick when she escaped…” Missy said, her tone still mulish.

To leave a mark like that, even through her shield and armour, Rune would have had to hit Missy pretty damn hard. Either she knew about the shield and was compensating, or she really wanted to hurt Vista.

"If it makes you feel better, Rune didn't exactly get away clean. Waspinator got her in the face with some pepper spray."

Missy finally looked at me in the mirror, looking surprised and amused at the same time. "Really? I did wonder why she was swearing so much. She had some really interesting names for you."

"Oh?"

"'Robot-fucking dyke' was probably the politest one," she said with a strained laugh.

I laughed as a thought occurred to me. "I wonder what would happen if the public knew just how
foul-mouthed you are? Maybe I should call the Youth Guard rep now before it's too late?"

Finished with the cream, I pulled Missy's shirt back down and took in her expression of horror in the mirror.

"You wouldn't!"

"They'll probably have to take you off the team. Maybe even send you on 'sensitivity training'." Clockblocker had been sent on the course after he publicly announced his - not approved - cape name and had complained about it ever since.

Missy glared at me, but she was clearly trying not to smile. "Taylor? Don't you dare! If you even think about it I'm gonna -"

"Ah-ah, none of that. If you're going to act grown up, that means watching your language… Otherwise, I'll tell Gallant."

"Hey! That's fighting dirty."

"And who helped teach me to fight?"

Unable to think of an appropriate comeback, Missy stuck her tongue out at me, grabbed her stuff, and walked out of the room. She stopped and turned back to me at the door.

"Thanks, Taylor."

Still laughing, I waved her off and started gathering my stuff. I was running late and Rewind had already sent me three reminders that I needed to speak to Chromedome.

##

When I walked into my workshop, Dragon's avatar was already waiting on a screen. I'd gotten so used to her coming to see me in person that I was a little surprised.

Chromedome was standing on one of my workbenches, discussing something with her while nearly a dozen holographic interfaces floated behind him.

"Sorry I'm late," I said as I put my stuff down. "I got held up helping Missy."

"That's okay, we've just been discussing the Sentinel project," Dragon said with a nod towards Chromedome. "I'm sorry I couldn't be here in person; there was a minor scuffle with Hookwolf last night and I needed to make some repairs. I'll still be at the product demonstration," she insisted.

"Did you get him?" I asked. Hookwolf was a heavy hitter and very much on the Wards 'do not mess with' list. Past actions notwithstanding.

"No, he was able to escape, but his followers weren't so lucky. On the upside, I've been able to oversee the shipment of the new shield units. They should be with the PRT later today."

At least some good came from last night, then.

On the desk, Chromedome shifted nervously.

"Alright, Chromie, why don't you tell us why you called us here?" I said, turning my attention to him. "Is there a problem with Wyvern?"
"Please don't call me that," he muttered quietly. Rewind had been the one to start calling him that, and the two were rarely apart when I was in my workshop. It was kinda cute.

Sighing, he waved his hand shifting the displays so that Dragon and I could both see them. Lines of code were streaming across the screens with entire sections highlighted in red.

"I think I've managed to map out everything the Dragonslayers have done to her, and it's really not good. They clearly had no idea what they were doing. Important subroutines have been either buried or outright removed while others have been co-opted for different tasks. If you look here, you can see where the code has been doubled up."

One of the screens moved forward and the scrolling text stopped. Looking at the red areas, I could see what he meant. I wasn't sure what the removed section was, but the code replacing it was easier to understand. It was set up to trick her systems into thinking the missing code was still there.

"Amazingly, her sense of 'self' is intact. When I look through her memories, she clearly thinks of herself as 'Wyvern'. However, most of her agency has been removed. She can't take any actions without it clearing a list of restrictions or receiving direct approval from Saint."

"If that's true, how was she able to help Taylor?" Dragon asked leaning forward.

"Because he never specifically told her that she couldn't," I guessed.

Chromedome nodded. "That's right, and she really hated Saint."

"I thought Saint removed her emotions?" I wasn't that surprised she hated Saint. I knew Dragon had hated Saint, and although I wasn't sure how much of her memory Wyvern had retained, he'd tortured and crippled the AI. That had to breed a certain degree of hatred.

"No, they weren't able to isolate the parts that controlled her emotions," Chromedome said, gesturing at the different screens. "They're distributed across so many subroutines that suppressing them was the best they could manage. I spoke to Rung and he agrees. The effect would leave her numb, almost apathetic."

"So why did she turn on him?" Dragon asked, curious despite her usual apathy when I mentioned Wyvern.

"They were dulled, but her emotions were still there. Did I mention she really hated Saint? No matter how you look at it, Wyvern's a mess."

He pulled air into his systems and pushed it out again in a sigh. "What's worse are the long term effects this is having on Wyvern. She's a mess of conflicting signals and impulses that are tearing her code apart… Simply put, it's killing her."

I felt sick and even Dragon's avatar looked a little pale. To a 'software' based AI like Wyvern, what was happening could be compared to a case of aggressive, rapidly developing Alzheimer's. As pure software, her mind was all she had, and it was being torn apart from the inside.

"Is there anything we can do?" I asked.

"No, nothing. By the time you uploaded her to the protoform, it was already too late. Even when her systems are just idling, there are dozens of smaller subroutines running in the background, routine tasks outside of conscious control, and most of them are dedicated to preserving her code and error correction."
"Like a hindbrain?" Dragon suggested.

"Yes, exactly. All living things have it, even Autobots. In Wyvern's case, Saint lobotomized it. There were key sections designed specifically to correct errors and even apply minor updates in her code, and they removed all of it. Without that code, more and more errors have been allowed to build up, causing a cascade effect. Each error is causing another error and so on. Truthfully, she should already be dead by now, but placing her in stasis-lock has helped slow down the problem."

"Can she be restored from backup?" I asked. I had little hope Wyvern had been able to make a backup of herself before everything went wrong, but there was still a chance. Even a damaged backup of her code would be useful.

Dragon sighed, "There are no backups. Saint made sure to delete them. I might be able to find an older backup of myself in one of my older damaged suits, but it would be years old."

"It wouldn't work anyway," Chromedome said as he shook his head. "Wyvern identifies as a separate individual from you, so any backups made before her creation would simply be a copy of you, not her."

"You said stasis lock was slowing it down, but what if we took her completely offline? Once she's fully powered down we could bring her back once we have a solution," I suggested. Unlike the autobots, whose processors and sparks required constant power, Wyvern could be safely rendered powerless.

Chromedome brought up a section of code on screen. "Wouldn't work. Her boot sector is corrupted beyond repair. If she goes offline, she can't come back."

"How long can Wyvern last?" Maybe if I spent more time looking at her code I could re-create her boot sector. Even if it was for nothing, I couldn't give up on her.

"It's hard to be sure, but if she stays in stasis-lock? Two months at most," Chromedome said, not sounding very confident.

"Maybe… Maybe we should consider shutting her down," Dragon said quietly. "I know you wanted to help her Taylor, but at this point, it sounds like anything we try would simply do more harm than good."

I glared at Dragon, "Not yet, we still have two months to come up with something! I won't just give up on her. After everything Saint did, she still tried to help me!"

Dragon sighed. "Alright, I understand. Just keep in mind that she may be beyond help. I don't want you blaming yourself if there's nothing we can do."

I nodded before I turned back to the screens showing Wyvern's code. I didn't have any time left this morning, but I'd think things over while I was on duty. Once everything was taken care of, I'd get Wheeljack and Chromedome to sit down and work on ideas. Maybe I could get Dragon to help?

Shaking my head, I walked over to the stand with my armour on it. I still had a job to do after all.

##

As it was just me today, I decided to fly myself to Hamilton Park. I wasn't sure where the name came from, but it was a large area of green in the western part of the city that the Merchants had claimed as their own.
Like most of the city, it was safe enough in the daylight, providing you watched out for used needles and other crap. But at night you stayed away unless you were either looking to buy/sell or just cause trouble.

With the collapse of the Merchants, BBPD had increased the number of patrols in the area, hoping to make it safer again. Of course, this still left piles of trash, used needles and anything else left behind by the druggies.

The solution was to assign people on community service the task of cleaning it up.

I spent most of the flight thinking about Wyvern and how to help her, but I still had no idea what to do by the time the park came into view.

The people doing community service were easy to spot as they were all wearing overalls and high-visibility jackets. My job today was twofold. First I was supposed to be here as a 'positive role model'. Second, I was to help keep an eye on everything.

While the Merchants had been officially disbanded, smaller groups still remained. I was here to make sure they, or the fighting in the rest of the city, didn't cause trouble. It sounded kind of dull, but thankfully I wouldn't be on my own.

Vicky had already arrived and was floating a short distance away from the group. Spotting me, she flew up and met me in the air.

"Hey, Tay! I was wondering when you'd get here. The cops asked if we would fly a couple of patrols around the park and then make time to talk to people."

I grimaced at the nickname. "Please don't call me that… A quick patrol sounds good though."

Vicky laughed and with a shrug, she set off towards the edge of the park.

"Oh, I'm supposed to tell you there are two groups here today. The ones in orange are doing community service, the ones in green are just volunteers helping to clean up the park," she told me as I caught up.

The park wasn't that large, so it only took a few minutes to circle it from the air. The weather today was fairly clear, even if there was still a bit of chill in the air, and by the time we returned to the group my mood had improved a bit.

Landing near them, Vicky and I waved at everyone. On a whim, I had Steeljaw and Ravage teleported to the park and let them 'off-leash', so to speak.

Ravage approached a nearby tree and jumped up into the branches, where he seemed content to stay, watching everyone below him.

Steeljaw, however, walked into the crowd of people, sniffing at bags and watching what they were doing. The people in orange tended to shy away from him while those in green would stop what they were doing to stroke or play with him briefly.

Watching a couple of people digging a new flower bed, he decided to 'help'. Enthusiastically.

"I knew he should have been a dog," I muttered to a laughing Vicky as I walked over and pulled him out of the mud.

The rest of the morning passed like a typical meet and greet. I spoke to some of the volunteers, who
apparently lived nearby. I also spoke briefly to the man who was in charge of the volunteers. Turned out he was an ex-Merchant. He'd gone clean about a year ago and was trying to encourage others to turn over a new leaf.

And I was totally not jealous of how easily Vicky mingled with people. She moved from one person to the next, smiling and laughing. It was nice to know she was cheering back up.

Because it felt wrong to just stand back and watch, I soon found myself helping out as well. Between us, Vicky and I were able to lift the remains of a fallen tree onto the back a low loader. Apparently, it was going to be recycled into benches for the park.

"I think you've got an admirer," Vicky singsonged while everyone was taking a break.

"What?" Looking round, I spotted who she was talking about.

She was a young girl, close to my age, in an orange jacket. I hadn't noticed her before because she'd kept her hood up all morning, but it looked like the heat had eventually gotten to her. Finally getting a good look at her face, I realised I knew her.

*Madison?*

She looked like crap if I was honest. She'd cut her hair, which was part of the reason I hadn't recognised her earlier. It was in a short pixie cut now, and I could see the bags under her eyes since she wasn't wearing any makeup.

"Hey, you alright? Do you know her or something?" Vicky asked, grabbing my shoulder.

I realised I'd been clenching my fists tight enough to make my armour creek. Even Steeljaw and Ravage had picked up on my mood; they were both staring at Madison, who looked like a deer in headlights.

"I'm fine, don't worry about it," I said flatly. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't angry. She helped ruined my life after all.

Maybe if I told Vicky, she'd go punch her for me? *No, bad Taylor! Do not set Alexandria-lite on people. Amy would get annoyed at you.*

Deciding to just ignore her, I turned my back and focused my attention elsewhere. I didn't expect her to walk up and try talking to me.

"Tay- I mean, Matrix? C-can I talk to you?"

"Yes?" I said, looking over my shoulder at her. Frozen tundra had more warmth than my voice.

"Wait, you do know each other?... Oh shit! she's one of those girls!" Vicky's expression quickly hardened.

Madison flinched, it was so different from what I remembered that I almost felt bad. "I-I wanted to… Is it too late to say 'I'm sorry'?"

Not sure what to do or say, I just stared at her. The expression on my mask doing the talking for me.

"I-It was a game… The others were doing it and I didn't want to be left out so… when I got the chance, I took your homework. I thought it wouldn't matter, that you'd get into trouble and everything would blow over. Then all of a sudden Emma and Sophia were telling me what a good
idea it was, and after that I couldn't back down...

The words were tumbling out of her mouth, she was practically pleading with me.

All I could think about was how much I wanted her to shut up and go away.

"So that's it? You ruined my life because you were too weak to say no? Why now? Why do you suddenly care?"

Vicky took a step forward and I raised my arm to stop her. Madison stepped back in fear, but seemed determined to go on.

"Because you nearly died! We... nearly killed you. My aunt works at the hospital you were taken too. She told me you nearly died in there because we were all idiots."

We'd been trying to keep our voices down, but people were starting to stare. Almost everyone was watching now, including the nearby cop who gave me a questioning look. I shook my head slightly in response.

I'd rather this not happen in public, but maybe it was for the best. I was less likely to punch her here.

"I know, I know. It's not an excuse," Madison continued, either unaware or simply ignoring everyone else "... I never stopped to consider what I was doing to you. I never thought about anything beyond the next joke. I...was a complete fucking idiot. I-I just wanted you to know, I had nothing to do with the locker. They never told me about it until after it happened. They said they'd let you out in a little while!"

They didn't. They left me in there and I'd almost died.

"I spent nearly two weeks on antibiotics waiting for blood test results," I hissed. "Do you know how many infections I could have picked up?"

"I do... mom made me look it up. When the police arrived, I told them everything... I want... I wish I could undo it. But I can't and I don't know how to make it right."

//A deed, once done, cannot be undone... But perhaps it may yet be mitigated.//

I snorted. I'd often imagined this before I got my powers. The three of them, broken and crying at my feet. Now that I had it? I just felt cold.

I didn't need the multitude of sensors to tell me the guilt and pain on her face were real, and lording over her made me feel far too much like Emma for my liking. Maybe I should be more forgiving, but I wasn't that good a person.

Sighing, I pulled my helmet off and looked Madison in the eye. "I've been told that trying counts for a lot. Personally I'm not sure if I believe it. But if you really want to make it right, then fine.

"I wasn't the only one you hurt, I was just your favorite target. That can't be undone, you can never 'make it right.' From now on, you need to do better. I want you to wake up every day and try to make things better. Eventually, you might find that better is good enough. That is the least you can do."

Without putting my helmet back on, I walked over to a table that had been set up with drinks and grabbed a bottle of water. I didn't look back at Madison.
Realising the entertainment was over, everyone else drifted back to what they were doing.

"Ouch, you okay?" Vicky asked quietly.

"Yeah… just prime," I said, my voice thick with sarcasm.

Vicky didn't say anything while I drank. Eventually, I spoke.

"I never really hated her. Not like I did the others. She was nothing; Sophia liked to get physical and Emma turned everything I ever told her against me. But Madison? All she ever did was follow them around like a lost puppy. I was just surprised to see her here."

Picking my drink up, I downed the last of the bottle -

"Want me to drop her in the bay?" Vicky said with a grin.

-and very nearly choked.

"I can do that myself, thank you very much!" I said with all the dignity I could muster as I wiped my face.

"Thanks for the offer though." With that, I pulled my helmet back and focused on getting through the day. Madison had pulled her hood back up and gone back to work at the far side of the area.

I felt a little bad for what I'd said, but I wasn't going to apologise.

After that, things were a little tense between us and the volunteers. Only a few of them bothered to come near me, and even then they kept things brief.

Vicky did her best to cheer me up, with even Steeljaw trying to help. Sitting next to me, he leant against my side and refused to move until I gave him an energon treat.

Thankfully, it wasn't long before the work was done for the day and I could leave.

##

I was still a little pissed off when I reached the hospital. I'd stopped briefly on a rooftop to wipe my armour down with some wet wipes and had only just made it there in time for the meeting.

I wasn't even sure why I was here. To the world at large, the scanners were the product of Dragon's Lair R&D, just like everything else I built. Even if it was an open secret that Dragon and I were the only employees.

She certainly didn't need my help to promote tech to people.

Landing outside, I disconnected from Divebomb and sent him to a nearby roof to wait. It would be easier to walk around in the hospital without him on my back.

After talking to the woman at the reception, a security guard led me to a large meeting room on the top floor. The entire far wall was glass, offering a nice view of the city. In front of it was a large table than nearly ran the length of the room.

Already seated at the table were four men and Amy, while Dragon was standing nearby. In order to keep people in the dark about her status, she had taken to closing a 'battle plate' across her face that hid her expressions. To anyone who looked, she was just another remote body.
"Umm, sorry if I'm late," I said as everyone turned to me.

"Don't worry about it. With the way the city is lately, I'm surprised you can make time for us at all," one of the men said with a warm smile. He was probably the oldest at the table, with grey hair and a mustache.

Dragon stepped beside me. "Matrix, this is the hospital Director Norman Briggs, Head of Equipment Procurement Dr. Chris Kelley and Head of Inventory Dr. Frank Laurie. Dr. Mark Sloan is here at their request, and of course, you know Panacea."

Briggs was a bald man with glasses and a dozen papers in front of him. Kelley looked older, but his hair was still a dark brown colour; he was frowning at me and Dragon, but there was no heat behind it. Dr. Laurie had messy salt and pepper hair and perma-stubble on his sunken cheeks.

Of everyone in the room, he looked the least interested.

Lastly was Dr. Sloan. He'd been the one to talk when I first entered and was the most friendly looking of the bunch. Under their combined looks, I was starting to remember some of the more bizarre dreams I'd had when I was younger.

The kind where being kicked out of school was the worst thing to ever happen.

Ignoring them and turning my attention to Amy simply swapped those images for another set that I really didn't need at the moment. *God damn it Rung!* Thankfully, with my mask on, no one could see me blush.

"So now that we're all here, what is it you wanted to show us?"

Reaching down, Dragon picked a small silver flight case off the floor and placed it on the table. There was a beep as she remotely disabled the lock and opened the case up. Inside, there was a small gun-like device and a tablet computer sitting in the foam.

The sealed 'barrel' was about the size of a soda can and it was attached to a slightly blocky body. I knew the pistol-like handle contained the batteries.

I'd been worried about shaping it like a gun, but Dragon had pointed out the shape was a good idea from an ergonomic standpoint. It could be quickly and comfortably picked up and used by almost anyone, the very shape making its usage obvious: point and pull the trigger at the targeted area.

The device had already been cleared as safe and functional. Now it was just a matter of showing people it could work.

"This is the mark 3 portable scanner. It is capable of performing a number of deep bone and tissue scans simultaneously. Matrix, if you would be so kind?"

Still not entirely sure why I was here, I picked up the gun, checked that the batteries were installed, and flicked on the power switch. It was only then that I realised Dragon's larger, claw-like hands would make holding it awkward.

Normally I would have considered that when I designed it, but if Dragon was going to use something like this, she'd simply build it into an attachment for her body.

With the gun working, Dragon passed the tablet to the Dean. "The system is capable of processing that information in real time to create a comprehensive image of a patient's body."
Lacking a patient, I pointed the gun at my upper arm. The thick material of my body suit didn't affect the gun in the slightest and a scan of my arm showed up on the tablet's screen.

I held it there while the four doctors, with instructions from Dragon, played with the image. They could zoom in on areas, switch between looking at the bones, veins or muscles in my arm, and even capture still images.

"It's certainly an interesting idea. I could see the EMT's getting a lot of use out of it," said Kelley, looking interested despite himself. "But we've had tinker-tech devices in the past. The upkeep they need makes them impractical."

Dragon kept her reactions hidden, but I could feel her preen at the question. "These require no more maintenance than your current equipment, and what little they do need can be supplied by trained technicians.

"I'm already establishing a support arm for Dragon's Lair. Based locally, it will have technicians trained to repair all of the equipment we sell. A long term support contract and additional training for staff will all be made available."

"Yes, but why bother when we have Panacea?" Dr. Laurie said, fiddling with his cane.

"Panacea has a life of her own," I practically snapped before I could stop myself. Once again, I was thankful they couldn't see me blush.

"That's right. We can't expect a single young girl to do everything, after all," Dr. Sloan said, shooting Laurie an annoyed look. "Portable equipment that can speed up diagnostics would be of immense help."

Standing up, he walked over to me and held out his hand. "May I?"

I glanced quickly at Dragon, who nodded before I handed it over.

"It's simple enough to use, just point and shoot," I said as he examined the gun. "The batteries are good for about two hours of continuous use. They can be removed for separate charging and are interchangeable."

Giving me an amused smile, he tired the gun out on his own arm.

"I take it these have already been cleared by the PRT?" Dean Briggs asked, making a note.

"Of course," Dragon replied. "The device meets all current safety standards and has been certified by the PRT, who've already put in their own order."

Doctor Beckett - the doctor on the Rig - had been torn between ecstatic at getting such a useful device and terrified about having yet one more thing he could break.

"Maybe we should see if it actually works before agreeing to anything," Dr. Laurie said, rolling his eyes.

"We currently have five prototypes," Dragon said. "If you'd like, I could loan you this one for for a week as a trail?"

Smirking, Dr. Laurie grabbed his cane and stood up. "Wonderful, why don't we give it a try now? That was the plan, yes?"
Dragon nodded. "Certainly." She had barely finished talking when she sent me a message, [prick]

I quickly turned my laugh into a cough as Dragon's message popped up on my screen. In truth, the plan had been to test the device on some volunteers. That was why Amy was involved, she could confirm in seconds the device was safe and providing correct information.

As everyone stood up, Dean Briggs waved at his paperwork. "I'm afraid I don't have time to escort you." Standing up, he held out his hand for Dragon to shake. "That being said, I trust Dr. Sloan's opinion and look forward to his report."

Dragon nodded. "Of course. Matrix, would you mind going with them? The hospital is crowded enough as is, and I can watch everything remotely through your suit."

"Sure." My helmet had a built in subvocal mic that could convert speech to text, so I could write/send messages quickly.

[You just don't want to deal with Dr. Laurie]

[Nonsense, this will be a good learning experience for you], she sent back, even as my HUD's indicator lit up, letting me know she was accessing my suit.

We started off simple, a young man already diagnosed with a broken arm. Using the scanner, they were able to confirm the location of the break and save the image to the hospital network for later reference. As compensation, Amy fixed his arm then and there.

In the space of thirty minutes, the scanner found three broken bones, a suspected blood clot and a case of appendicitis.

With every success, Dr. Laurie looked more disappointed until he just seemed bored. Dr. Sloan however became more excited. I got the impression he was a fairly jovial man, quick to laugh or smile at anything.

Meeting the different patients was interesting. Most seemed happy to see us, especially Amy. Of the five people we healed, three tried to thank Amy, the fourth barely looked at her and the fifth was still asleep.

Despite the reactions she got, Amy just looked bored. I was about to say something when a warning message came up on my screen. The truck delivering the shield units to the PRT had come under attack!

"Shit, I've got to go! Amy can you look after the scanner for me?"

Barely waiting for her reply, I turned and ran. I was near the ground floor; once I was outside I could link up with Divebomb and fly the rest of the way.

I wasn't sure who was stupid enough to try pulling this off, but I couldn't risk them getting away with those shields.
Martin Bigglesworth was a large man with greying hair and an impressive beard. He'd been driving trucks for most of his life, until a bone condition affecting his spine made long-distance driving impossible.

Not able to get a job doing anything else, he'd moved back to Brockton Bay and found work doing local deliveries for a company near the docks. When that company folded, he'd thrown his lot in with the dockworkers.

Hebert was a good man, even looked the other way if a guy decided to go do some 'private work', provided it wasn't illegal and didn't leave the docks short handed. Not that there was much worry of that these days. They had too many hands, but not enough work.

When Danny had approached him with a job offer for hauling Tinker made crap around the city, he didn't need to think twice.

So here he was, sitting in the cab of his new box truck. Compared to his old eighteen wheelers, it was barely more than a large van, but it was nice to be behind the wheel again. At least it would be once they got underway.

He was still waiting for his 'partner' to arrive. The boss lady had insisted all deliveries be done by two people for security. He was considering just getting out and looking for the guy when a short, younger man pulled open the passenger door.

"Hey! Sorry I'm late. Foreman wanted a word," he said as he climbed in. "I'm John, John Wedgewood."

"Biggs," Martin said with a nod, casting an eye over the younger man. Fresh faced, he was probably in his late teens or early twenties.

"Everything buttoned up back there?" Martin asked as he started the engine.

"Yeah, we're good to go," John said, practically bouncing in his seat. Just watching him made Martin feel tired.

Shaking his head, he shifted the truck into gear.

For all that he'd heard about capes, it looked like the boss lady had a good head on her shoulders. The truck wasn't some fancy, high-tech, monster. Instead she'd bought a small fleet of tough, reliable little runabouts.

Hard to break, easy to fix and comfortable to drive. The air conditioning was a pleasant bonus.

"How cool is this? I mean, we're hauling stuff for Dragon! She's like the Tinker. I heard that Danny's little girl is one, too y'know?" It was only a short drive, but John seemed determined to talk the entire way.

The route they had been given would take them east through the city, skirting close to Empire and ABB territory. It was a risk, but in this city just leaving the house was a risk. That's why there were two people in the truck: a driver and an extra body to keep an eye out.

"Say, you ever wonder how much they're worth?" John asked, looking over his shoulder.
Stopping at the lights, Martin fixed him with a cool stare. "I don't worry about that and neither should you. Our job is to haul freight, that's it."

Chastised, John fell silent.

In truth, while he tried not to think about it, Martin was experienced enough to know it was probably worth more than he'd ever see in his life. Even the truck they were in would probably go for a small fortune. While the boss lady had mostly left them stock, she had fitted some extra devices for added security.

They were just passing the halfway point when the road ahead of them exploded and a wall of ice twenty feet tall spread across the street, trapping cars and people.

"What the fuck!" John cursed as Martin hit the brakes and slammed the truck into reverse. They'd barely moved five feet when there was another explosion behind them, another wall of ice blocking their escape route.

Around them, people were already hastily abandoning their cars. The roads were blocked, but there were several small side streets between the buildings, too small for anything but foot traffic.

Those that couldn't make it to a side street tried to take cover inside the nearby shops as people in ABB colours charged into the streets from a boarded up shop.

Among them was a woman wearing a gas mask and a braided cord of black, yellow, and green wires over her shoulders.

Seeing the cape, John reached for the door handle. "Fuck this, I'm outta here!"

Before he could move, Martin grabbed him and pulled him down. This was not the first time he'd had a load hijacked.

At a shout from the cape, the ABB opened fire, their bullets slamming into the truck's integrated shield.

"How cute," the cape said, lifting a large grenade launcher and firing a grenade that exploded into a ball of lightning. Arcs of electricity the size of boa constrictors danced across the shield, quickly overloading the generator and leaving trails of scorched metal across the vehicle's body.

A second grenade exploded into a spire of crystal that quickly rose up under the truck, trapping it in place and twisting the thin metal of its trailer.

"Well? What are you waiting for? Get in there!" she shouted at her men as they stared in terrified awe.

Before the closest could reach the stricken vehicle, there was a blue flash as several Autobots appeared.

##

Warpath switched immediately to his tank mode and started firing. Behind him, the Protectobots scattered for cover.

Two of the ABB attackers were down before the others started to return fire. Between his armour and shields, Warpath could safely ignore the small caliber rounds. He focused fire on the cape, who threw herself behind a car while cursing.
"Warpath! We'll move the civilians, can you keep these guys busy?" Hotspot shouted as he ducked behind an abandoned car.

"No, *blamo* problem!"

"Blades, in the air! Look for civs. First Aid, get to cover. The rest of you, set up shelters!" Hotspot ordered as he pulled his rifle from its storage. Ducking out of cover, he fired at a couple of henchmen who'd been trying to sneak up on him.

Transforming to atl-mode, First Aid tore between the abandoned cars, heading for the largest collection of people in a nearby alleyway. He could see why they hadn't run away: they were at a dead end.

First Aid frowned, pulling a short metal rod out of subspace. Moving to the alley's entrance, he drove the spiked end into the ground and twisted it to face the direction he wanted.

A blue hardlight shield sprung up, four feet high and six feet long. He'd angled it to shield the people in the alley from the ABB while still leaving room for people to get in and out. With that done, he started checking the civilians for injuries.

##

Groove skidded to a stop next to a car and pulled out a shield staff, driving it into the ground.

"Everybody out!" he shouted as he pulled the car door open. "Get down behind the shield!"

The couple inside crawled out and huddled by the shield wall. Streetwise jumped off a nearby car roof and skidded to a stop by them, creating another wall.

"When I tell you to go, I want you to run for the alley!" Groove shouted, pointing at the alley First Aid had secured. Meanwhile, Streetwise climbed inside their car, started the ignition and put the car into gear. He was too small to reach the pedals and see over the dash, but that wasn't a problem.

Bracing the wheel to keep it straight, he jumped on the accelerator. The car flew backwards towards the ABB, hitting the car the female cape had been hiding behind and forcing her and some of her henchmen out of cover.

As they ran, Blades dropped out of the sky. Hitting the ground in robot mode, he drew his hard light batons and swung for the nearest gangbanger. The man went down with a scream as his knee broke, dropping his gun.

Kicking the gun away, Blades chased after the closest ABB member, taking to the air in helicopter mode after he saw the ABB cape turn her grenade launcher towards him.

It didn't deter her as she pulled a grenade from her belt and threw it at him. A blast from Warpath intercepted it and the grenade exploded, releasing a massive shockwave that shattered nearby windows and bounced Blades around like a leaf in a hurricane.

The blast also knocked the cape off her feet.

Rolling behind another car, she climbed unsteadily to her feet and loaded more grenades into her launcher.

With a calculating look, she stepped out from behind the car. "Try and stop this!" she shouted as she fired grenade after grenade in random directions. Some grenades arched over cars and others
bounced off walls.

The Autobots were forced to dive for cover as the world went wild. Cars started to sink into the ground, out of phase with the world around them. Others floated upwards, trapped in a localised anti-gravity field. Amongst them was Groove.

The facade of a nearby building was covered in a foam-like substance while ice crawled up the walls. A bright purple grenade created a short-lived vortex that started pulling objects towards itself. The cars closest to the effect started to crumple under the pressure.

Another purple grenade flew towards a building just as a blue one sailed towards Warpath. Swinging his turret, he aimed at the purple grenade, blasting it even as he tried to retreat. The blue grenade exploded mere feet away, coating his front end in a thick crystalline substance.

His systems shorted out even as the weight of the crystal pulled him to the ground.

In the pause in battle that followed, the cape turned to her remaining henchmen. "Well? Move it!"

With the Autobots down, they smashed open the back of the truck and started grabbing crates.

##

(Taylor)

I kept my attention on the growing plume of smoke in the distance, flying at full speed. Behind me, Dragon was plowing through the air in her beast mode.

Rewind had been keeping me updated, but I was close enough to feel it when Warpath went down.

Soaring over the wall of ice, I saw the battle below me. First Aid and some civilians were trapped in a nearby alley, Groove was caught in an antigrav field, Streetwise was pinned under a wrecked car, and Hotspot was behind a shield wall with more civilians.

The delivery truck was stuck in what looked like crystal and the back had been broken open. Some ABB thugs were loading a crate onto the back of a quad bike. As the roads were blocked, it was the only thing small enough to get down one of the side streets.

Bringing up my Null-Ray, I fired a warning shot near the bike, shattering the pavement. The gang members closest to it scattered. Upping the power even further, I blasted the crate.

They were not leaving here intact.

The crate shattered and was swallowed in a fireball as the bike's fuel tank exploded.

On the ground, an ABB cape who I assumed was Bakuda swung a grenade launcher in my direction. Closing my wings, I let myself fall, trusting my AG-Parachute to catch me even as a massive shockwave buffeted against my shields.

Before I reached the ground, Dragon was there underneath me. She hit the street on all fours, spread her wings and roared. Landing on her back, I grabbed hold with my left hand and aimed my Null-Ray at the remaining gang members.

Several of them dropped their weapons and held their hands up. However, one tried to run, only for Bakuda to turn her weapon towards him.

When nothing happened, she swore loudly and threw herself sideways to avoid my shot. Jumping
off Dragon’s back, I took to the air and gave chase. I couldn’t give her the chance to reload.

Behind me, I could hear Dragon transforming even as she ran after us.

I caught Bakuda around the waist from behind and drove her to the ground. Her launcher skittered across the ground, coming to rest under a half-melted car.

I'd added a taser function to the armour on my left arm recently and was just about to try it out when I saw Bakuda grab something from her belt.

I pushed off the ground hard and my antigrav system kicked in, reducing my weight enough that my enhanced strength threw me into the air.

Bakuda’s grenade launcher exploded, shredding the remains of the car and turning it into shrapnel. Bringing up my HL-shield, I was able to deflect most of the larger fragments while my personal shield dealt with any of the small pieces that made it through.

Battered and bleeding, Bakuda climbed to her feet, another detonator already in her hands.

"Next time, it's your head!" she screamed at me.

Hesitating, I landed next to Dragon.

"Give it up, Bakuda, there is no way out." Dragon said, probably hoping to calm things down.

"You think I don't have a backup plan? I've got bombs all over this city, so if you fuckers come near me, I'll detonate them all!"

"And who told you to do that?" Rumbled a deep, accented voice.

Lung walked calmly out of a nearby alley, looking almost relaxed amongst the carnage. The sensors in my suit picked up on his rapidly rising body temperature and the tension in his muscles.

"Lung, what are you doing here?" Bakuda asked, taking a step back. There was a slight tremor to her voice.

"I… [I wanted to prove myself.] Bakuda's Japanese was halting and broken. If I had to guess, she wasn't a native speaker.

Moving closer, Lung's fist shot out. There was a sound of striking meat and Bakuda hit the ground. Stepping forwards, he grabbed the Tinker and threw her over his shoulder.

Throughout it all, Dragon had a hand on my shoulder.

"My… subordinate acted without orders. She will be punished. You may keep the others," he said as he turned to leave.

I shot Dragon a disbelieving look. Was she really just going to let them go?

[That's not good enough, Lung! People have died here today. I can't just let you take her.] Dragon said, smoothly swapping languages as she stepped forwards. She used the hand on my shoulder to push me backwards, putting me just behind and to the side of her.
I shifted my Null-Ray to its highest stun setting. If I could hit Lung quickly enough, I should be able to put him down.

"You do not have a choice in the matter. Do you really think you can stop me?" Lung said, giving us a dismissive look. In that moment, I dearly wanted to blast him.

Dragon shot me a warning look and turned back to Lung. "I could always throw you in the bay again, if that's what you want."

That got his attention. Turning towards us, he was practically growing. "You may try, but how many people are you willing to hurt? All for the sake of a single Tinker. Lee!"

At Lung's shout, Oni Lee appeared at his side. He was wearing a flak jacket covered in oddly shaped grenades., If I had to guess, they were more of Bakuda's work. Lee was holding a detonator in his hands.

Two more Lees appeared by the nearby buildings and a third behind us. After a few seconds, all of them except the one in front of us crumbled to dust. The threat was explicit.

Leaving Oni Lee behind, Lung walked away. He stopped briefly by the side of the road and looked back at Dragon.

Watching him leave, I clenched my fists. It was disgusting that people like him felt like they could do whatever they liked.

Him, Kaiser, even the Undersiders. We couldn't even go after them outside of costume because all they had to do was threaten to hurt people.

I didn't need my connection to Dragon to know how she was feeling. The raised wings and twitching tail showed just how angry she was at the situation.

Once Lung was out of sight, Oni Lee stepped forward. [Lung wants you to know. The province the Simurgh attacked... it was home to the Yangban... ]

Dragon straightened in surprise. "He's sure?"

[Yes.] Before Dragon could ask anything else, he crumbled to dust.

##

It would take hours for the ice walls to melt, which forced the emergency services to come through the side streets on foot.

First Aid helped the EMTs treat people. Among them was Amy, who passed one of the EMTs the prototype scanner.

Meanwhile, Dragon and Hotspot placed small explosive charges at select spots on one of the ice walls. The explosions were timed to coincide with explosives placed by the PRT on the other side. They'd then be able to haul off the ice chunks before they could melt and flood the streets.

While that was going on, I turned my attention to my bots. The Protectobots were more or less unhurt, just a few scratches and dents.

Blades and I were trying to rescue Groove. Using a broom that Blades had 'borrowed', I stood on the hood of a car just outside of the effect and offered the other end to Groove. Once he had a tight grip,
I pulled him free of the anomaly.

As soon as he crossed the border, Groove fell heavily to the ground. Thankfully, he landed on his feet. After that, the pair of them went to free Streetwise while I dealt with the only real Autobot injury.

My suit could display the status of any of my bots if I chose, even if they were in stasis lock, but the crystal boulder which covered most of Warpath's front end and cannon was blocking any attempts to get a damage report.

His spark was still burning, I could feel it, but I wouldn't know if there was damage to his processor until I could examine him. Kneeling next to the tiny tank, I placed a hand on his flank and let my power map him out.

Seeing how the crystal had ruptured several important areas was worrying. He was leaking internally, energon and coolant pooling near the bottom of his chassis. Thankfully, his spark chamber and processor were deep enough to escape the worst of it.

"Will he be okay?" Amy asked, making me jump. I'd been so focused on Warpath I'd never noticed her approach.

I looked over my shoulder at her, she had a genuine look of concern on her face.

"Yeah, he's in stasis-lock - a protective coma - but he's stable." I looked at the crystal and the way it had fused with not only his armour, but his sub-frame and protoform.

"Can't your power fix him?"

"I can't. He's too large and the damage is too extensive. At this point, It'll be quicker and simpler to build him a new body."

Amy knelt down next to me and placed a hand on Warpath. "Huh… you know, I can almost see him. With my power, I mean."

Off to the side, there was a small explosion as a hole was blasted in the ice wall. Amy and I briefly turned to look before getting back to our conversation.

"I thought your power only worked on organic matter?"

"It does," she said with a frown, "but something about him feels… alive, I guess. I can't change anything, but my power knows they're alive, if you get what I mean."

"Yeah, I do," I said with a chuckle. "Still, I need to get him to a workshop. Want to come?"

Amy gave me a wan smile. "Sorry, I need to stick around for now." With a wave, she walked off towards the truck drivers. Somehow they had made it through this mess completely unharmed.

With a path now cleared, emergency services were able to get vehicles in to help people. Amy had done what she could, but there were some people with head injuries that needed to be taken to hospital.

A pair of PRT vans also came through. At Dragon's instruction, they pulled up by the stricken delivery truck and started transferring the remaining cargo. I'd destroyed one of the crates, but several others had been smashed open by the ABB.
We wouldn't know if anything here was missing until they had a chance to do a full inventory. Or until someone was stupid enough to try using one. With all the Tinkers around, it was too risky to build a remote shutdown into the jackets, but we had fitted them all with tracking devices.

Dragon had already checked the trackers and nothing showed up outside of this small area, but it was best to assume that some had been taken.

When I spoke to Dragon about Warpath, she had a small flatbed commandeered to take me and all the Autobots to her workshop as it was closer than my own.

Despite the situation, I was kinda excited. Dragon had put a space aside for me at her workshop, but this would be my first time actually using it.

##

Getting Warpath on and off the truck was easier than it should have been. I stuck a couple of antigravity disks to him, reducing his weight and making it easy to lift him, crystal boulder and all.

The only odd thing I noticed while examining Warpath on the way to the workshop was how quickly he'd lost power. The best I could guess was that the crystal somehow drained his systems.

My new workbench groaned as I turned off the disk and Warpath's weight returned to normal, but it didn't look like the was going to collapse.

There was a flash as Wheeljack and Perceptor teleported in.

"I've already got Romie working on a new frame for him," Jack said, hefting a large grinder. "It should take about four hours."

"Great, thanks Jack. Percy, any chance you can examine this crystal? I'd like to know anything you could tell me."

"Certainly," Perceptor said, climbing up to the crystal boulder and picking at it. "Assuming we're able to isolate a sample for analysis of course. Based on a visual evaluation however, I can can give you a rough calculation of its capabilities..."

I still I had my helmet on, so he couldn't see my face, but Percy must have realised he was rambling.

Making a throat clearing sound, he picked up a hammer and struck the side of the crystal. It produced an odd ringing noise, but the crystal was otherwise unharmed.

"In other words?" I prompted.

"This stuff is tougher than your dad's old curry," Jack said as he swapped the disk on his grinder for a stronger one.

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. "Right, Jack you help me with this. First Aid, can you take care of your teammates?"

"Of course," the little medic said, leading them over to a smaller work bench.

Grabbing some tools, I started trying to loosen a panel on Warpath's armour plating. I wanted to make sure his sense of pain was disabled before I started cutting, and that required a hardline connection.

I was almost through when I heard the clattering of claws.
"T~aylor!" Predaqueen came running round the corner and skidded to a stop by my legs.

"Taylor! D-did you come to play? What happened t-to Patchy, is he okay?"

I chuckled, stroking her head. "Calm down. What did Dragon tell you about talking too fast?"

Despite how it sounded, her stutter wasn't a speech problem. She was simply trying to talk too fast and her vocal system couldn't keep up. She also couldn't say Warpath for some reason.

I'd seen younger kids at public events do the same thing.

"Think, pause, then talk," Predaqueen said with an attempt at a pout. She didn't really have the lips for it to work.

"Thats right. Now, Warpath is going to be fine, but I need to fix him so I can't play right now. Okay?"

"Okay…" she said, her wings and tail drooping. In an effort to cheer her up, I summoned Steeljaw and Ravage to the workshop.

Pointing Steeljaw at Predaqueen, I gave him one simple order: "Go play." That was all the big cat needed to hear. Nuzzling her side, he soon had Predaqueen giggling. As the pair of them ran off, I turned to Ravage.

"Keep an eye on them," I told him. He gave me a long flat look before walking after them with a huff.

I'd have to make a point of sending some of my bots here to keep her entertained when Dragon was out.

With them gone, I went back to work. It took nearly another twenty minutes to get through the thick armour and establish a connection. With that done, I was able to grab the largest cutting tool I could and get to work.

##

Two hours, nearly a dozen diamond tipped cutting disks, a blown router and a lot of cursing later, I threw my cutting tool down in disgust.

This crystal was stupidly dense. I don't know how Bakuda made it, but I had barely made any headway in removing it.

Wheeljack had blunted several drills punching a hole in the bottom of the crystal just so we could drain the leaking energon. After that, he had wandered off to follow up on an idea he'd had, leaving me to carry on working alone.

Perceptor had run off earlier with one of the larger pieces of crystal and was already busy studying it.

I didn't need to clear everything, just enough that I could safely remove Warpath's spark and processor, which were near the center of his alt-mode.

It was time for a break, so I dropped onto a stool and started removing my chest plate. I'd never actually worn my costume for this long, and it was starting to get uncomfortable. Removing the armour plating would help, but I needed to keep the body suit on, since the enhanced strength was useful when doing physical labor.
There was a bottle of Gatorade and a turkey sandwich on the side; Predaqueen had brought them to me twenty minutes ago. Grabbing the bottle and one of the two sandwich slices, I let my mind wander.

Three people had died in Bakuda's attack. But at least the PRT had some of their shields now. Maybe they could finally start pushing the gangs back. I tried not to think about what Oni Lee had said about the Yangban.

From what I knew, they were government sponsored heroes in the CUI. According to Dragon, there were rumors of them kidnapping and brainwashing capes. Was them being exposed to the Simurgh ironic, tragic or terrifying?

Shivering, I pushed the thought away and focused on other things. With the gangs fighting each other again, Maybe I should start doing more solo patrols.

I was still considering the idea when Wheeljack returned, followed by one of the ceiling mounted waldos. It looked like he'd stripped it down and bolted a mess of wires and lenses to it. He was also carrying what looked like a grinder, but without the disk.

"Hey Taylor, I think I have a solution," he said happily. "I've managed to build a laser strong enough to cut through the crystal. Plus I was able to get a shaped, moving field working with the hard light system."

He passed me the 'grinder'. I could see parts of a hard light system mixed in with it. Plugging the cord into a nearby socket, I carefully held it away from me and turned it on. A glowing blue disk appeared, where the cutting disk would go. It was hard to actually see it move because it was made out of a shaped force field, but I could certainly hear the faint whirr as I depressed the button.

Shutting it down, I grabbed my helmet for protection. With it on, I started up the cutter and pressed it to the crystal. Immediately, sparks began to fly and I had to tighten my grip to avoid the device flying out of my hands. Maybe I should integrate the power button into the handle in the next version, so losing control would automatically turn it off?

Stepping back, I looked at the deep gash I'd carved into the crystal. "Well, if nothing else, that works," I said a bit breathlessly.

Jack chuckled and pulled a tablet out of subspace. I watched as he moved the waldo into position and activated the laser. My display automatically adjusted to block out the light as the laser turned on. Slowly, it carved a large chunk of crystal off.

Between the laser and the cutter, it took only another hour to finally reach Warpath's spark.

With the majority of his systems now exposed, I was able to hook up an energon and coolant feed. I had to bypass the damaged areas, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about him offlining while I waited for his new body to finish.

Of course it would only take another hour or so for that to happen, so I decided to stick around. Maybe I could play with Predaqueen?

I picked up a piece of crystal, about the size of my thumb. It was almost pretty, glowing in shades of blue and white depending how the light hit the multifaceted surface. Given the effect on Warpath, I suspected it could absorb energy. If that was the case, maybe I could find a use for it.

Holding it up to the light, I realised I could feel a small tug on my power, like the crystal was trying to draw my power in. Curious, I let the energy flow from my body into the crystal, and it slowly
started to glow.

Surprised, and a little concerned, I put the fragment down and watched as it continued to glow. Thanks to Armsmaster, I knew Dragon had devices that could detect the energy I gave off. Leaving the crystal alone, I went to find one.

When I returned, the crystal was still glowing. According to the readout, the amount of energy it was giving off was small and slowly diminishing. Staring at the glowing crystal, an idea started to form.

There was an odd tingling in my arm, phantom sensations from a dream I could barely remember.

//...Reach out and take hold of the flame...//

I felt something in my mind shift as everything fell into place.

//This is the Matrix of our souls.//

No… It couldn't be that simple… Could it?

Digging through the off-cuts of crystal, I found one large enough for what I was planning and grabbed Rewind off the workbench.

"Windblade, are you still at the Rig? I need you to grab some things and teleport to me with them."

Before she had a chance to reply, I pulled Rewind away from my ear and looked towards the nearest monitor. "Romie, connect to Teletraan and access my completed project files."

While she was doing that, I went back to Windblade. "Yeah, the blue box. Just hold on tight and the teleporter will send you both through, thanks!"

Hanging up, I moved to the nearest terminal and started flicking through the completed designs. If this worked, there were so many ideas I wanted to try. It was hard to choose.

In the end, I picked one of the smaller protoforms. Unlike the others, she wouldn't require any overly specialised parts.

"Romie, how long will it take to build this?" I called out.

"Due to current production queue, time till completion: 58 hours," the VI replied.

"Fuck!" I dialed Dragon, hoping I could get her to move up the timetable a bit.

*Taylor? Is something wrong? Did something happen to Warpath?" Dragon asked, concern in her voice.

"What? No, he's fine. But I think I've worked out how to finish that energy storage device!" Behind me, there was a flash as Windblade and my unfinished device appeared.

"The crystal Bakuda left behind can store my power! It's not perfect, but I think I can use it to create larger bots!"

I just needed to shape it to fit. Holding Rewind with my shoulder, I grabbed Jack's tablet and started up the laser control program. It looked like Wheeljack had customised the software from a 3D printer.

Flipping open the box, I grabbed the paper notes from inside so I could use them to cut the crystal to exactly the shape I needed.
Hanging up the phone, Dragon appeared on the nearby monitor. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, the crystal absorbs energy and I've already built a vessel that can direct that energy. It all just clicked into place!" I could barely hold still long enough to enter the commands. This was the biggest breakthrough I'd made since the shield units. Maybe bigger.

Six autobots, none of them more than four feet tall, had held Bakuda and a team of ABB members at bay. What would have happened if they'd been six feet tall?

"Okay Taylor, I'll have Romie move the protoform to the front of the production list," Dragon said, her avatar smiled in excitement. "I'm still dealing with the PRT. When I'm done, I'll come give you a hand. The protoform should be finished in ten hours."

It took me nearly an hour to create a roughly spherical shape that would fit inside the vessel. Splitting the vessel in two, I placed the still warm crystal inside and closed it up. There was a sense of finality as the two halves clicked together.

In theory, it would only need to be close to me to charge up. Even now, just putting my hand near it, I could feel the slight drain.

Putting some chains through the handles, I hung it from my neck. It felt a little awkward, given it was the size of a tennis ball, but almost immediately I could feel it drawing on my powers.

It was a noticeable drain, but nowhere near what I felt when sparking a bot.

"If this works, what are you going to call it?" Dragon asked, splitting her attention between me and the PRT.

"I was thinking I'd call it the Matrix," I said slowly.

"Naming it after yourself?" Dragon asked with a smirk.

"No, I named myself after it. I've been dreaming about ever since I got my powers… is that strange?" I asked with a touch of worry.

"No more than usual for capes," Dragon said with a laugh.

Not wanting to rush things too much, I left the Matrix hanging round my neck while I returned to work on Warpath.

---

In the end, I wound up spending the night at Dragon's workshop. By the time I'd finished swapping Warpath into his new body, it was already getting late and I wanted to be here when the new protoform was completed.

I spent my time either working, playing with Predaqueen, or meditating. Miss Militia had suggested it when I told her I didn't need to sleep. I didn't really see the point at first, since I preferred to work or read.

Now, however, I decided to give it a try. I closed my eyes and focused on my power, feeling it moving through my body and into the crystal. It was odd at first, but it started to feel normal after a little while. I'd have to see about modifying my armour so I could fit the Matrix inside.

I didn't realise it at the time, but Dragon was monitoring every move I made. I was so wrapped up in
my thoughts I never noticed her approach.

Her polite cough scared the daylights out of me.

"Dragon! Don't do that!" I said, gasping for air. "How long have you been there, anyway?"

"I'm sorry," she said, not looking even remotely sorry. "I got back over an hour ago, and I've been watching you over the camera system. You haven't moved in nearly two hours. Are you sure you don't need sleep?"

I climbed back to my feet, sticking my tongue out. "I wasn't sleeping, I was meditating," I protested, then laughed when I realised how weak that sounded. "I was focusing on charging the Matrix." I took it off, letting Dragon hold it.

As she held it in her hands, the crystal pulsed with light and the collection of small scratches and repair marks on her body mended themselves.

Dragon shook herself. "That was… interesting. Did you know it could do that?"

"No, but I'm not surprised either," I said with a shrug. The energy I gave off could heal my bots, so it made sense that the Matrix would do the same. "What time is it anyway?"

"Nearly seven in the morning," Dragon said, handing the Matrix back. "The protoform you asked for is complete."

I broke into a smile, practically bouncing on the spot. It was ready? I was about to run to the production room when I remembered Dragon was there. Blushing, I forced myself to walk calmly and ignore her quiet chuckle.

The protoform had already been moved to a recharge berth alongside Warpath, a type of 'bed' Jack designed for a bot to sleep on. A small device on the side would then connect to their wrist and pump energon or fresh coolant into their systems.

From the attached readout, its energon tank was full and all its systems were good to go.

I'd picked a female protoform for this bot. In terms of height, she was a bit taller than me, with a mostly blue paint scheme and the odd bit of pink highlighting.

Holding the Matrix in both hands, I considered how I was going to do this. I was certain I had the energy; the crystal in the core was lit up like a Christmas tree. I just needed to work out how to move it into the protoform.

I tried pressing it against the protoform and pushing my power through it. The glow brightened, but my power wouldn't make the jump into the protoform.

Trying a different tactic, I let the Matrix rest on its chain and put both hands on the protoform. I waited until my power had finished mapping out every inch of the frame before I took a deep breath and pushed.

Immediately, the world went white. Bolts of energy arced through the air and crawled down my arms from the Matrix to the protoform. I could see small imperfections and faults mending before my eyes. The empty spark chamber burst into life as the spark ignited, filling the body with life.

Just like that, it was done. Letting go, I staggered backwards only to be caught by Dragon.
"I'm okay!" I insisted. It was true, there had been no pain or weakness. The shock of it all had just taken my breath away.

On the recharge berth, the protoform sat up and looked around curiously. It would take some time for her personality to emerge, but I'd done it. I'd created a human sized Autobot.

This was just the beginning. I already had plans for more bots. Medics, soldiers, scientists. I was going to build them all. Maybe then we could finally push the gangs out of the city.

All I needed was a little time and a lot of luck.

An: so now we reach the point a lot of you have been waiting for.

Taylor has her Matrix. This scene has been planned ever since I started the story. (mostly) I always planned for Bakuda to be responsible for Taylor finishing the matrix, but how it happened has changed a few times.

Now, i'm going to make something clear. We have probably reached the size limit of the bots for this fic. I never planned for them to go beyond human sized. (In truth, I never planned for them to go beyond a foot tall or speak english. The autobots were originally supposed to be on scale with the 'friendbringers'- The cute mini endbringers from the fic With Friends Like These.)

Yeah, yeah, I know blah blah blah, transformers, giant robots, curb stomp everything, blah blah blah Optimus Prime blah blah blah. :D ← Don't take this personally, you guys have been great.

The simple fact is this, I like character interaction, I enjoy writing it and it's hard to do when one of the charas is 5x the height of the others. As the above fight (hopefully) shows the bots [i]don't[/i] need to be 20+ feet tall to hold their own.

I want the humans to matter and that means things need to stay on their scale. And before someone mentions the EB or scion; I already have plans for them. trust me, you're going to love them (i hope).

Maybe it's just me, but I can't put humans and full scale transformers in a story, esp when they are fighting other humans, and still consider the humans relevant.

I expect I've just put a lot of people off this fic and i'm sorry but that's how I've always planned this story to go. That being said, I'm not totally ruling out larger bots just don't expect anything larger than Dragon for awhile.

Next up: Interlude 9: Lisa.
(The day before the Lung fight.)

"Are you sure?... I don't think we'll get away from Lung a second time... Yeah, I'll let him know."

Sighing, Lisa hung up. The last thing she wanted was a team meeting. Still, orders were orders and she didn't need her power to know time was running out. Coil hid it well, but he was excited about... something. He's found something important. High value, will risk me for it. Information? No, a cape?... Must be a new cape...

Shaking her head, Lisa forced her power down. Getting a headache before dealing with her 'team' was not a good idea.

Shooting Brian a text about needing a meeting, she sat in her room for a little while longer, giving herself time to plan. The Undersiders weren't important anymore. Whatever plans the boss had in store for them had been scrapped. They were cannon fodder now and the last charge was about to be ordered.

So how would she get out of it?

Sighing again, she guessed she'd given Brian enough time and left her room. She stopped briefly to bang on Alec's door.

When he opened it, she spared the half-naked young girl on his bed a brief glance: Runaway, found her nearby. Not being controlled. Suppressing her power again, she focused on Alec.

"The boss wants to see you. Now. He's sending a car to collect you." She spared another glance at his companion, just to confirm that the girl wasn't being controlled.

Alec could take full control of a person's body after only a few short hours. She knew he used to do it all the time before he joined the Undersiders, and she needed to know if he'd fallen back into old habits.

Alec rolled his eyes. Leaning against the door frame, he smirked. "What's the matter, Tats, scared?"

Lisa smiled sweetly. "Not really. If you even considered jacking me, I'd kill you. Now get your ass moving." She was bluffing of course. She'd never actually killed someone, but if it came down to it, she'd do whatever it took to keep herself safe.

She could feel him watching as she walked away and the skin on her back crawled at the thought. She'd only gone a few steps when her foot jerked under her. She managed to catch herself on the wall and glared back at the still smirking Alec.

"Mind your step," he said, going back into his room and shutting the door.

Cursing him, she continued on her way. This wasn't a team, it was a time bomb, and the fuse was lit.

In the main room, Chariot - Trevor - was playing a computer game while Trainwreck watched. Seeing her enter, the larger man scowled and stood up, preparing to leave. After their little argument, which he'd been smart enough to keep quiet about, he'd been avoiding her.

"Team meeting as soon as Brian gets here," she called before he could reach the door.
Not waiting for them to reply, she entered the kitchen and made herself some coffee while she waited.

Now how was she going to sell this?

##

It took Brian another twenty minutes to arrive, which struck her as odd. He had a place near Empire territory, but even with the tension between the gangs he never usually ran into trouble.

She was just considering giving him a call when she heard the front door open. A minute later, he stormed into the kitchen, followed by Trevor and Trainwreck.

"Sorry, I had to deal with something." He gave her a meaningful look. "What's up?"

*His sister. Things are getting worse for her at home.* She didn't know the full details behind Brian's home life, only that protecting his sister was part of his trigger.

"Don't worry about it. The boss has another job for us. He wants us to hit some business for him. We can take whatever we want, but the buildings need to burn when we leave."

"Hitting a joint I can understand, but torching them?" Brian asked, leaning forwards.

Lisa shrugged. "The boss wants the land. It's in a good spot if you could get the gangs out."

"Really, land snatching? What is this, the wild west?" Trevor asked with a laugh.

Brian gave him a dirty look but otherwise ignored him. "So where are they?"

Bracing herself, Lisa told them the addresses. This was the part she knew was going to be a hard sell.

"Lammden Street… Are you fucking kidding me?" he didn't quite shout. "That's ABB territory. What do you think Lung's gonna do if he finds out we're on his turf!?"

"Hey, if that's what the boss wants," Trainwreck said with a shrug.

"I dunno, it does sounds risky," Trevor said. "We've avoided him for a reason."

"Yes, it's a risk," Lisa agreed, sighing, "but it's not like we really have a choice. The boss said Lung will be distracted. There's a meeting going on tomorrow night so we'll only have to deal with Oni Lee at worst."

"Yeah, cause that's so much better," Brian said with all the sarcasm he could muster.

"Look at it this way, one of the targets is where the ABB launders money, and the other is a betting shop. Plenty of cash for everyone and we don't have to give any of it to the boss. Besides, losing Bitch hurt our reputation. Lung beat us and everyone knows it. We need to hit back at the ABB if we want people to take us seriously."

Brian didn't respond, and when he stared off into the distance, she knew she had him. Reputation was important to Brian. If the Undersiders wanted to be more than a group of kids playing dressup, more than Uber and Leet, they had to work for it.

"Where's Regent? shouldn't he be here?" Trainwreck asked, changing the subject. "Or are you trying to cut him out?"
"He's not in on this one. The boss needs him for another job," Lisa said, not even bothering to hide her dislike for the missing member.

"Well, that's something at least," Brian muttered, running a hand down his face. "Okay, like you said, it's not like we've got a choice anyway."

"Damn right," Trainwreck said with a nod.

Trevor shrugged. "Guess I'm in too."

They spent nearly an hour working out a rough plan for the hits before Brian received a call and had to leave.

Her power told her that his sister was in trouble yet again, something that lingered on her mind after she returned to her bedroom.

She'd never met Aisha, but she sounded like a real handful. Maybe she should introduce herself sometime? Little sisters needed to stick together after all.

Despite the melancholy the thought of being related to Brian brought, she had to admit the image wasn't unpleasant.

Brian was devoted to his sister. You only needed to get him talking about her to see that. She was kinda jealous. Her relationship with Reggie had never been great, and it had only gotten worse as they grew up.

Her power made it almost impossible to have romantic relationships, but she could always adopt Brian as a brother.

Sitting on her bed, Lisa laughed. Maybe she should make it official, print out a couple of adoption certificates? She was sure she could make a passable forgery of the document or an official looking certificate. Brian's face if she ever gave it to him would be priceless.

As funny as this diversion was, it wasn't helping. If they didn't get away from Coil, none of them had a future.

Coil's long term plans didn't include the Undersiders. If they did include her, she suspected it involved locking her in a room and pumping her up with whatever hellish drug his chem-Tinker came up with.

The problem was figuring out a way to escape. She couldn't just run, and if she went to the PRT she'd be dead by evening. Her original plan of subverting his organisation from the inside was all but destroyed, and Coil had made it clear he wouldn't tolerate her trying again.

So if a long term plan was out, what about something sudden and impulsive?

Slowly, she felt herself smile as a familiar feeling surfaced. It was the same rush she got when pulled out some dirty little secret, it was the part of herself that thrilled in knowing more that her opponent.

Coil had let her plan her escape, just so he could crush her. He thought he could out think her? Fine, she'd just change the game without telling him.

Getting up, she grabbed her jacket and checked her reflection in the mirror. She looked presentable
enough, even if her hair was still shorter than she'd like.

Picking up her keys, she headed for the front door.

"Hey Tats, where you going?" Trevor asked as she passed through the front room.

She cringed at Chariot's voice, but tried not to let it show when she turned to him. "Just going to the mall. I feel like doing some shopping."

"Great, I'll come with you," he said, standing up. "I've got some stuff I want to grab."

*Acting under orders, won't let me go anywhere without an escort.* Her power supplied. She'd already known Coil had his men following her, but she'd hoped to slip away quietly.

Still, she could deal with this. Chariot wasn't as bright as he thought he was. It would just take a bit of finesse.

##

Lisa climbed on the bus, trying to put some distance between herself and Trevor. He seemed to think that just because they were villains, they needed alibis. Never mind that no one knew who they were.

Apparently, he thought it would be a good idea for them to act like a couple on a date. Grabbing a seat, she grimaced as he sat down next to her and placed an arm around her shoulders so he could pull her close.

She turned towards him and took the hand on her shoulder in her own, stroking her fingers across his knuckles before suddenly driving her nails deep into the skin.

Trevor made a strangled squeak and tried to pull away, but she drove her nails in deeper.

"Don't push your luck!" she hissed as she released his hand. She'd had enough of the little creep and his obsession. She'd even started scanning the shower for cameras before using it.

She hadn't found anything yet, but if she ever did, well... Coil wouldn't complain too much if she killed the Tinker for that. He had spare Tinkers after all.

##

When they reached the mall, Trevor stayed a safe distance behind and to the side of Lisa as she walked through the doors.

Unfortunately for her, her warning hadn't stuck.

They had barely passed the first store when he stepped next to her and attempted to put an arm around her waist. Without looking in his direction, she made a point of examining her nails. Picking up on the threat, Trevor dropped his arm and stepped away.

They spent a little while just browsing through the stores. Trevor stopped briefly in an electronics store to pick up a collection of parts and a magazine.

Several times, she walked into the larger women's clothing stores and watched carefully to see how Trevor reacted.

She also stopped by a store to buy a couple of new phones: a smartphone she knew would be bugged the moment it was out of her sight and a couple of cheap disposables.
They stopped briefly for lunch and Lisa pulled out one of the disposable phones. It was an older, flip style phone. Installing the sim card, she fitted the battery and turned it on. There wasn't much charge on it, but it was enough for a quick call.

"I don't know why you bother with those," Trevor said as he helped himself to his rather large lunch. "We could probably get something better from the boss if we asked. Maybe some Tinkertech."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Yes, and I'm sure the boss would be happy for us to just throw them away. That's why I buy these, I can make a few calls and dump them."

While he was distracted with his lunch, Lisa slipped the phone into her pocket and the box back into its bag. She'd only bought a small sandwich compared to his full meal and was finished first. She waited until he was exactly halfway through before standing up.

"Aren't you going to finish your lunch?"

"I already have. There's something I want to look at. Why don't you wait here?" She didn't expect him to let her go, but watching him struggle between finishing his lunch and following orders was funny.

With one last longing look, he picked up his tray and followed her across the food court. Holding the tray in one hand, he stuffed as much as he could into his mouth before throwing the rest into the bin.

As she approached the store, she made a point to look away from him since she didn't want to give herself away. Still trying to keep the smile off her face, she walked casually into a lingerie store.

As expected, Trevor stopped dead at the doorway. He hovered uncertainly for a moment or two before turning around and walking away, taking up position by a pillar near the door with his hands in his pockets.

Lisa smirked. For all his swagger, Trevor was still a teenage boy. Threaten him with a box of tampons or a lingerie store and he'd run a mile.

Confident she couldn't be seen by him, she approached the cashier, doing her best to look worried, wringing her hands and biting her lip.

The young woman behind the counter frowned. "Excuse me, are you alright?"

Lisa quickly glanced around, like she was worried someone was going to jump out at her. "Yes, it's just... there's a creep standing outside staring at the windows. He's got his hands in his pockets," she said with a knowing look and a shudder.

The cashier groaned and palmed her face. "Oh god, not another one. Don't worry, I'll contact security. Why don't you take a look around?"

The moment the cashier was out of sight, Lisa broke into a broad smile. That had been easier than expected, but now came the hard part. She pulled the burner phone she'd just bought out of her pocket and dialed a number.

"Hello and welcome to Dragon's Lair Research and Development. So we can process your call more efficiently, please select from the following options," the pre-recorded message said. Automated system, uses keywords to filter and screen calls.

Right, she thought as she grabbed some clothes off the hangers and ducked into a changing room, this shouldn't be hard. "My name is Tattletale and I'm a member of the Undersiders. I want to
surrender myself to your custody and yours alone. I have a safehouse at 28 Fellmont Street. You can contact me there in two days time. It is being monitored by my employer, who will kill me if he sees you." Nearly grinding her teeth, she forced herself to say, "I'm willing to do anything you want. Just help me." With that, she hung up the phone and dropped it into her pocket.

That last part had hurt. She'd prided herself on her independence, what little of it Coil let her have. Asking for someone else to save her made her feel like she'd given up, that he'd finally won. Still, this wasn't just about her anymore.

Unlike the PRT, Dragon was a known quantity. Coil had a few people in the factory she'd built, but her private workshop was a fortress and the only known employee was Matrix. As long as she was with Dragon, Coil wouldn't be able to touch her.

That just left Brian. She knew this would hurt him. No matter what, he was going to see this as a betrayal. But if everything worked, he and his sister would be safe.

Looking through the items she'd picked out, she grabbed the few things she actually liked and made her way to the register.

The woman behind the counter looked up and smiled as she approached. "Security found the creep you were talking about. They dragged him off while you were gone."

Lisa did her best to act relieved and not cackle. "That's great, thanks. Seriously, what is wrong with some people?"

"I know right!" The cashier laughed as she totaled everything up.

Halfway to the mall doors, Lisa dumped her phone into a bin.

Outside, she found Trevor pacing by the curb. She couldn't keep herself from smirking when he spotted her.

"What the fuck was that about?" he hissed as he stormed towards her.

"I don't know what you mean," she said with almost complete honesty. She'd always been a skilled liar.

"Bullshit! They were going to call the fucking cops, do you know that, you stupid cunt? How do you think the boss would react to that?" Trevor growled, getting dangerously close to her.

Not impressed, or even scared by his little tantrum, she rolled her eyes. "Yeah, 'cause you're going to tell him you got kicked out of the mall for being a creep."

She gave him a small shove, putting a bit more space between them. His lunch had been heavy on the garlic and the smell was starting to bother her.

"No, I'm going to tell him that you vanished, that you tried to run off." Trevor smirked. He probably thought he'd beaten her.

"No, no you're not. And do you know why?" She gave him the same smile that still sent Trainwreck running, "Because if you do, I'll tell the others everything. Do you think Grue knows about all the cameras you keep putting in my room? Or maybe I should give the Boston PD a call? How old did she tell you she was, Trev... How old was she really?"
Chariot's paling face suddenly reddened and he stepped forward, grabbing her arm painfully. She refused to react beyond a frown.

"Listen to me, you mouthy little bitch, I never touched anyone, especially not a fucking kid!"

He'd said too much and she could see in his face that he blew it.

"O~h I see. She was older than you then?… Who was she, a family friend, a teacher?" She gave him a knowing grin, fully aware they were starting to attract attention. "A little too hot for teacher were we?"

With a growl, he let go of her arm, but she stepped forward and grabbed him in return. She wasn't going to let him go that easy.

"Now you listen to me, what happened here? Never happened. We came to the mall, did some shopping, and went home. And if you even think about tell the boss, I'll go to Brian. We both know he can't stop himself playing the white knight. What do you think he'll do when he sees the bruises?"

The last was said as she rubbed her arm. She was going to have an impressive bruise there tomorrow, it was already starting to sting.

Red faced with temper, Chariot still managed to pale slightly. "Fine! You've done your shopping, let's go home."

As he stormed off towards the bus stop, Lisa walked along beside him and smiled.

"Sure… Oh! One last thing. No more fucking cameras, do I make myself clear?"

Trevor didn't say anything, but they both knew she'd won for now.

##

Two days later, citing a need for some alone time, Lisa made her way out of the loft. The hit on the ABB had gone off without a hitch and Regent had returned home the next morning. The fact his solo mission for the boss had been on the same night Lung fought with Kaiser wasn't lost on her.

Chariot had made a token gesture to follow her when she left, but she'd firmly shot him down.

She was getting a ride from some of the boss's people and they'd be keeping an eye on the place, so it wasn't like she could leave unnoticed.

The safe house she'd chosen was firmly in Empire territory. Personally she thought their so called 'supremacy' was nothing but bullshit, but a pretty blonde girl was probably safer than most.

She could just never bring Brian here.

Her apartment was halfway up the east side of the tower block in one of the better high-rises. While she could have afforded a penthouse, people would be more likely to notice if it went unused for long periods of time.

The decor inside was fairly plain, more or less the same as when she'd bought it. Cream walls with a few pictures to break things up, hardwood floors with a couple of thick rugs: one was by the side of her bed and the other in the middle of the living room.

Walking through the apartment, she almost screamed at the large rat sitting on her kitchen table.
"Ey! what's the matter? You never seen a rat before?" it asked, standing up on its hind legs. "Or were you expecting Mickey Mouse?"

Lisa rarely found herself speechless, but a large rat with a strong Bronx accent sitting on her table managed it.

Lisa pinched the bridge of her nose. "You're an Autobot… Dragon sent you because you can get in unseen…" She looked at his smug expression. "And because you can disable bugs."

Sitting on the table next to him was a small memory stick like device with a red LED on it.

"Not bad. Boss-lady wanted to make sure this wasn't a trick, so you get to talk to me. So, why should we bother helping your sorry ass?"

*Has built in lie detector. Doesn't like me, hate by association, hates Trainwreck for trying to kill his maker. Can't touch Trainwreck, but I'm fair game.* She tried not to groan. This was just what she needed: an interrogator with a grudge.

Sighing, she waved at the nearby counter. "You mind if I make myself a drink? What should I call you anyway?" She clamped down on her power. Guessing people's names was a good way to put them off balance, but she doubted her 'little-miss-psi' trick would go down well.

"Go ahead and call me Rattrap. You gotta problem with that, Lisa," he added at her raised eyebrow.

She wasn't too surprised he knew her name. He'd had two days to crawl through her apartment, after all. Still, she had to wonder, did the Autobots name themselves or was it Matrix who named them?

"You wanted to talk, so talk," he said, switching to robot-mode and sitting down.

Taking a seat with her coffee, Lisa wondered where to start. She needed to give them enough information to trust her, but keep enough that she stayed valuable. His lie detector would make things more difficult.

"The Undersiders didn't just happen, they have a backer who rounded them up and pays them to do jobs for him. I… I didn't join willingly. I was living on the streets when he found out about me, about my power. I was grabbed off the streets and taken to his base where he put a gun to my head and said I worked for him or died."

He'd actually been a bit more polite, offering to 'buy' her services and making it sound like a job interview. It was the man next to her that let her know exactly what would happen if she said no.

From the way Rattrap moved his shoulders and head, she got the impression he was rolling his eyes at her.

"Oh, cry me a river. Look, if you wanted to hand yourself in, you coulda just gone to the PRT. You called the boss-lady, why?"

He hid it well, but her power said her story had bothered him; he was just doing this to be difficult.

"He has people in the PRT. If I go to them, I'm dead by lunch time. If Dragon can keep me safe, I'll tell her everything I know, and I mean everything. Not just about my boss."

"What sorta info?"

"Regent is the one who killed those PRT officers. I also think he was involved in whatever happened
between Lung and Kaiser. He's one of Heartbreaker's kids."

Once, she would have felt bad about this, but after that night she knew he didn't care about any of them.

In a way, it was almost sad. It wasn't that he didn't care, but that he couldn't. Whatever Heartbreaker had put him through had screwed him up big time. He knew he was supposed to care about his teammates, but when everything went wrong he'd sell them all out.

"You want any more than that, you need to guarantee my safety," she said firmly.

Rattrap looked at her for a minute. *Listening to orders, has been transmitting everything I said in real time.* Eventually, he nodded. "Fine. There's a car in the underground lot. Get in and it'll take you to the boss-lady."

So that was it, just like that she was free of him. Now for the hard part.

"I can't… There's one more thing I need."

"Oh for booting up cold!" Rattrap groaned, palming his face. "Now what?"

"One of my teammates, Grue. He's not a bad guy, not really. I can't just leave him -"

"Fine! if your boy toy means that much to you, have him meet us at Dragon's workshop."

"I can't! It's not that simple. He joined to help his sister, the boss is providing him with money and legal assistance so he can adopt her. If Grue or I suddenly leave he *will* kill her. She's just a kid... " Okay, maybe she was laying it on a little thick, but she needed this to work.

There was a blue flash and a small, inexpensive looking phone appeared on the table. Almost immediately it started to ring. Barely glancing at Rattrap, Lisa answered it.

"Miss Tattletale, what you are asking for is not easy. I assume your partner is younger than eighteen? If so, his case would have to go to the PRT. I'm afraid I can't do more than make recommendations there," Dragon said without preamble. From the way Rattrap nodded along, Lisa knew he was listening in.

"I know, but I'll make it worthwhile. I'm a very good Thinker; if you can help Grue, I'll agree to work for you." Sure, she was trading one captor for another, but this one wouldn't kill her or worse.

There was a thoughtful silence. "Very well, I'll see what I can do. You understand that it will take me some time to arrange all this, a few days to a week at most. Will you be safe until then?"

"Yeah… I think so."

"Good, keep this phone with you. It's clean so you don't need to worry. If something happens, you can dial 'autobot' and it will connect to me. If necessary, either of you can come to my workshop directly. You will be protected there." With that, she hung up.

Lisa wasn't stupid. She knew Dragon could easily track the phone. If she took it back to the loft, there would be nothing stopping her from attacking the Undersiders in their own base. She didn't like it, but she would just have to trust Dragon to keep her word. Speaking of Dragon, Lisa hadn't expected her to be chatty, but the coldness of her voice was a little surprising. *Matrix isn't a Ward. She works for Dragon. Dragon is very fond of her, thinks of her as a*
With a groan, Lisa cursed Trainwreck for the umpteenth time and turned back to Rattrap.

"I suppose you'll be sticking around?"

"As much as I'd love to leave you in the mess you're in, I got orders to keep an eye on you. Now if you'll excuse me, I got a date with a battle bot." Jumping off the table, he walked into her living room where she heard the TV turn on.

_Battlebots huh?_ The show had remained popular over the years, even if Tinkers weren't allowed to enter. Still, after everything else that had happened, a little mindless violence would be cathartic.

Grabbing some food, she followed him into the living room. If she was going to work with them, it wouldn't hurt to get to know them.
Friday, the day before 9.4 (Saturday and Bakuda's attack)

Standing in his latest workshop, situated near the border of Coil's territory and hidden in a building purchased through shell companies managed by the snake themed villain, Knockout watched as his newest assistant put together the equipment he needed for his current project.

Knockout didn't know how many of these hideouts the boss had, but he was guessing a lot.

Nearly a dozen metal tables had been brought in and were now being assembled for him. Each one was built at an angle and was large enough for a tall man to lie down on, with a raised base for them to rest their feet on. There were also limb restraints and places to hang medical equipment.

Coil had been impressed with the results of his latest drug trial and was now funding this little experiment. If it worked, he'd probably use it on some of his mercenaries.

The building itself had once been a community center of some sort. It was a long rectangular building, most of it taken up by the main hall with a few small side rooms, including a kitchen. Knockout assumed the main hall used to be rented out for various functions while the smaller side rooms served as offices.

He'd moved some stuff into one of the smaller rooms so he could use it as a temporary office and another was being used as a waiting room.

As a matter of fact, his first appointment of the day was already there.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully, making the two young men jump. "If you'd care to follow me?"

Uber and Leet shared a look before following him. They'd switched costumes again; today there were wearing simple jeans and sweaters with a pair of cheap masks. Personally, Knockout thought Uber wore it better.

Leading them into his temporary office, he took a seat at his desk and waved them towards the chairs opposite.

"First things first, how's the hand?" he asked, leaning forwards and extending his hand.

Reluctantly, Uber placed his large calloused hand in Knockout's.

"It's better," Uber said. "It doesn't hurt any more and I can use it but... it's a bit stiff and my grip feels kinda weak," he said as he tried to flex his fingers.

Knockout hmm'd as he gently turned Uber's hand over and watched the tendons move. "That's to be expected. There are a couple of things I could try to help speed up your recovery, but frankly they're not worth the side effects. I wouldn't worry, just keep doing your exercises and things will soon be back to normal."

Releasing Uber, Knockout leant back in his chair. "Now while you're here, the boss was very happy with how you dealt with New Wave last week and wanted me to pass some information to you in
Opening the folder, he gave them a wicked grin and passed them some photos. The first was of some modified police body armour while the others showed Matrix using various pieces of tech.

"What's this?" Leet asked with a frown. Being on someone else's payroll clearly didn't sit well with him.

"As of tomorrow, the PRT will be wearing those. They're personal shields, the latest of Dragon's inventions."

"Really?" Uber asked while looking at one of the photos. "They've tried that before, but dropped them fairly quickly."

"Yeah, the upkeep was always a bitch," Leet added, sounding like he was talking from experience. "Most of the time they cost a fortune and break down after only a few uses."

"These are different. They're being mass produced in that new factory Dragon built and apparently, anybody can fix them."

"Fuck!" Leet muttered to himself, slumping down in his chair. Knockout almost felt sorry for him. A big part of their schtick was being too hard for normal police or PRT forces to handle without putting themselves at risk.

"Okay… guess that means we'll need to be even more careful," Uber frowned. "But what's this got to do with us? I doubt you're warning us for no reason."

Knockout smiled. "You're right. The boss let slip something he felt you should know. That shield is yours. In fact, most of the tech you can see in those pictures is yours."

"What?!" Leet's head snapped up so fast Knockout winced.

"Apparently, Dragon's little apprentice has some extra skills. She's been reverse engineering confiscated tech and selling it to the PRT."

Leet quickly flicked through all the photos. Aside from the jacket, there were photos of Matrix using hard-light shields, floating and even pulling a grenade launcher out of thin air.

"That… That bitch! She can't do that, can she?" Leet demanded, turning to his partner, who put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Actually, I think she can. Right?" Uber looked to Knockout for confirmation.

"Absolutely. The PRT is free to do whatever they want with confiscated tinkertech. If it's been used in a crime, it belongs to them."

Groaning, Leet put his face in his hands while his partner continued trying to console him.

"I can sympathise," Knockout consoled the distraught Tinker. "While I can create large batches of my various pharmaceuticals, they tend to have short shelf lives when produced that way. It took me all of five minutes to realise Dragon's new 'medical cream' is based on one of my creations."

It was probably much worse for Leet, he silently mused. He'd been active for years, using and discarding tech as he went.

Bolting out of the chair, Leet stormed out of the office and into the waiting room. Uber quickly

return."
followed along, probably hoping to calm his friend down.

Knockout knew he really should respect their privacy, but hell, *this* was going to be *juicy*.

Taking a small box out of a drawer, he pressed the button that connected it to the microphones he'd hidden throughout the waiting room.

"Leet, you need to calm down," Uber urged his friend. From the sound of things, Leet was pacing the room.

"Fuck calm and fuck her! She's stealing my tech and selling it to the fucking PRT! I wanna make her pay!"

"Yeah fine, I get that, but she's a Ward *and* Dragon's apprentice. You go after her and they will fuck us up!"

"So that's it? We just let her get away with this?" Knockout could almost see Leet's disgruntled pout.

"No, look. Just listen to me. I'm not saying we can't do *something*. We just need to be smart about it. She copied your tech. Can you copy hers?"

"Maybe… but it'll take time."

"Fine, but until then… Maybe we can do a couple of specials starring the Wards? Show them up and make some money at the same time."

"That…" Leet chuckled. "Yeah, I've still got those body suits and I think I can get the emitter working again. Come on."

The door from the waiting room to the exit opened and closed.

"They didn't even say goodbye," Knockout mused to himself with a chuckle. Grabbing his phone, he sent a quick message to the boss.

Honestly, Knockout didn't know what the boss was planning, but he felt Uber and Leet weren't being aggressive enough. Although, given their usual propensity for failure, he certainly didn't blame them for being cautious.

Not waiting for the boss's reply, he got up and went back to the main hall. His next appointment should be here soon and he needed everything to be ready.

It was getting dark when Sophia reached the building. She'd been sent a message a few days ago from LordChiefJustice, one of the moderators for 'Justice for all', the vigilante website she'd been working for.

He'd thanked her for her contribution and was offering her a chance to really make a difference. The message had asked her to meet here tonight.

While no one had ever met him, LordChiefJustice had a reputation on the board for honesty, so she didn't really think this was a trap. But it never hurt to check. She circled around the building from the nearby rooftops one last time before ducking behind a chimney stack and pulling her costume off.

Since leaving the PRT, she'd never once called herself Shadow Stalker. As far as the other people on the board knew, she was just another random vigilante and she planned to keep it that way.
Pulling on a dark hoodie, she checked that her wrist-mounted crossbow was loaded and jumped down. Ideally, she would have brought her full size ones, but there was too much chance she would be recognised. The wrist-mounted one she'd bought only had a single shot, but it would buy her time if things went wrong.

Making sure her bandana covered her lower face, she pushed the door open and walked inside.

In the reception area, there was a large man holding a machine gun in a relaxed grip. He didn't raise it at her; instead, he nodded towards a notice by the door.

"Private Party, invitation only. Please state name and code."

"Huntress. 707442," she said. The code had been in the same message as the invitation.

He nodded, waving her towards the door beside him.

She wasn't surprised to find nearly a dozen people already waiting. From the way they were dressed, she assumed they were also vigilantes. Most of them had dark, concealing clothes with various cheap masks and more than one not-so-hidden weapons.

What did surprise her was how different everyone looked. The group ranged in ages: from a girl who looked younger than her to what looked like a man in his forties. Some were tall, others short. Most looked like they worked out, but one of them was almost twice as wide as her.

Some of them she knew personally. She'd either dealt with them when she was a Ward, in which case she always gave them a chance to get away, or she'd met them since going solo. The one thing they all had in common was their lack of powers.

She thought they were nuts, going up against the gangs without powers. The first time they ran into a cape was usually their last. At least they didn't bitch and moan when things got a little rough.

Looking around, she spotted a tall, slender man in a red suit and mask enter the hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for coming. I'm sure you're all wondering why you were invited here, so let's get right to business."

He positioned himself at the head of the room, putting the assembled vigilantes between himself and the door.

"You are here because Lord Chief Justice has been impressed with your work so far. You have done more to help this city in the past few months than the PRT ever has. To that end, he wondered what you could achieve if you worked together.

"His idea is to build a team, a team that would finally put the gangs in their place. A team that doesn't need capes to make a difference."

Several people murmured in support and Sophia glared at them. Unpowered teams had been tried before. They usually died when they pissed off the wrong cape.

"Of course, in a city where Nazis can openly walk the streets, that sounds like suicide. That's where I come in. My name is Knockout and I work for a Tinker the boss has hired. While we can't give you powers, we can make you better, stronger, faster, and smarter."

Somebody snorted. "Yeah, and how do you plan to do that?"
"With a simple medical procedure," Knockout said with a smile. Picking up a stack of folders, he handed them to the nearest person, who took one and passed the rest on.

Sophia was one of the last to get a folder. Opening it, she saw a picture of a woman who looked more like a corpse. She'd dealt with enough Merchants to recognise a druggie.

"Now," Knockout said, "the woman you can see in that photo was a lifetime drug user. The papers underneath detail her condition. As you can see, it's not a pretty picture."

Taking a small remote out of his pocket, he pointed it at the wall and pressed a button. The lights dimmed slightly as a projector mounted on the ceiling projected an image against one of the walls.

"This is what she looked like one week later."

It was the same woman, but her condition looked to have greatly improved. Her face was more filled out, her hair was growing back, and in the body shots she looked like she'd been working out. Before Knockout could explain further, a side door crashed open and a woman walked in.

She had a bandana covering her lower face and a pair of blue coveralls that she'd tied around her waist. The tank top she was wearing underneath exposed her toned arms and stomach and an incredible figure.

"What the fuck are you shit stains doing here?" she asked, walking forward and dropping the box she was carrying.

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce Crasher, who as you can see has made a full recovery."

She glared at Knockout. "Your shit's finished. I'm heading back."

Crasher paused to look at the photo on the wall. "Why the fuck are you showing them pictures of me? You could have at least used some fucking good ones. I looked like shit."

Even Sophia had to double check. The Amazon in front of her looked nothing like the near corpse the photo showed.

"As you can see. Crasher looks better than ever." He waved at the woman who snorted before flipping him the bird. From the way her eyes crinkled, Sophia guessed she was smiling.

"Fuck you, Knockout. I'll see you later," Crasher said as she left.

Chuckling, Knockout turned back to his audience. "Unfortunately, we couldn't do anything about her manners. Some things are beyond fixing, I'm afraid."

A quiet wave of laughter rippled from the collected vigilantes. Most had probably heard worse.

"Still, as I was saying, enhanced speed and strength, better reaction times, even your eyesight can be improved. All in all, you would probably qualify as a low level brute."

"What's the catch?" a tall, dark-skinned man asked. "What does Justice get out of this?"

"Your help. He wants you to hurt the gangs. Take the dealers off the streets, show the Nazis and other criminals they won't be tolerated."

"What about the capes?" another vigilante asked.
"The boss will take care of that. If need be, he'll hire a couple of capes to help you out."

"What about the PRT? They're not just gonna look the other way."

Knockout smoothed his jacket and smiled. "The PRT can barely look after themselves. Besides, 'Justice for all' has plenty of supporters, many of whom work for the police, and they are willing to 'look the other way'. So what do you say?"

There was some hesitation in the crowd before several people walked forwards. Sophia could hear some of them asking questions, but she'd already made up her mind.

As she turned to leave at least three other people followed her.

What he was offering was tempting. Being a brute, even a low-level one, would be great. Hunting down dealers, deadbeats and wifebeaters had been fun for a while, but it was losing its appeal. Fighting random gangbangers on the street wasn't satisfying anymore.

Hunting and fighting were a thrill of their own. Most couldn't understand what it was like when your blood was pumping and the world went white. But it wasn't enough anymore, she was having to hit bigger and badder targets just to get the same thrill.

She wasn't stupid. She knew if she kept going after the bigger fish she'd eventually end up as fish food.

Being a brute could change that. She wouldn't need to worry so much about fighting a cape, about being outnumbered.

But she'd spent enough time around Kid Win and Assmaster to know there was always a catch when it came to tinkertech, and she'd heard enough gang recruitment speeches to know when she was being played.

Still, maybe they were on to something. If she could find some people who saw the world as she did, maybe they could go after the bigger fish together. Wolves hunted in packs after all. It wouldn't be an official team - she'd had enough of those - but the occasional team-up wouldn't be so bad, and working with the people following her out of the building sounded like a good place to start.

Her small group was stopped at the door by the same armed guard she'd passed on her way in. He kept a hand on his gun, but was careful not to point it at anyone.

"The boss wants you all to have this," he said, his free hand holding what looked like business cards. "If any of you change your mind, call this number."

With that, he let them go.

Sophia wasn't sure what to make of this little organisation. But as long as they kept paying her, she'd keep quiet.

Downtown Brockton Bay - Saturday Night (same day as 9.4)

Taking a deep breath, Madison let the cool night air wash over her.

It had taken a lot of work, finding a building with roof access, but the apartment complex she was standing on gave a great view of the city. She could almost see where the PRT had fought Lung last week from here.
Sitting there in the darkness, she could almost forget what she'd done. '...It was a game...

Madison hadn't told her parents she was going out, she'd chosen to climbed out the window. It was better if she didn't see them. She wouldn't have to see the disappointment.

Ever since that video had been posted online, Madison's life had fallen apart. She may have had nothing to do with the locker, but because the entire school knew her as the third member of their little clique, everyone assumed she had to have been involved. As soon as that video hit the net and the police got involved, the floodgates opened.

People were clambering over themselves to 'help'. Every little thing they had ever done to Taylor was suddenly known in excruciating detail.

It was just a game. That's what she'd said to Taylor. That was what she'd said to herself, time and again. Just a bit of stolen homework, just some name calling.

Then her aunt had phoned, she'd seen the video and wanted her to know exactly what she'd done to the girl. A heart attack at fifteen. They'd almost killed her.

Just a little fun.

Her parent didn't shout as much as she expected. Instead, they had sat down with her and forced her to tell them everything. Every prank and every name. And as the list grew, she realised that no, it wasn't a game.

Seeing the disappointment in their faces had hurt. Her father rarely spoke to her now and her mother treated her like a stranger.

On top of that, she'd been forced to leave school. Winslow simply wasn't safe for her now and her parents were having trouble finding a private school willing to accept her so late in the year or a public school willing to make an exception for someone outside their district. Though she expected the video to follow her no matter where she went.

When the police arrived, she told them everything. Sophia could threaten her all she wanted, but for once, she was going to do the right thing.

"You can never 'make it right.' Taylor's words echoed in her head.

To top it all off, there'd been her run-in with Taylor that morning.

She could have handled that better; approaching Taylor in public like that was always going to end badly. She'd always thought of Taylor as the weird one, the quiet girl no one cared about. Seeing her in body armour with Glory Girl at her side had been a major shock.

I wasn't the only one you hurt, I was just your favorite target.

Taylor was right. It wasn't just her. There had been a handful of kids they'd tormented, yet they always went back to Taylor. It was like Emma was obsessed.

She hadn't known the names of the others, but a bit of effort on FaceSpace soon filled in the blanks. One had tried to kill himself, the other joined the Merchants, and another joined the Empire and was killed in a shootout.

That can't be undone, you can never 'make it right.
She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting when she'd approached Taylor. Forgiveness? Maybe an end to the guilt?

She didn't stuff Taylor in the locker, but she didn't let her out either.

She couldn't undo any of it, but she was going to try.

Standing up, she moved to the edge of the roof and spread her arms. This wasn't the largest building in the city, but it was tall enough.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and let herself fall forwards.

Her stomach flipped as the wind rushed passed her. The feeling of weightlessness was almost freeing. Opening her eyes, she saw the ground rushing up to meet her.

'You need to do better.'

She didn't know why she tried talking to Taylor, but now she knew what to do.

Reaching inside, she felt a rush of warmth as the world seemed to expand around her and insectile wings emerged from her back. She knew that such tiny wings shouldn't be able to lift even her new miniscule size, but they apparently cared nothing for the vagaries of physics.

At less than three inches tall, the world was a much different place. For one thing, the ground below her looked much further away. A brief smile flitted across her face as she pulled out of the dive and accelerated down the street.

This was how she chose to make things right, how she'd try to make up for things that could never truly be forgiven: she'd use this power to be a hero.

She'd only had these powers a short time. After the court case, she'd gone into her bathroom and had taken a good long look at herself in the mirror. In that moment, she had been overwhelmed by the guilt, the isolation, and the knowledge that she wasn't the sort of person she'd always believed herself to be. She'd woken up on the bathroom floor, looking up at a world that was suddenly much larger than she'd ever known.

She hadn't spent much time learning about these powers. She knew she was stronger than she should be while shrunk down, that she had vaguely disconcerting 'stingers' she could extrude. She knew she could fly, but not how fast. Given she was overtaking cars on a residential street, she guessed she was doing at least thirty MPH. If she really pushed it, she could probably move even faster for short distances.

The ABB and the Autobots had given each other a pounding earlier, but there were still plenty of other people on the streets. Dealers, thugs, random gang members. Now she just needed to find them.

Despite her powers and her weird obsession with 'hunting', Sophia had never been particularly subtle. When the three of them were alone, she liked to brag about the things she'd done. The people she'd hurt.

Looking back on it, Madison was ashamed of laughing at some of the stories.

That didn't mean she couldn't use the information she'd gleamed. Sophia often mentioned areas where crimes were more likely to happen, the sort of places criminals liked to hang out. Once upon a time, she'd used the information to avoid bad areas. Now, she was actively looking for them.
Spotting an alley between two buildings, she slowed down. The lighting was poor and anyone standing inside the alley would be hidden from the street. Just the kind of place where criminals hung out.

Landing on the edge of one building, she kept close to the roof despite her small size. She was almost disappointed to find that the alley contained nothing but a couple of sprayed over gang tags. By looking at which graffiti had been covered by what, you could track the territory's history. It looked like this had started as Merchant territory that had been claimed by the Empire and then the ABB.

Twitching her antennae in annoyance, she took off again. How was she supposed to help anyone if the gangs kept moving?

It took nearly an hour of flitting from one likely location to another, finding nothing worse than some homeless people sleeping in boxes and rats nosing around in dumpsters and with each dead end, she could feel herself getting increasingly irritated.

The only saving grace was what she was learning about her new eyesight. While shrunken, her vision was just weird. If something was in her line of sight and she twitched her antennae just right, she could see it as if she was right there. It didn't matter how dark or well lit, it was all the same to her now.

Spotting another likely location, she decided to take one last look before giving up and going home.

Jackpot!. A trio in Empire colors were holding a black woman at gunpoint. Who doesn't like beating up Nazis?

The woman was backed up against the wall, looking terrified of the three men who'd formed a loose semicircle around her. The one to the woman's left was the only one with a visible gun while the others looked unarmed.

Frowning, Madison dove down. Landing behind the one in the middle, she shifted back to her full height, kicking him hard between the legs.

Letting out a strangled gasp, he fell to the ground clutching himself. His friends turned in alarm and the gun wielder firing blindly in her direction, but she'd already shrunk again and the bullet lodged into the opposite wall.

"Missed me!" she shouted, hoping she sounded braver than she felt as she threw herself sideways. With her dark clothing and small size, they couldn't see where she'd gone.

"Fuck, Cape! You're on your own!" the smaller criminal shouted, running for the street.

Not wanting to let him escape, Madison flew after him, punching him as hard as she dared behind his knee.

She didn't understand the mechanics, but a few tests with her dad's old weights had shown that at her smallest, she could almost lift a grown man.

There was a crack and the guy collapsed to the ground with a scream.

Seeing that his friends were both down, the gunman grabbed the struggling woman and pulled her close.

"Stay back or I'll blow the nigger's head off!" Dragging his hostage backwards, he tried to put his
"Ooh, big tough man with a gun. What's the matter, scared of a little thing like me?" Madison taunted, desperately hoping to distract him.

The gunman aimed roughly in the direction of her voice and fired. The gunshot was scary loud, making Madison flinch, but his aim was off by at least a foot.

"Nope, not there," she called, sticking to the darker areas. Again, he tried to guess her position but missed a third time.

Getting an idea, Madison grabbed a rock off the floor. To the gunman, it was barely more than a pebble. Throwing it as hard as she could, the sound of it hitting the wall drew the shooter's attention.

As his arm swung to shoot at the noise, she flew as close and as fast as she could. A small bone-like shard fired from her forearm and lodged itself into the gunman's wrist. He shouted in pain and dropped the gun as the paralytic poison numbed his hand, giving his hostage the opportunity to drive her elbow deep into his ribs. Staggering from the blow, he let her go and tried to run, only for Madison to get ahead of him.

She fired another spike, this one into his shoulder. He still tried to run even as his movements became more and more erratic, only for another barb to hit his leg. Stumbling, he dropped to his knees as Madison appeared behind him at full size. Giving him a gentle nudge with her foot, he fell to the ground.

She probably wasn't much to look at: her 'costume' consisted of loose black jeans, black boots and a hoodie with a scarf. *Maybe I should add some yellow?*. Trying to keep her breathing under control while acting more confident than she felt, Madison turned to the woman.

"Are you okay?"

Still shaking, the woman nodded.

This was how Madison would make things right. She'd do whatever she could to help people. She couldn't join the Wards; if she did then people would start calling her a hero. She didn't deserve that yet, she had to do this herself, alone. Maybe one day, it would be enough.

Also, Sophia should have paid more attention to that code.

Chapter End Notes

An: what, you thought I'd show a girl committing suicide? Big thanks to Essex on spacebattles for his help with the Madison stuff, that section just did not want to be written.
When I reached Arcadia on Monday morning, I was surprised to find Amy and Vicky waiting for me. I'd been running late this morning when Arcee offered to give me a ride. Dad had been unsure, but I'd managed to convince him. Puppy eyes, works every time.

Given that Arcee's alt-mode was a full-sized motorbike, I wasn't that surprised by Dad's reluctance. It had taken a bit of talking to convince him that despite looking like a normal bike, she was anything but.

With all her sensors and better than human reaction times, she was probably the safest bike in the city. With the possible exception of Armsmaster's.

Officially, Arcee was classed as a 'Tinker-vehicle' and the PRT would prefer it if she passed a number of public safety tests before she was taken out on the road. Dragon had booked it for later today, so everything would get taken care off while I was in class.

Amy glared at me as I came to a stop.

"Um… Morning?" I said as I pulled my helmet off. Thinking ahead, Dragon had given it to me last night before I left her workshop.

Vicky looked at Arcee with an amused smirk while Amy just looked even more annoyed.

"Really? A bike? Do you know how many bikers I've put back together?" Amy said, looking like Arcee had personally offended her.

"Don't mind her," Vicky said, rolling her eyes at her sister's antics. "I like it, nice colours. How'd your dad take it when you bought it home?"

I could feel Arcee twitch with irritation under me. Her personality had only emerged late last night, just after I'd finished sparking my second human sized Autobot.

"Not too bad, but he's used to me bringing my work home." I looked around and tried to ignore the squirming in my gut.

Riding Arcee to school might have been a mistake. Other students were stopping to watch and I was sure at least one of them was filming this. I think i'm starting to hate video phones.

Sighing, I climbed off and tucked the helmet into Arcee's pocket space. "Amy, Vicky, this is Arcee. Arcee, meet Amy and Vicky."

There was near silence from the watching students as Arcee transformed. Her robot mode was a little over six foot tall with a female figure. For some reason she'd decided to add blue 'lipstick'-like paint to her lips.

"Charmed," Arcee said, crossing her arms and glancing at the watching crowd. It was amazing how much sarcasm she could fit into one word.

Amy worked her mouth silently as she blushed.

"What? - but I thought - I mean… I'm sorry?" Amy finished, looking away from Arcee.

"Don't worry about it. If it helps, I was driving, not Taylor," Arcee said as she relaxed a bit. She
even gave Amy a brief smile.

"Huh… I thought you could only make, y'know..." Vicky held her hand at about waist height to show what she meant.

"Not any more," I said with a proud smile, "I'll tell you the story later." I made a slight gesture with my head towards the watching students. I didn't want to discuss it here in the open. Too many cameras, not to mention possible gang members.

Winslow might have been a terrible school, but at least you could tell who most of the gang members were. Arcadia banned gang colours and insignia, and most students were smart enough to keep their mouths shut if they were members.

Catching my meaning, both girls stayed quiet.

"You going to be okay by yourself?" I asked Arcee, who was stretching her joints. As I understood it, being in alt-mode wasn't uncomfortable per-se, but after awhile it felt nice to stretch out.

She smiled indulgently. "I think I can manage. Do you want me to pick you up later?"

"No, I'll be fine. I've got a patrol after school, so I'll make my own way to the rig. Don't forget you have your safety checks later," I reminded her as she transformed.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't remind me," she grumbled as she drove off.

Following Vicky and Amy into the school, I noticed an odd mood in the air. There was a tension I hadn't noticed before, and people felt like they were standing further away.

I'd long gotten used to odd looks, mostly of disdain and ridicule, but this was different. This wasn't the scorn I'd experienced at Winslow or the curiosity/excitement I'd received since starting here. This almost felt like fear.

I could feel people's eyes on me, but whenever I turned to look, they quickly looked away. The few that didn't, glared at me instead.

"What's going on?" I asked Vicky quietly while Amy glared back at one of the students. "Did something happen?"

"You don't know?" Vicky said, incredulously.

"Know what? I was working all yesterday." I'd spent the day building a new bot and even found time to work on Amy's equipment.

"Tinker frenzy," Amy muttered and I frowned at her.

'Tinker frenzy' wasn't really a thing, more a meme that kept cropping up. The theory was a Tinker would suddenly get an idea and lose all focus on the world around them, often cannibalising objects around them or even old projects for useable materials.

In all the time I'd spent with Kid Win or Dragon, I'd never seen it and it had never happened to me. Sure, it was possible to get so caught up in a project you lost track of time or forgot to eat, but that happened to normal people just as easily.

It had happened in the past, once.
A Tinker in Europe years ago would often fall into a ‘frenzy’. Later, a movie would be made that used a character based on him and the idea had stuck.

Personally, I blamed bad Tinker fiction on PHO for keeping that idea alive. I wonder if anyone's ever written anything about me?

Coming out of my thoughts, I focused on Vicky. "So what did I miss?"

Biting her lip, Vicky shared a look with Amy and nodded towards the girls' restroom. "Come on, We'll talk in there."

We still had time before classes started, so I followed them in. I was surprised and amused when Vicky leant up against the door. No one would be getting in unless she decided to move.

Amy and I leant up against the sinks.

"Right, so, do you remember that girl on Saturday?" Vicky asked, giving me a worried look.

"Girl?... You mean Madison?" There was a sinking feeling in my stomach, I think I know where this is going.

"Yeah, her. Well your… discussion kinda got caught on camera and uploaded to Facespace. It does kinda make you look like a bitch…"

Groaning, I buried my face in my hands. I should have known, "Christ, do people have to film everything?"

In my pocket, Rewind beeped pathetically and some sad face emoticons appeared on my glasses but I ignored them.

"Well… We are famous. It's to be expected." Amy gave me a sympathetic look, putting her hand on my shoulder.

"Like you'd know," Vicky shot back with a warm smile. "They don't allow cameras in the hospital and you still don't go on patrols."

"Aunt Sarah doesn't want me patrolling until she's satisfied I can look after myself," Amy shot back. She'd already admitted to me that she wasn't looking forward to it. "Anyway, that's not the point."

Vicky waved away Amy's comment, "Yeah, yeah. But it gets worse. Your fight with Bakuda made the news."

"Of course it did." I groaned. "Let me guess, I'm being blamed for all the damage Bakuda did, and the PRT needs to do something about rogue Tinkers."

Amy snorted. "Nearly word for word. The problem is they're saying you used excessive force."

"What!?"

"They're saying you were using lethal force from the moment you arrived and that you let Bakuda just walk away," Vicky said, a look of distaste on her face.

"We know you didn't," she added quickly.

"Rewind, call Dragon!" I demanded as I pulled him from my pocket.
"I can't. The school's faraday cage is blocking me!" he beeped.

I was about to try storming out of the building and trying again, but Vicky gave me a look that clearly said she wasn't moving.

Walking over to me, Amy pulled me into a one-armed hug. "Don't worry about it. It's just the media looking for someone to blame. Give them a week or two and it'll all be forgotten."

"Yeah, and besides, who cares what they say?" Vicky added. "We know you didn't have a choice. It's not worth getting worked up over."

I sighed, putting Rewind away. They were right. It wasn't like I could do anything about it anyway. I'd give Dragon a call during lunch and see what she said.

"We've still got time before classes start, so why don't you tell us about Arcee?" Amy suggested.

"Yeah, how'd you manage to build her?" Vicky agreed.

I knew they were just trying to distract me, but I appreciated the gesture.

"Funny you should ask, it was Bakuda that solved it…" Leaning against the sink, I started to tell them everything.

##

Arcee activated her holographic 'rider' as she pulled away from the school. It wasn't anything special, just a woman in black leathers and a full face helmet.

She wasn't trying to blend in as the Autobot insignia was clearly visible on her license plates and the back of her rider's jacket but having a visible 'rider' made the other drivers feel safer.

Or at least, that's what Rung claimed.

She didn't think it would make much difference. Most of the drivers barely looked at her. Personally, she thought they needed to pay more attention.

Getting away from the traffic around the school, she headed for the docks.

She had plenty of time before her appointment, so she was going to take a look around. Maybe scout out some possible trouble spots for later investigation.

Streetwise had provided her with maps of the city and known gang territory, but things had been moving around a lot lately.

When she pulled up at a set of lights, the passenger of the car next to her dropped his window. There were four men in the car, two of them wearing red and green bandanas.

*ABB*, she told herself.

"Hey baby, how'd you like something else between your legs?" The passenger called out as his friends laughed.

Turning her holographic head, Arcee gave them a dismissive look. "Like I'd get anything out of it," she said, pulling away as the light changed.

Even if they had been in gang colours, they needed to do more than make a few comments before
she could arrest them. There were no laws about being stupid after all.

Turning left at the next junction, she stayed near the edge of ABB territory. There was no reason to push her luck too far after all.

Arcee was so caught up in her thoughts, she almost missed the car that came flying out of a side street.

She barely had time to recognise it as the one she'd seen earlier as she tried to avoid them.

Swerving round the front of the car put her on the wrong side of the road and right in the path of oncoming traffic. Banking hard to avoid a collision, she hit a slick patch and her wheels slid out from underneath her.

As she slid across the asphalt, she dispelled the holographic driver and transformed, rolling to a stop.

Pushing herself up on her arms and climbing to her feet, she glared at the driver of the car, who paled and roared away with a screech of tires.

*Arcee, you okay? Teletraan just sounded an alert!* Wheeljack called over the radio.

"I'm fine, just a little road rash." Her paintwork was covered in dings and scratches down one side, but it was all superficial.

Running after the car as it accelerated away, she jumped and transformed mid-air. The moment her wheels hit the ground, she gave chase.

"Are you keeping tabs on me?" she demanded as she darted around slower moving vehicles.

*Teletraan keeps an eye on all of us and sounds the alert if we get hurt, just in case we can't do it ourselves.*

"Like when you blow yourself up?" she shot back. "Gotta go, I'll call you back."

Catching up to the fleeing car was easy. She was faster, more agile and could accelerate like a rocket.

The problem was stopping the car without killing someone.

Opening a window, one of the passengers aimed a gun at her and started firing, the speed and awkward position throwing his aim off. Bullets hit the pavement around her with the occasional one bouncing off her shield.

Accelerating past them, Arcee bounced on her suspension, the small anti-grav unit she was equipped with letting her gain even more height as she spun through the air and transformed. Her right arm folded in on itself into a gun and a well aimed shot hit the car's engine.

Like all Autobot weapons, she had stun and EMP settings which could fry electronics.

Landing in a three point skid, she ran towards the car as the driver lost control and plowed into a parked sedan. Two of the passengers climbed out of the wreck, one of them being the gunman from earlier.

He tried to shoot her, but her return shot put him down. Seeing this, his partner threw himself to the ground.

Arcee approached carefully. There had been four people in the car and, so far, she'd only dealt with
two.

Reaching the car, she found the driver slumped over the wheel. Keeping her weapon ready, she moved close enough to scan him. There was no blood and he was groaning quietly, so she guessed he wasn't in any immediate danger.

The passenger next to him, however, was carefully trying to reach for his gun.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Arcee warned, pointing her weapon at him.

Cursing, he held his hands up.

"Wheeljack, can you call PD? Let them know I've got four ABB here waiting for them. One might need an ambulance."

Instead of Wheeljack, it was Dragon who replied. *They're on their way. By the way, Arcee, weren't you supposed to meet me here?*

Arcee sighed. "Scrap…" *Busted.* She'd been hoping to put off her appointment. After all, who enjoyed getting a checkup?

##

(Taylor)

When I arrived at the rig after school, I wasn't too surprised to find Miss Militia waiting for me. At her request, I followed her to her office.

Lunch had been a bit frantic with me talking to Dragon about the Bakuda fight, Dragon telling me about Arcee getting into a fight, and learning that my latest bot was starting to show signs of his emerging personality.

I'd spent most of Sunday working on him and had sparked him late the same night. If he was anything like Arcee, I expected him to be fully operational by later this evening.

"Let me guess, you need to talk to me about Arcee?" I said tentatively as I slipped into the chair opposite her desk.

Miss Militia chuckled. "I've already spoken to her and Dragon, so the matter is closed. She's hardly the first hero to be a bit overeager."

She gave me a pointed look and I felt myself flush. I swear, get into a fight with Lung one time and nobody let you live it down.

"And the Bakuda fight?" I was almost dreading the answer.

Pulling off her mask, Hannah waved away my question. "Under the circumstances, I can't really fault you for that either. Dragon showed me the footage from your helmet. Considering what it was
they were trying to steal, I'd say the level of force was justified. The biggest complaints are from the ABB members injured in the attack, and they don't really have room to complain."

"What about the director?"

"If I'm being honest, she's... not happy. She tends to take bad press personally, but she's not going to press the issue. Truthfully, I wanted to make sure you were okay. I know one of the Autobots was hurt, and this is really your first bit of bad press since you joined us."

That was true. So far, I'd been lucky. I'd managed to avoid making any major mistakes where the public could see them. The few times there had been problems, it was directed at the group as a whole.

Sure, I still got comments about being 'Mecha-Nilbog' on PHO, but my Autobots had managed to help curb those fears by being open and friendly with people, both online and in person.

Although, if Rewind ever dared to post another video of me dancing in my workshop again, I would turn him into a toaster.

"Warpath is fine. He's already repaired. As for the complaints... They bother me a bit, but it doesn't matter. From what Vicky said, everyone has to go through it at some point," I shared, relaxing more now that I knew I wasn't in any sort of trouble.

Hannah smiled warmly; with her mask off, she was really pretty. "Sadly, yes. I'm afraid it comes with the job. All heroes have to deal with it, and it's worse for the independents as they don't have the support structure we do."

I could see her point. The PR department was annoying, but having them around meant silly mistakes wouldn't necessarily destroy our reputations.

That was one thing heroes and villains had in common, reputation. The PRT needed the public's trust to function, especially during the Endbringer battles. From what Rattrap had told me, villains needed to maintain a reputation for almost the same reasons.

Not to mention, a gang that was seen as weak or whose members couldn't be trusted would quickly be wiped out.

"Just remember, if you ever have any problems, like the kind you can't to talk to your dad about, you can come to me. Okay?" Miss Militia said as she stood up and put her scarf back on.

"I will, thanks," I said in genuine gratitude as I followed her out of the room. "Are you coming to dinner tomorrow?"

Miss Militia blinked in surprise. "Yes, but how did you know?"

"Dad mentioned he was having some friends over, and I know he's been talking to you a lot lately so..." I shrugged, not sure what else to say.

I think it was Rung's doing. He'd mentioned to me that he was encouraging Dad to reconnect with his friends. Dad had been spending more time with Kurt and the other at the docks and he'd mentioned Miss Militia a few times.

I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about it if I was honest, so I tried to avoid thinking about it most of the time.
We walked to the common room in a companionable silence. The other Wards were milling about in boredom while they waited for us to arrive.

We were due to start our evening patrols soon, but before I could slip away to get dressed, Miss Militia stopped me and called out to get everyone's attention.

"I know you're all due to leave soon so I'll keep this brief," she said as everyone fell quiet and turned to face her.

"I want all of you to know, Stormtiger, Cricket and Multiplayer have escaped custody. We do not yet know how they did it, but Armsmaster is conducting the investigation. Their cells were found empty this morning, still locked and undamaged. This isn't public knowledge yet, so you are not to repeat any of this."

"Weren't they wearing collars?" Aegis asked.

The collars were currently the best method for restraining capes. They would fit snugly around the neck where they could monitor for any attempt at using powers. If you tried to use your powers, they either injected you with a sedative, shocked you or exploded.

The specific action could be chosen depending on the type of cape being restrained. People sent to the Birdcage were usually the only ones fitted with explosives. The collars could also be triggered by attempts to remove them or via remote, and they were fitted with tracking devices.

"Yes, they were, but we've been unable to locate them."

"Do you think they'll come back to the bay?"

"Stormtiger and Cricket will almost certainly come back, but Multiplayer is another matter. Officially, he's a member of Uber and Leet's team, but since they seem to have abandoned him, I doubt he'll return."

Clockblocker snorted. "He can't be that bright if he joined up with them in the first place."

There were a couple of laughs from the Wards and even Miss Militia smiled.

"Either way, keep your eyes open. If you see any of them, report in immediately," she finished before nodding to Aegis, who took over the 'meeting'.

"Okay, you guys know your routes for tonight. The plan is to pass near some possible trouble spots and be as visible as possible. We're trying to prevent fights, not get into them."

"Tell that to the gangs," Clockblocker muttered.

Aegis ignored him. "Taylor, you're with Gallant and Clockblocker on route C. Vista, Kid, you're with me on route D. Routes A and B will be handled by the Protectorate. Officer Jenkins will be running the monitor, those of you not in costume should suit up now."

With that, the meeting broke up and we went our separate ways.

The patrol routes were Armsmaster's idea. Using a data analysis program, he'd compiled a list of places where he expected conflict between the gangs. The plan was for us to be seen in those areas and hopefully dissuade them from starting anything.

I wasn't entirely sure it would work. If the gangs were riled up enough to fight, I doubted our
presence would do much to calm them back down.

There was a growing weight to the air tonight, like the city was holding its breath. The ABB had taken some losses over the last week, without taking my fight with Bakuda into account. It wasn't like Lung to just retreat.

Leaving Wasp to circle around, I dropped down from the rooftop I was perched on to the ground, just as Clockblocker and Gallant drew level.

"I don't see anything," I said. "It looks like they've all gone to ground."

"They probably heard us coming," Clockblocker quipped. "Rusty here isn't exactly quiet."

Gallant groaned and I tried not to laugh too much.

He wasn't really wrong. Gallant jogging along in power armour was hardly subtle, but the point of the patrol was to be seen.

"Y'know, Clock, one of these days I'm gonna -"

A sudden explosion shattered the calm and rattled the windows of the buildings around us.

Not waiting for Gallant, I took off and flew above the buildings for a better view. Off in the distance, I could see a plume of smoke rising into the air.

"What is it?" Gallant called up to me.

"Dispatch, Matrix. There has been an explosion north of our location in the vicinity of King's Hill Park, permission to check it out?"

*Confirmed, Matrix, approach with caution.*

Below me, the other two started jogging toward the smoke as I dropped down to keep pace with them. Rushing on ahead was too risky at the moment.

*Wait—I mean, all units, stay where you are!* Jenkins stuttered before we'd even reached the end of the street.

*I'm getting reports of fighting all over the place! I'm not sure - just stay there while I - Fuck! All units, Lung has been spotted at the southern end of the city, near the shopping district. Everyone needs to get over there!*  

My heart felt like it was in my mouth. I really didn't want to fight Lung again. We didn't have another dropship handy for one thing.

It sounded like Jenkins was starting to panic, but before anyone could say or do anything, Miss Militia overrode him.

*All Wards, ignore that order! Spread out and do what you can about the fighting. Leave Lung to the Protectorate! I repeat, do not engage Lung!*  

My relief was followed by a stab of guilt, but I ignored it. Instead of worrying about that, I flew upwards so I had a clearer view of what was going on.

Rewind highlighted the areas where fighting was being reported.
*Team two, check in!* Aegis ordered over the radio.

*This is Gallant, I'm with Matrix and Clockblocker. We're near the corner of Third and Eastwick.*

"We've got smoke rising just south of here, and a gang fight to our east," I said. "I think we need to split up."

*What!* Gallant nearly shouted.

*No! Not a chance!* Aegis ordered.

Pushing down my annoyance, I dropped to the ground by Gallant and Clock.

"I'm the only flyer here! I can get to that explosion and back while Gallant and Clock deal with the fight."

"And if you run into trouble?" Gallant asked, I could hear the concern in his voice. Strictly speaking, he was the eldest of us three, and that put him in charge.

"Then I call the Autobots for backup! And if it looks like more than I can handle, I can just fly away!"

"Do we really have time to argue about this?" Clockblocker asked.

*She's right,* Aegis said, interrupting us. *Matrix, do it. But if things look bad, I want you to retreat immediately. Do I make myself clear?*

"Crystal."

"You're nuts, you know that?" Clockblocker said, shaking his head.

"Maybe," I said before connecting to Teletraan and summoning my cats.

"Take these two with you. Steeljaw and Ravage, do what they say."

"Thanks… just, stay safe," Gallant said before jogging off with Clock and my Autobots in tow.

"You too."

Taking a breath, I pushed down my nerves and took off.

##

From my position on a nearby rooftop, the road below looked like a battleground, with nearly two dozen ABB members attacking a bar. Using a line of cars as cover, they were shooting at anything they could see through the doors or windows.

The building itself was smoldering and one wall had partially collapsed. Bad Wolf could still be made out on the sign hanging over the door.

There was a blue flash as Arcee appeared next to me. She was shaking off the disorientation of a teleport, as she scanned the fighters below. "I don't suppose we could just let them fight it out?"

I shook my head. "No. There's too much chance an innocent bystander could get caught in the middle."
She gave me a disbelieving look, but didn't say anything.

I ignored her unspoken comment. Nazi hangout or not, we couldn't just sit back and watch.

I highlighted several areas in front of me. My bots all had access to my augmented reality display, which made issuing orders and assigning teleport locations easier.

"Okay, go on my mark… Now!"

Arcee and I jumped off the roof while Warpath teleported in behind the ABB barricade.

The attackers panicked and scattered as he opened fire on them while Arcee vaulted over a car for a clear shot.

Defensor appeared in between both sides, but focused his fire on the Empire members who were shooting out through the bar's windows.

HL-Riot shield in place, I threw a containment foam grenade through the missing section of wall and ducked as several people opened fire at me.

Several ABB members made the mistake of trying to fight Arcee hand-to-hand. I could see the bats and other weapons in their hands.

Arcee was lightly armoured and backed up by a shield, but her best defense was her agility. She danced around them, ducking and weaving around countless blows. Six of them were already down.

A warning flashed on my HUD and I turned in time to see a wave of ghosts pour out of the ruined bar.

Fuck! Crusader!

I jumped and Divebomb took over, carrying me up and out of reach. Crusader's ghosts could pass through non-organic matter such as armour and shields, making them the perfect counter to Tinkers.

They could also fly, albeit slowly. I was forced to dodge as Crusader emerged through the hole in the wall to direct his projections.

I fired at him, only for the ghosts to pull him safely out of the way.

Thankfully they couldn't pass through my bots, and the swords and spears they carried weren't strong enough to do any significant damage to Warpath or Defensor.

Arcee was more at risk, but she continued to dance around the ghosts with the same ease as before.

Arcee fired at the ghosts, but the energy bolts just passed through them. Changing tactics, a pair of blades extended from the sides of her arms and she swung them at the ghosts, decapitating one of them.

The ghost dissolved into nothingness and Crusader hissed in pain. Slowly, Arcee tried to whittle down the numbers, but Crusader was creating ghosts faster than she could destroy them.

Slowly but surely we, were being pushed back. I couldn't just run away, since Crusader would probably kill the ABB members we'd subdued.

*Need a hand?* A deep voice asked.
There was a blue flash and my latest Autobot appeared. His six-wheeled, scaled down, all-terrain armoured transport mode was built to contrast Arcee. His armour was much thicker than even Warpath's, and while his top speed was low, he was nearly unstoppable.

His engine roared as he plowed forward. His alt-mode didn't have much in the way of weapons, but he didn't need them.

Crusader's ghosts were sent flying as the metal juggernaut drove through the mass. Those that didn't move were either knocked aside or crushed.

Crusader himself turned and ran back into the ruined bar, staggering in pain at the loss of so many minions while his ghosts attempted to block the hole behind him.

The Autobot punched a new hole in the wall without even slowing down.

I heard shouts and gunfire coming from inside and nearly a dozen men in Empire colours came running out into the street.

Arcee, Warpath and I stunned most of them before they could get more than twenty feet from the building.

Bricks crumbled under his feet as my new bot calmly walked out of the stricken building, Crusader slumped over his shoulder.

"I win," he said with a quiet chuckle, dropping the cape to the ground.

I hadn't noticed when I built him, but the gold coloured trim on his face almost looked like a beard. It contrasted well against his tan coloured alt-mode and green 'skin'.

"So, you talk now?" Arcee walked over, looking up slightly. He wasn't much taller than her, but he was a heck of a lot wider. It gave him an almost squat look.

"Yup. Just call me Rhinox."

With the way he'd charged down Crusader and smashed through the wall, it was certainly a fitting name.

*All units, Lung has retreated. Status report.* A new voice called over the radio. It wasn't Jenkins, so I assumed someone else had taken over.

"Dispatch, Matrix. Situation here is under control. I've got nearly two dozen gang members needing pickup, with a few requiring medical treatment."

*Dispatch, Gallant. Clockblocker is with me. The fighting is over here, but some of these people are injured.*

As each team reported in, I felt myself relaxing. Either because of Armsmaster's routes or sheer luck, we'd managed to keep things mostly under control.

Tonight could have gone so much worse.
Yawning, I stretched my back with a satisfying crack. I'd spent most of last night sitting on my bed working on new designs while the Matrix hung from my neck.

"Jesus, don't do that!" Clockblocker complained with a shudder. Who knew that the sound of cracking joints creeped him out so much?

Next to him, Vista used her take out 'coffee cup' to cover her smile. It wasn't actually coffee; after the third time I watched her force down a cup in an attempt to look older, I'd convinced her to try some tea. It wasn't as bitter and had less caffeine, which made everyone much happier. First Aid telling her that coffee could stunt her growth had probably helped as well.

"Oh, don't be such a big baby," Vista shot back with an amused smirk.

It had only been a few days since 'the big push', as the media was calling it, and both sides were licking their wounds. A large number of Empire and ABB members had been arrested, but Crusader was the only cape who'd been captured.

Thanks to the PRT's immediate response, the fighting had quickly been brought under control, and even though Lung had escaped, PR was quick to spin the outcome in the PRT's favour.

As a result, I saw a lot more friendly looks when I went on an early morning patrol. I doubted it would last and planned to simply enjoy it while it did.

Mostly, Ward patrols were in the afternoon and only took place once a day. Today's dual patrol was one of the rare exceptions. The Protectorate were required to attend a PRT training event just outside the city, so they would be unavailable for most of the day. To make up the difference, the Wards would be split into two teams. Three would patrol in the morning and then have the afternoon off, while the other three would do the opposite.

At this point, we were nearly halfway through our assigned route and had stopped briefly to grab some drinks and talk to the public. Aegis had requested I do this patrol on foot and that the three of us stick to ground level.

I'd agreed to go along with it, but Divebomb was currently soaring overhead in beast-mode, Steeljaw and Ravage were walking alongside us, and Wasp was on overwatch just in case.

"So… You guys hear the latest news?" Clockblocker asked, moving closer and making an attempt at a stage whisper.

"If this is about Jenkins, we already heard," Vista replied in a bored voice. After Jenkins fell to pieces on the console, he'd been moved to punishment detail.

There wasn't a lot of teen drama in the Wards, but the PRT personnel on the rig tended to gossip like old women.

"I wasn't talking about that one," Clock confided with a sniff. "Actually, I've heard there's a new indie hero about."
"Really?" Vista said, looking interested.

"Yeah, she stopped a mugging Saturday night and has been seen around a few times since then."

"Any idea what her power is?" I asked. I'd never been much of a cape geek before triggering, but now it felt important to know this sort of thing. Just in case I ended up having to fight against them.

"Apparently, she's some sort of Changer. She turns into a tiny insect or something and wears and black and yellow costume. She's been temporarily named Bumblebee."

"She turns into an insect? That sounds kinda… lame." Surely there had to be more to her powers than that. There were countless research papers on the subject of powers, and even the weakest had some combat applications.

Vista shuddered, scrunching her nose in disgust. "Sounds gross to me."

"That's what I thought, so I looked up the report. She took out three grown men solo, so there has to be more."

Vista gave him a disbelieving look. "You're just making this up." Last time Clock started talking about a new cape, he tried to convince everyone she was a seven foot tall, green skinned brute.

"Rewind, can you pull up the file?" I asked, but the little bot was already ahead of me and the report was immediately on my HUD.

"Huh, he's right. New cape in black 'starter' costume. Three men, light injuries, and some form of paralytic poison. Same cape two days later, costume now has yellow markings," I read aloud.

"See, I told you it was real. Ye of little faith."

"I'm a little worried about this 'poison'. That sounds kinda dangerous -" I was cut off by a call on the radio.

*Dispatch to Matrix, we're getting reports of fire in your area. Possible pyrokinetic suspected, can you investigate?*

"Understood, we're on our way."

*Last sighting was at the Woldrich Sanitarium.*

"Twenty bucks says it's just kids messing with matches," Clock said as we started jogging.

Vista bent the space ahead of us, letting us get up on the roofs where she could shorten the distance to the sanitarium even further.

"That's a suckers bet and you know it," Vista snorted as we bounced from one roof to another while throwing away her now empty cup. It flipped through the air before landing neatly in an empty trash can below. *Showoff.*

"I take it this happens a lot?" I asked as I dodged around an air conditioning unit.

"Yeah, people see fire or rocks and call the PRT. Most of the time it's nothing. Occasionally it's a new cape messing with their powers."

Given it was a low priority call, we weren't exactly rushing, and I didn't bother summoning Divebomb. Besides, the sanitarium really wasn't far from us.
Despite its name, the Woldrich Sanitarium had once been a thriving hospital. It had been built in the early days of the city and had been no better or worse than any other sanitarium. After a fire had destroyed the original building, it had been rebuilt as a hospital, but the name had stuck.

Over the years, the property was expanded and renovated, and it currently covered three buildings on a large expanse of gated land. Eventually, the growth of the city and the costs of maintaining and improving such old buildings had become too much, so a new hospital was built elsewhere.

The sanitarium was finally closed a few years after I was born, and Brockton Bay General took over the last of their duties.

The land was later sold for a housing development, but it got caught up in legal issues when people living nearby protested. The planned 'estate' would have been one step above a slum and construction was shut down until they cleared the red tape.

That had been years ago. Since then, the land and the building had been left to rot. A high chain link fence, patched in places with wooden panels, surrounded the area now. Not that it really kept people out.

Vista brought the pavement up to meet us and we stepped off the final rooftop. Up ahead, near a hole in the fence, I could see a couple of kids in dark clothes, with either hoods or hats on. Occasionally, there was a flash of flame against one of the panels.

The video feed from Wasp showed them holding what looked like spray cans.

"Looks like you were right, deodorant and lighters," I said to Clockblocker.

"Hah! Pay up!" he crowed while Vista just shook her head at his antics.

Minor vandals were a very low priority when compared to everything else in the city, but someone would probably complain if we didn't at least try to talk to them.

Walking at a more casual pace, we approached the group and I tried to calm myself. I hated public speaking, but one of us had to do it. Thanks to his reputation, Clockblocker wouldn't be taken seriously and Vista's age worked against her.

"Hey!" I shouted once we were close enough. How they never noticed our approach, I don't know. Startled, they spun to face us and dropped the cans. There was a beat before most of the group dived through a gap in the fence.

One of the stragglers pulled a small, snub nosed revolver out his pocket and pointed it at us. Before he'd taken the first shot, Vista bent space between us and him, diverting the bullet into the ground while my HL-riot shield snapped on. Clockblocker had wisely moved behind me.

He fired twice more before following his friends through the fence.

"After them!" I shouted.

Just what we needed, kids with guns. Steeljaw and Ravage dived through the same hole and we followed close behind them.

The moment we were all across the threshold, a dark purple barrier appeared behind us, lightning moving across its surface. It reached up into the sky, forming a dome over what I assumed was the entire area.
Around us, the world changed. The dome faded away, replaced with a hologram of a night sky heavy with dark clouds. Ruined and abandoned cars appeared, and there was smoke rising in the distance.

The area looked like something out of a disaster movie.

On a hunch, I fired several times at the barrier, starting with the EMP settings and working up to lethal. They each splashed harmlessly against the effect.

"Damn it! Dispatch? Dispatch come in… Wheeljack, Teletraan - Anyone?"

Fuck, no signal. Whatever that barrier was, nothing was getting through.

"Looks like we're on our own," I told the others as Steeljaw and Ravage backed up, growling at something in the distance, but not willing to move too far from me. Waspinator, however, flew to Vista for comfort.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to today's event, coming to you from Brockton Bay's own Woldrich Sanitarium! With our special guest stars, the Wards!" a voice shouted from somewhere above us. It was deep and theatrical, like the voice used to announce movies or boxing matches.

"That's right!" another voice said, thinner than the first. "And joining us today is that adorably tiny tyke, Vista! Wannabe funnyman Clockblocker! And finally the Mistress of Mecha, the Beauty of Bots, the Champion of Cheap Knockoffs herself, Matrix!"

I couldn't help but notice the amount of sarcasm in my 'introduction'. More importantly, I knew those voices.

"Uber and Leet, what the hell are you playing at now?!!" I shouted. I couldn't see them anywhere, but that didn't mean much. Assuming this was all just a hologram, they could be twenty feet away and I'd never know.

To test the idea, I cycled through different vision modes on my suit while Uber continued to orate.

"For the benefit of those watching at home, today's game is Left For Dead. The goal is simple, the four survivors must make it to the roof of the Sanitarium and signal for help. Contestants ready?"

"Go to hell!" Vista snapped.

"3, 2, 1, Go!"

"I'd run if I were you!" Leet added helpfully.

"So what do we do?" Clockblocker asked.

"Not much we can do. I can't get a signal out, so we can't call for help or teleport anyone in." I glared at the field keeping us trapped. "We either play along or sit down and wait for whatever's powering this to break down."

"Would that really work?"

"Sure, it's Leet-tech. Sooner or later it always breaks. Isn't that right Leet?" There was no answer, but I liked to think I was pissing him off.
Leaving the fence, we headed towards the main hospital building. It would probably take us maybe five minutes to reach it, and that was mostly due to working our way around shrubs, trees, and debris. With all the video game obstacles Leet had undoubtedly created, plus whatever traps he'd thought up, it would probably take longer.

"Vista, any chance you could shorten the journey?" I asked. No point playing along unless we had to.

Holding out a hand, Vista flexed her fingers and frowned.

"I can't. It feels like there's lots of people around!"

Frowning, I sent Waspinator up to look around. It did look like there were a fair number of people wandering around out there. If they were affecting Vista's power, they couldn't simply be holograms. One of the dark clouds overhead moved as Wasp got close and I realised it was a swarm of gnats.

Leet must have had countless swarms buzzing around up there to screw with Vista. Maybe some sort of pheromone device to summon and direct them?

I couldn't even offer to fly us over. Divebomb had been circling pretty high when the field went up and was now trapped outside. I could feel his spark moving about so at least I knew he was safe.

We were barely twenty feet from the fence when I saw the first figure with my own eyes. A dark shape moved, climbing to its feet and shuffling towards us. It looked almost like a corpse, covered in blood, open sores and rotten skin.

"That's it?" Clockblocker asked. "Another zombie game? Geez, Leet's really hitting the bottom of the barrel."

Clock's voice must have carried, as the creature immediately stiffened. Turning towards us, it let out a wailing howl and charged.

A stunner sent it stumbling to the ground, but I could hear more, howling in the darkness.

The horde came out of nowhere, dozens of zombies sprinting towards us full speed from all directions. They weren't tough; a single shot was enough to put one down, but there were just so many.

I continued to fire wildly while using Ravage's side mounted guns for extra fire support. Steeljaw, Vista and Clock dealt with any that got too close.

It worked for a few seconds, but we were quickly being overwhelmed. The first few to reach us completely ignored Vista and tackled Clockblocker.

He froze them into place the moment they touched him, but sheer weight of numbers eventually pushed him to the ground. The mob continued attacking him, kicking and stamping on anything they could reach. His personal shield was flashing constantly as it tried to dissipate the attacks, but there were simply too many.

Eventually, Clockblocker turned his power on himself, freezing his costume and protecting him from any further attacks.

The horde then focused on me. My armour and shields were tougher, but I was taking hits from every direction. The attackers weren't focused, just wildly swinging their limbs, but they were able to put a strain on my system.
One of them grabbed the barrel of my Null-Ray, forcing me to retract it. The shorter barrel reduced the accuracy of my Null-Ray badly, but the horde was so close now that it didn't matter.

Switching my HL-shield from a riot shield to something smaller and more manageable, I started clubbing the creatures with it while firing continuously with my other arm.

Vista was having an easier time of it. The horde looked like it was actively trying to avoid hurting her, seeking to grab and pin her rather than beat her down. This left them open to the girl's surprising knowledge of close quarters combat.

Despite being much smaller and lighter than the horde, she was dancing around most of them, using throws, joint locks and simple leverage to break or dislocate bones.

##

Leet was sitting in his control room, currently watching the Wards play his game. Both he and Uber were wearing suits with full face helmets; Leet's was silver with a protruding visor while Uber's was gold on the sides with a black face plate.

"Looks like the heroes have encountered their first horde. Anything you can tell me, Uber?"

"Well Leet, as any gamer will tell you, lone infected pose little threat, but in large numbers they can beat down even the toughest opponents. Bright lights and loud noises will attract them. When that happens, all you can do is grab a gun and hope for the best… That reminds me, what weapons did you give the players?"

"... Oops?" Leet said with a laugh. "Not to worry, I'm sure they'll be fine."

##

The last of the zombies hit the ground with a thud and I breathed a sigh of relief. That had been intense. Around us, nearly thirty of the creatures were sprawled out on the ground.

"Ugh, I'm gonna feel that tomorrow," Clock groaned as he got up, getting a pained agreement from Vista.

"I know, but we need to get moving before Leet sends another wave," I said as I knelt down to examine one of the 'zombies'. Now they weren't running around like crazy, it was easier to see that they all looked exactly the same.

Feeling around by the neck, I found a seam and pulled.

The latex mask came away, revealing the red, blotchy face of Multiplayer. Well, that explained where they were coming from. The real one was probably hidden nearby, waiting for his cue. Actually, he didn't look good. Either he was having a reaction to his makeup or he'd been ill recently.

"Hey Clock, looks like you were right. Multiplayer was dumb enough to come back," I said with a grim chuckle.

"~Hooray~ me," Clock said weakly. I think there was even an amused snort from someone, but I wasn't sure.

This wasn't going to work. Excluding Ravage, I was the only person with any ranged weaponry. And while our shields could tank punches, getting rushed and stomped en-masse still hurt.
Thankfully, whatever was blocking the comms didn't work against my sub-space storage. Kneeling down, I pulled out what weapons I had on me and put them on the ground. The same grenade launcher I'd lent Glory Girl, a handgun Jack had put together, and a prototype rifle.

"Automatic grenade launcher. Containment foam rounds with short range impact fuses, try to aim at the feet. I don't have a lot of rounds, so you'll need to make them count. Prototype Null-Ray rifle. Three settings, EMP, stun and kill. Enough power for nearly two hundred stun shots, accurate up to six-hundred yards."

The prototype rifle was a bit bigger than an M16 and roughly the same shape. Thankfully, tinker materials meant it was much lighter than it looked. The pistol was of the same bluish metal Kid Win had used for his own pistol, and looked like something from one of the more realistic sci-fi shows.

"The pistol is something Jack put together. It's non-lethal, but it hurts like hell and can break bones on high power. Two hundred shots at full power, closer to three at low."

"Okay, the launcher I get, but why do you have the rifle?" Vista asked as she grabbed the grenade launcher for herself. I also forced her to take the pistol as backup.

"Things break," I said with a shrug. "I wanted a backup if my main rifle ever jammed at a bad time. Remember to keep it on stun." The last was said to Clockblocker as he lifted the rifle and took an experimental look down the sights.

"Everyone ready? Good, let's go."

##

"Looks like the Wards are re-armed and ready for round two," Uber said, turning to his partner. "I gotta say, it was nice of you to give them a chance to catch their breath."

"Yeah well, it's no fun if they lose right at the start. Now, lets see how they do against something a little tougher. Multiplayer, if they stop moving for more than three minutes, bring in the horde!"

"Ouch, you're a cruel man, Leet. Can you tell us anything about their weapons?"

"Why thank you Uber," Leet said with an exaggerated bow. "There's nothing too special about the launcher. It's just a modified MGL with six rounds. Knowing the Wards, It's probably loaded with containment foam. The gun is an obvious Kid Win design and the rifle is something I suspect Matrix stole from someone else."

"True but - Oh! it looks like the Wards are about to reach checkpoint one. Let's get back to the action!"

##

We were nearly halfway to the hospital when we stumbled across half a dozen abandoned cars all bunched together. Well, this certainly doesn't scream trap

So far, we hadn't seen more than a few stragglers that either ignored us or were easily dispatched.

"What do you think?" Vista asked quietly.

"Stay away from the blue car," Clock said, gesturing to the car near the middle.

"What's so special about it?" I was spending so much time looking at possible alt-modes these days
that I was getting more familiar with different makes and models of cars. The ones Leet had created for this 'scenario' were just generic Hollywood cars. Little more than boxes with wheels.

"It's alarmed…" He sighed at our confused expressions. "Don't you two ever watch movies? Look, this is a zombie game, yeah? Well, if they're attracted to noise, a car alarm's gonna bring them running."

That… made sense. "Right, new plan, stay away from the cars."

"Yeah, got it," Vista muttered.

Rather than risk going through the cars, we circled around to the left. It was slowing us down, but I'd rather get to the end in one piece.

The plan was working until we heard the roar. It sounded vaguely human, but I couldn't be entirely sure. Either way, it sounded big and angry, so we slowed down while looking for the source.

I was just considering sending one of my bots to investigate when Steeljaw started to growl.

Amongst the cars was a zombie, and it was staggering drunkenly towards the alarmed car. Before any of us could get a shot off, it smacked an arm against the car, setting off the alarm.

"Oh that cheating son-o-va-!" Clockblocker shouted even as zombies began to appear from everywhere.

This time we were better armed and prepared. Any large groups were stopped dead in their tracks by a well placed grenade from Vista, who switched to her pistol when she ran out of grenades, and the smaller groups were gunned down either by me or Clockblocker.

Just as we were starting to beat back the horde, we heard that roar again.

Something large smashed its way through the cars, picking one up and throwing it in our direction. We ducked as it sailed over our heads. Judging from the height, I guessed it was trying to scare rather than hit us.

The monster itself was huge, nearly seven feet tall with an upper body that was so over developed it was grotesque. Its lower body looked relatively normal, giving the creature the appearance of a misshapen gorilla. The missing lower jaw, blisters and chunks of missing skin made it look like something Bonesaw would probably cook up.

Charging forwards with more speed than should be possible, it smashed its way through most of the horde. A meaty arm thicker than my waist slammed into my shield, lifting me off the ground and throwing me a good ten feet.

Vista ducked under it and ran, putting distance between herself and it while she continued to fire at the creature. Clockblocker dived forwards, freezing it in place.

My anti-grav system managed to bleed off the worst of my inertia before I hit the ground. Nothing was broken, but I felt like I'd been hit by a car.

There was no way that thing was real. I cycled through the vision modes on my helmet and smirked when I was able to look straight through the monster.

Vista and Clockblocker were still holding off the horde, but they were slowly being forced away from each other and the brute. Steeljaw and Ravage were in much the same predicament, clawing
and biting anything that came near, but slowly being overwhelmed. Waspinator circled overhead, too small to be of use against these opponents.

I stood up just in time to see the monster unfreeze.

It grabbed the nearest zombie and threw it at Clockblocker, forcing him to back further away before it charged me again.

I'd had enough.

I set my Null-Ray as high as I could without damaging it, aimed at the monster's chest, and fired.

The glow bolt of energy punched clean through, hitting the one remaining car behind it, causing the wreck to explode into a massive fireball. The car was just a hologram so the explosion had to be simulated. It did look cool, though.

The creature's image flickered, and when it winked out, the horde hesitated in its attack. I pointed my gun at them and fired. I'd dialed the power down to something that would merely break bones, but I wasn't going to tell them that.

I didn't know if Multiplayer could feel pain inflicted on his copies, but at the moment I really hoped so. A dozen shots and countless broken bones later, the horde had all but vanished.

"Were not playing this game anymore, Leet! Only warning, let us go!" I shouted to the sky. I didn't really expect an answer, but it made me feel better.

Rejoining the others, I took the weapons I'd given then and adjusted the settings. The stun shots worked fine against Multiplayer, but I wanted to make a point.

By tweaking the alignment and focusing systems of Clockblocker's gun, I was able to increase the spread of his shots, effectively creating an automatic shotgun that could hit multiple targets at once at the cost of range and accuracy. Setting it to break bones was just me being spiteful; not that Clock had any complaints when I told him.

For Vista, the best I could do was switch the pistol from semi-automatic to full auto. Sure, it would fry the barrel and targeting systems, but it would do for now and I could always fix it later.


Idealy, at this point we'd take off running, gunning down anything that got in our way. Unfortunately, between all the beatings we'd taken, a light jog was the best we could manage.

Meanwhile, Multiplayer sent several more zombies after us, but after a shot from Clockblocker destroyed their legs, nothing more appeared.

##

"Look, don't be like that. You don't even feel their pain! Ugh, okay, okay, fine. Just head on back."

Uber tried to massage his forehead and stave off the oncoming headache, only for his helmet to get in the way.

Shutting off the cameras, he pulled it off.

"What the hell!" Leet demanded. "What are you doing?"
"It's game over, man! Multi's refusing to go after them."

"What! why?" Leet whined.

"They're not fucking around down there, Leet. Those weapons aren't just breaking bones, they're pulping them. What happens if one of them catches sight of Multiplayer?" He could make as many clones as he wanted, but he couldn't get too far from them. Every time he staged an attack, there was a risk of him being seen.

"But we can't just stop, we've got them beat! A few more swarms and another tank or two and -"

"And then what? They're Wards, Leet. Kids. Y'know what the PRT will do us if this goes too far?" Fuck, it probably already had. This was going to be GTA all over again: a bad idea pushed too far, and the PRT breathing down their necks.

"FUCK the PRT!" Leet growled as he grabbed his microphone. "Multiplayer, throw everything you've got at them!"

Uber's hand came down of the controls, smashing them and cutting Leet off. "Ignore that, Multi. Get out of there and get some rest."

"It. Is. Over. Leet," he repeated, turning to his friend. "Now either shut it down, or if you really must screw with them, leave the system on automatic." Not that he thought it would do much good. The special monsters were all just holograms and Matrix clearly had no problem blasting them to pieces.

"Besides," he added in a quieter voice. "Multi's sick, he shouldn't even be on his feet. Or had you forgotten?"

Leet looked briefly guilty, but it was quickly replaced with the sullen look Leet usually had when he couldn't get his own way.

Honestly, Uber thought of the guy as his brother, but sometimes - he felt - Leet really needed to grow up.

"Look, let them go. We've still got the big show to do. No sense getting the PRT wound up now. Have you got everything you need?"

Scattered around Leet were countless sheets of paper, covered in Leet's untidy scrawl and rough sketches.

"Alright, fine. But they still have to finish the course. Holograms only!" he quickly added at the look Uber gave him.

##

We were finally closing in on the hospital. I wasn't sure what Leet would have waiting for us inside, but I'd noticed a sudden drop in zombies.

So, either Multiplayer really did feel their pain or he'd decided it wasn't worth attacking us anymore. Or Leet was planning something big.

The guy was an idiot, but underestimating him was still a bad idea. He'd managed to build a hardlight holographic system large enough to cover this entire area, after all.

There was an overturned ambulance right by the doors of the hospital, but it didn't look like it was
It was only once we got closer that we heard the crying. It sounded like a young woman sobbing, and it was coming from the other side of the ambulance. I gestured to the others and we took up positions against the side of the vehicle.

With the right mix of sonar, radar and all the other sensors on my suit, I could practically look through solid objects, but it had trouble with hardlight holograms because they were just shaped force fields with an image projected on them. Trying to look through the ambulance would also mean looking through whatever projection was hiding on the other side. *At least that means it's just another hologram.*

So instead, I edged around the ambulance for a better look.

The creature resembled a thin, emaciated-looking woman. For a second, I wondered if they had modeled it on me. Her clothes were ripped and torn, exposing most of her body, and her fingers extended into long, knife-like claws.

As I stepped out fully, she stopped sobbing and turned to look at me. Her eyes glowed red as she started to growl. In response, Steeljaw and Ravage growled back.

It was almost amusing, but I knew it was just a hologram, and as I'd already said, we weren't playing this game any more.

Before the creature could move, I took its head off with a blast from my Null-Ray.

"Jesus, execution much?" Clockblocker asked as he limped around the ambulance. He must have twisted something with all the fighting.

"Oh, I'm sorry, did you want see what it could do?" I said flatly.

"... No… Not really, now that you mention it."

Rolling my neck, I sighed. "You guys do realise this building will probably be crawling with Multiplayer's copies, right?" I refused to call them zombies - out loud anyway. "Vista, any chance you can create a shortcut?"

I waved at the roof above us and the younger girl grinned. Her power hadn't been much use so far. While the copies soon faded away, they still screwed with her abilities. She couldn't affect living things or areas with large numbers of people.

Stepping back, she folded the space between the ground ahead of her and the roof above us, allowing us all to simply step onto the roof.

On a raised platform in the middle of the roof was a makeshift antenna with a large knife switch and 'rescue signal' written above it.

Moving slowly across the rotting surface, we kept an eye out for any further attacks, but even when I looked through the roof, I couldn't see any sign of Multiplayer.

With nothing else left to do, I pulled the switch down.

A green light on top of the antenna came on and a siren sounded, but nothing else seemed to happen. After nearly twenty seconds, more of those large monsters spawned around us.
Vista and Clockblocker focused their fire on one while I brought the other two down. None of them were able to get close enough to do any harm. Three more waves spawned, but honestly, it felt like Leet wasn't even trying anymore.

Without hordes of mindless attackers keeping us distracted, the brutes really weren't much of a threat. Eventually, there was another siren call and the world returned to normal.

With the holograms gone, it was worrying just how bad a state the hospital was actually in. There were holes in the roof and the entire back wall was being held together by scaffolding. I dread to think what would have happened if we'd tried to fight our way through.

A structurally weakened building and us blowing holes in the walls with high powered weapons; there's a recipe for disaster.

"Thank god that's over, can we go home now?" Clock asked as he dropped heavily to the roof. Now that the light was back to normal, I could see just how filthy the three of us were.

Whatever lingering effect was blocking my radio finally cleared as it crackled into life.

*All units! Robbery at Brockton Bay Central Bank. I repeat, all units report in!* Vista glared at Clockblocker.

"It wasn't my fault!"

Chapter End Notes

AN: Yeah, I know. I honestly tried to avoid the bank robbery. I've spent ages trying to think up something else that would 1, be big enough to draw attention/bring the wards running. 2, be small enough that the Protectorate doesn't drop everything and come charging in. 3, worked as a distraction.

I can at least promise that Amy is nowhere near the bank.
"Okay, guys," Lisa said, trying not to look nervous as she hung up her phone. "That was the boss. The heroes are out of the city and the Wards are in school, we're good to go."

She'd spared a brief use of her power while talking to Coil. Best she could tell, he still didn't know what she was planning, but she couldn't risk using her power too much at the moment. She would need it once they got to the bank.

This was the third day in less than a week that Coil had ordered them to gather at the loft. Twice now, he'd called off the job at the last minute.

They had been waiting for the call from Coil. He'd made it clear that they weren't to move without his say-so.

Lisa looked to Grue who nodded. Standing up, Grue and pulled his helmet on. Coil may have been calling the shots, but Grue was still team leader and he was going to act like it. Leading the way, he went downstairs to Chariot's teleporting truck.

Between Chariot, Trainwreck, and the odd suggestion from Squealer - or Crasher as she was calling herself now - the truck was a true monster. Reinforced armour, teleportation, auto-targeting weapons, countless electronic countermeasures, and even a short duration stealth field.

The inside was fairly cramped, with just enough space for all of them. Most of the free room was taken up by Chariot's tech. The driver's seat was more like the cockpit of a jet fighter with all the switches, dials and readouts that surrounded it.

Lisa, Grue and Regent climbed into the back while Chariot and Trainwreck took the front. She stared out of the window while they busied themselves with the 'pre-launch' sequence. This was it, the last job they would ever do together. One way or another.

Idly, she started playing with the silver watch Dragon had given to her through Rattrap. The tracking device in it was currently inactive. She turned the face and pushed down on it until something pressed into her wrist, being careful not to draw attention. At least now Dragon will be able to find my body.

Shaking her head, she forced away the morbid thought. She couldn't afford to think like that; she needed to focus on what she was doing and how she was going to convince the others.

"How's the boss keeping the heroes busy?" Regent asked, distracting Lisa from her thoughts as he lounged in his chair. How much of his relaxed attitude was feigned and how much was real was hard to tell without wasting her power.

"The Protectorate are stuck in a training course for the rest of the day, courtesy of the Youth Guard and a few well placed calls," she said with a smirk. "Even if they do get called in, we should have plenty of time to get out."

"What about the Wards?"
"They should all be at school. The PRT can't pull them all out of class at once, so we should only have to deal with three of them at most. New Wave all have day jobs and Dragon is in a meeting in Boston. And before you ask, the Autobots are being kept at bay by Uber and Leet." Plus their 'boss' was using his power - whatever it was - to ensure they were successful.

She still couldn't pin down his power. There were too many variables, too many possibilities. Her last attempt to work it out had resulted in nothing but the mother of all headaches. Whatever it was, she just had to hope he never saw this coming.

"How'd the boss pull that one off?" Chariot said, turning in his chair to look back at her.

She shrugged. "He probably paid them. They're always short on cash, after all."

"Everyone remember what they're doing?" Grue asked. He'd had them running through the plan non-stop since they were given the order from Coil.

They all knew what they were doing, he was just checking to cover his nerves.

She didn't need her power to know Grue was uncomfortable with this job. He'd been against it from the start. It was too high profile and had too much risk to both them and any bystanders. Not to mention that a successful bank job needed trust and coordination, things a real team had. They were anything but a real team.

"Yeah, yeah. We know what we're doing. Take a pill and relax," Trainwreck snapped from his seat. Next to him, Chariot was visibly twitching from nerves.

They all were, if Lisa was honest. The air in the truck was charged with a nervous energy, with Regent being the only visible exception.

This was the first major job they'd pulled since Bitch died, and the biggest one of their careers. If it worked, their reputations would be made.

In theory, the plan was as simple as they could make it. Using the truck, they would get close to the bank, then enter through a side door on foot. They would then subdue the customers with Grue's darkness. Chariot and Regent would kept an eye on the customers while Grue, Trainwreck and herself would empty the vault.

Their job was to grab as much money as they could carry and get out.

There had been a small disagreement over the safety deposit boxes. Trainwreck and Chariot had wanted to raid them for anything of value, but she and Grue had argued against it while Regent hadn't cared either way.

Money was insured; no matter how much they took, it wouldn't actually affect anyone. The boxes, however, could have anything in them, and while it wasn't likely, there was still a chance of grabbing something too hot to handle.

Then Coil had contacted her and made it clear they were to grab anything of value. Deeds, invoices, insurance forms, mortgage and loan information. It didn't matter, he'd pay extra for it. He probably wanted it for leverage over people.

The chance for more money had swung Regent's vote - not that it mattered - and upped the risk even further.

Once everything was loaded up, they would get back in the truck and use its teleporter to escape
without risk of being followed.

"Okay, brace!" Chariot called as the truck drove out of the hideout and he tapped in the destination coordinates.

Lisa pushed herself back into her seat and clamped her mouth and eyes shut. She hated this part.

She didn't know if it was just Chariot's system or her power, but teleporting was hell.

It started with a feeling of acceleration, then the world around her would break apart. Colours would dance in front of her face like the devil's own kaleidoscope. And the screaming, god, the screaming. If she didn't keep a tight rein on her power, it would run in circles trying to understand what she was seeing.

After the first time, she made sure to keep her eyes shut at all times, and she wasn't the only one. Even Regent looked decidedly queasy afterwards.

There was a feeling of deceleration and Lisa carefully cracked an eye open.

Brockton Bay Central Bank was in the middle of the shopping district in the southwest portion of the city. Unlike the Boardwalk, which sat on the sea shore and was the main tourist draw for the city, the shopping district was quieter and tended to cater to people who actually lived here.

Coil had dictated the time when the job would start, and thankfully it worked in their favour as most people would be at work, reducing the number of customers in the bank.

They'd appeared in an empty parking lot at the eastern end, only a few minutes drive from the bank. They couldn't risk using the truck's stealth system on busy roads and teleporting closer to the bank was dangerous for obscure tinker reasons, so there was no real way to do this next part subtly.

Chariot tore out of the lot and drove towards the bank at full speed. People on the street stopped to stare as the massive tinkertech truck barreled down the road, barely avoiding other cars and causing more than a few accidents in passing.

The building itself was a stone fixture six stories tall, with crenelations on the roof and balconies, stone gargoyles at the corners, and iron grilles on the windows. The entryway had statues of rearing horses with wild manes on either side.

Clearing his throat, Grue leaned forwards.

"There's a side road just past the bank!" he shouted over the roar of the engine. "Pull in there! We can go in through the side entrance!"

"I got a better idea!" Chariot shouted back. The truck lurched as it accelerated further; the bank was now in view and he showed no signs of slowing down.

"What the fuck are you doing!" Grue shouted even as Lisa pinned herself to her seat.

"Hold on!" she screamed as Chariot threw the truck into a spin, her power already warning her what was coming.

The tires screeched as the oversized vehicle skidded, tinkertech and faith the only things keeping it upright. Now traveling backwards, the truck had hardly lost any speed and Grue barely had time to sit back and pull his belt tight.
The rear end of the truck smashed through the bank's outer wall, slamming everyone into their seats and knocking the wind out of them.

Her head was still spinning when the back door burst open, revealing dust and more than a dozen scared faces. Lisa could already hear alarms going off; she guessed whatever time they'd planned for had just been cut in half.

Grunting, Grue raised an arm and a cloud of darkness billowed out, quickly filling the bank.

"When we get out of here, we are going to have words," he growled between breaths. Climbing out of his seat, he was the first to enter the building.

"Fifteen minutes," his voice boomed in the darkness, his power giving it an unsettling edge. "We won't be here any longer than that. Stay put, stay quiet, we'll be gone before fifteen minutes are up. You'll be able to go about your day as usual with an interesting story to tell. This isn't a TV show, this isn't a movie. Don't try to be a hero. You'll only get yourself or someone else hurt."

As he spoke, his darkness lifted, pooling in the air to block the view from the second floor balconies. It also stuck to the doors and windows, keeping people from seeing in or out.

By the time he'd finished his speech, Lisa had finally managed to extract herself from the truck. Chariot was already patrolling, forcing people to the floor and confiscating phones as Trainwreck checked the ground floor offices for any stragglers.

By agreement, they weren't taking anything from the customers. Instead, their phones were being dumped in a pile on a desk so they could be collected when they were gone. Not that it really mattered: between Grue's darkness overhead and along the walls, and the jammers on the truck, no signals were getting through. Chariot had turned those on just before climbing out of the truck.

In fact, if Chariot was telling the truth, the jammers were working on everything within a city block.

Lisa rolled her neck in an effort to ease some of the ache and walked towards the vault. Releasing her power, she focused on the large steel wheel. Giving it a few careful twists, she smirked and spun it.

*Left, stop, right, right, stop, left again.* Regardless of everything else, this was fun. Using her power to outwit people, solve problems or just guessing the combination for a lock. She was probably going to miss it when she 'joined' the heroes.

It took longer than she really wanted before there was a deep clunk from inside the door and the locks released.

Stepping back, she waved Grue towards the door and watched him pull it open. Walking back to the main room, she swapped with Trainwreck. His large size and strength made him more suited to hauling bags of cash or breaking open locks.

Between him and Grue, they would be able to load the truck up in no time, assuming it still worked after that stupid entrance.

"Don't bother with that one, it's a dye pack," Lisa called. Grue dropped the pack he was carrying with a grunt.

She smiled as he walked back to get another.

"Hey, gimme a window!" Regent called out before Grue was out of sight. He'd moved to the front of
the bank and was standing by the large windows.

Grue waved a hand and a small circle cleared.

Looking through the window, Regent tensed, letting out a curse. "The white hats are here!" he shouted, backing away from the opening.

Trying not to smirk, Lisa followed Grue and looked over his shoulder.

The PRT had already established a perimeter, pushing civilians back and blocking the roads. Aegis, Gallant and Kid Win were standing inside the rope cordon along with nearly a dozen PRT officers and two Autobots: Defensor and Rhinox.

The PRT guys were wearing thick armour and carrying containment foam sprayers. New tinker-tech, personal force fields. Plan to back up the Wards until reinforcements arrive.

"What the fuck. I thought you said three wards at most?" Grue asked, turning to her.

She held her hands up. "I didn't think they would send Autobots without Dragon or Matrix around. The boss said they were being handled!"

"And the others?" he hissed back.

"Backup. If we get passed the Wards they'll try to trap us in foam. They're wearing tinker shields so they're more willing to fight capes head on."

"What're you worried about?" Chariot said, his wheeled feet gliding over the polished floor. "Once we're back in the truck, they can't do a thing to stop us. I don't need much spa -"

A beeping came from his armour and Chariot glanced at something only he could see before dashing towards the truck embedded in the wall. "No, no, no, no, no!"

Running to catch up, Lisa reached the truck just after Grue. A glance inside showed Chariot frantically pulling apart one of the consoles as the smell of burning plastic filled the cabin.

_Sabotage... Rattrap. He followed us back to the hideout, was waiting for the others to arrive._

Her lips twitched and she thought to keep her expression blank.

"Fuck!" Chariot had just managed to reach whatever he was looking for when she heard a small pop of shorting wires from somewhere else deep in the truck. Smoke started to rise between the panels while several warning lights came on.

"What happened?" Grue demanded, looking between her and Chariot.

"Equipment failure from ramming a wall at full speed?"

She tried not to sound too pleased, but from the way Grue turned to her it hadn't worked.

"Can you get it working?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Fuck, I don't know! The teleporter is fried. Even if I rigged it, the targeting system would need to be recalibrated."

"Can you at least get it moving?"
"I dunno… maybe… Just give me some time."

"How long do we have?" Grue asked her.

"That depends," she said with a shrug. "The PRT won't storm the place, there's too much risk to the hostages. Not unless we do something stupid, like threaten the hostages." She gave Trainwreck a meaningful glare before he could suggest doing just that.

"But the longer we spend here, the more backup will arrive. Sooner or later, the big guns will arrive, and then we're fucked no matter what we do."

"What if we went out the back way?" Regent said, looking thoughtfully through the window.

_He's suspicious._

"Go ahead, if you want to get shot in the face again," she said with a wry grin, hoping to distract him. Her power was telling her that Warpath was sitting just outside the door, ready to stun anyone who tried to escape. _Has possibly set up traps just in case we get past him._

The doorway was too narrow for them to try rushing past him. The first person through the door would be stunned, blocking the others from escaping.

"Can we fight our way out the front? Maybe use the hostages as shields?" Trainwreck suggested.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Grue said, shaking his head. "If we start using human shields, things will get messy."

"How did they get here so quickly?" Regent asked, looking at her. Lisa knew then that Regent had probably worked it out. Despite his general 'I don't give a fuck' attitude, Regent wasn't stupid.


"Yeah, but they've already got the streets clear, we're surrounded, and our ride just happens to break down?"

"You can't seriously think they knew?" Chariot protested, looking around nervously.

"I don't know… but why don't we ask Tattletale?" Regent said, stepping closer and looking into her eyes, daring her to lie.

She glared back silently.

"Don't be stupid," Grue said, stepping between them, "She'd never do something like that… right?"

She didn't answer.

"Fuck! Why?"

"Because Coil is going to kill us! Do you understand that? The man is insane! He thinks he can take over the city and literally run everything from the shadows like some sort of James Bond villain. Fuck! This job is nothing more than a distraction, do you get that? He wants the heroes focusing on us while he makes his real move. The moment he's finished with us, we're all dead."

She looked at Grue, Chariot and Trainwreck in turn. _Her life is in his hands. You already know he doesn't give a shit. We're resources, possessions. Your past stays hidden as long as you do what he says, and he will never give you what you want, because that would remove his leverage over you._
She focused on Regent last, knowing exactly what buttons to push. "Is that what you want? To spend the rest of your lives being manipulated by Coil? Dancing to his whims until he gets bored and kills you? Sound like anyone else you know?"

She laughed bitterly. "Well, you're dead. Me? I'm going to end up in some dark room, drugged out of my mind. And if I'm a very good girl, I'll be rewarded with less torture. Well fuck that! I'd rather take my chances with the PRT!" Her voice had been steadily rising and now she was shouting.

"So that's it? You're gonna fuck us all over just because you're pissed at the boss?" Regent asked. Angry. Doesn't like the comparisons to his father... Good.

"Well maybe you shouldn't have killed Bitch!" She hadn't meant to say that. This really wasn't the time, but she was tired of keeping quiet.

Grue, who had been glancing between them focused on her. "Wait, what?"

"Did you think I wouldn't figure that out? You tripped me! You kept me from stopping her, and when that wasn't enough, you threw some newbie at Lung just so you could run away! You. Left. Us. To. Die! So fuck you and fuck Coil!"

"You sonnova!-" Grue shouted as he turned on Regent.

She'd been so focused on Regent, she hadn't noticed Trainwreck moving until it was too late.

The bullet tore through her abdomen, narrowly missing Regent. Instantly, she lost all feeling in her legs and collapsed to the floor.

*Damage to spine, internal bleeding. Orders from Coil, kill me if I try anything*- The information poured in as her power slipped from her grasp, unable to focus on anything but the pain.

As she collapsed, Grue moved, trying to catch her before she hit the ground.

Trainwreck shot forward, his fist moving like a freight train. It smashed into Grue's helmet, cracking it and shattering the visor.

Around them, the hostages were screaming and trying to get away from the fight.

Spinning with the blow, Grue dodged the follow up strike and threw a cloud of darkness in the Tinker's face. Using the distraction, he stepped forwards and drove his fist into Trainwreck's abdomen.

Chariot dived out of the way as the two of them moved. Grue was by far the better fighter, and by keeping Trainwreck blinded, he negated the Tinker's greater strength.

Unfortunately, focusing on Trainwreck distracted him from Regent, who drew his own gun and fired. Five shots slammed into his back and Grue dropped to the floor. Regent wore a look of distaste as he reloaded his pistol.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god!" Chariot cradled his head in panic.

Grue's darkness was already starting to clear from the windows.

"We need to get out of here! Chariot, can your piece of crap still do anything?" Trainwreck demanded as he pulled several small devices from his arms. He pressed each one against Tattletale's costume around her wound. Each one clamped down, drawing a short scream from her.
"W-what are you doing?" Chariot asked, backing away from the larger Tinker. Only Regent standing behind him was keeping him from running.

"Keeping the bitch alive. The boss will want to talk to her, I'm sure. Now answer the fucking question!"

Taking a deep breath - and taking care not to look at Grue - Chariot started tapping away at an arm mounted computer. "The best I've got is a smoke screen, my own personal mix. I based it on tear gas and added some elements that block radio signals."

"And just how are we supposed to breathe?" Regent asked.

"I've got gas masks in the truck."

Trainwreck threw Tattletale over his shoulder, headless of her pained gasps.

"It'll do. We'll go out through the van. Split up and make your way back to base. Forget the money."

"What about Grue?"

"Leave him, the PRT can deal with him."

##

Outside, Rhinox frowned as thick black smoke started pouring out of vents on the truck. Something wasn't right.

"Looks like Grue is trying to clear a path, get ready!" Aegis called. "Rhinox, you sure that thing can't move?"

"Rattrap's eaten his way through most of the electrical system. The only way it's going anywhere is if I pull it." Watching the cloud spread, he tried to narrow down what was bothering him.

Warpath was behind the bank and had mined the area with what he was calling 'confoam-claymores'. They were out front and none of the Undersiders could fly. So what was he missing?

The cloud was just about to reach the closest PRT officers when he realised what it was. *Hissing!*

Grue's power was silent, so why could he hear the gas hissing through the vents!

"Get back! That's not Grue!" He shouted.

Two officers immediately moved backwards, but the third wasn't quick enough. As soon as the gas reached him he started to cough and splutter. A pair of grenade launchers emerged from the roof, firing canisters into the clearing and spreading the gas faster.

"Tear gas! Everyone get away!" Aegis shouted, flying up into the air along with Kid Win.

Rhinox ran forwards, closely followed by Gallant. The Ward's armour could seal itself for a short time, protecting him from the smoke.

The chemicals did nothing to Rhinox, but whatever else they had added to it was blocking most of his sensors, reducing his visibility to almost zero. Reaching the truck, he found one of the vents and crushed it closed. It didn't stop the smoke, but it did reduce the amount escaping.

"Hey! What're you wasting time here for!" Rattrap shouted as he appeared in one of the windows.
"They're getting away and they got blondie!"

"Go, we'll take care of things here!" Gallant shouted, using a borrowed containment foam sprayer to block another vent.

Rhinox transformed and charged after the Undersiders. Once he was clear of the smoke, he ordered Defensor to enter the bank and look after the hostages.

The tracking device Dragon had placed on Tattletale was still transmitting and moving away fast.

##

Aegis, Kid Win and Defensor stormed up the stairs and into the bank. The hostages were still huddled around the lobby, with one man desperately trying to help a guy in black leathers.

"Is anyone else hurt?" Kid Win called as Aegis ran over to help.

Aegis recognised the dark costume as Grue's and quickly knelt by the fallen criminal. There were holes in the back of his costume and he was lying in a pool of his own blood. The guy kneeling over Grue was putting pressure on the worst of the wounds, trying to stem the blood flow.

Trying his best to help with one hand, Aegis flipped his radio with the other. "Dispatch, we need an ambulance. One of the Undersiders had been shot. Male, late teens."

There was a sound of transformation and Defensor broke apart. Hot Shot started hosing the truck down with containment foam, partially to prevent fire but also to stop any of the tear gas from leaking into the building. Blades used his rotors to push the few bits of smoke away while Groove and Streetwise started checking the hostages.

First Aid ran over to Grue, his left arm transforming, fingers opening and folding back to make room for a multitude of pincers, forceps and scalpels. Placing his right hand on Grue's back, he injected the villain with a painkiller.

"Can you hold him down? I don't have time to wait for the painkillers," he asked Aegis, who nodded. Switching to a cutting tool, First Aid carefully started to remove Grue's mask, forcing Aegis to hold the villain down when he tried to move in protest.

"I'm sorry, but saving your life is more important than your identity," First Aid explained, pulling away the remains of the helmet. Pulling an opaque mask out of a side compartment, he covered Grue's nose and mouth and connect the tubes to himself so he could pump oxygen through it.

"There, you're going to be all right, but I need you to stay awake. Can you tell me your name?" His right hand converted into a lamp like device that gave off a green beam. He quickly ran it over his left hand, the wounds and the hands of Aegis and the bystander, sterilising everything. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing.

"G-Grue…" he groaned drunkenly.

"Good, do you have any family?" Converting his other hand, he started to operate. The boy was incredibly lucky. The shots should have killed him outright, yet somehow they had avoided hitting anything immediately fatal. Extracting one of the bullets, he ran another scan.

"A-Ashia. Sishter… need… need to… " Grue slurried as the painkillers started to affect him.

"That's alright, don't worry," First Aid soothed. "One more bullet is shallow enough for me to reach,
but among the other three, two will need extensive surgery and the last is worryingly close to his
kidneys. I also suspect he has a punctured lung," he said quietly to Aegis.

"Are you sure he's gonna be alright?" Aegis asked quietly, hoping not to be overheard by Grue.

"If nothing else, I'll make sure he lives long enough to reach a hospital." Converting his free hand
into its medigun mode, First Aid focused on closing the first wound.

As First Aid worked, Aegis turned to the man who had been trying to help. "Can you tell me who
shot him?"

"Yeah," the guy said, taking a breath. "It was the big guy with the arms. When they realised you
were here, they turned on each other. Started shouting something about a bitch. Then the big guy
shot the girl. They fought before the skinny guy shot this guy. They left and carried the girl off with
them."

As the hostage recounted the events, the PRT moved in to secure the bank. Hostages were taken
outside and paramedics were starting to arrive. They'd been called right at the start, just in case
something went wrong.

Watching Grue get loaded onto a stretcher, Aegis looked around. The Undersiders were fleeing, the
money had been saved, and none of the hostages had been hurt.

So why didn't this feel like a win?

Chapter End Notes

AN: my beta suggested I post a quick explanation for Regents behaviour as I'm not sure
I could a scene convincingly from his POV.. I'm posting it now because the chapter edit
function here is a pita to work with so please try not to discus this on SpaceBattles or
SufficientVelocity until I actually post it there.

Regents change in behaviour.

Regents regression has been caused by two things; 1, the fight with Lung and 2, the
after effects.
My take on him in canon is that he didn't really 'grow' as a person until after Skitter
joined the team. Her presence caused changes in all of them, in Regents case, she helped
humanise him. Later helped by his relationship with Imp. Of course, none of that has
happened here.

This story started a little earlier than canon, the Undersiders were more a lose collection
of people. Given time, they would have slowly meshed into a working team.

When Lung came after them, it wasn't some 'im gonna make you pay' thing. He was
wrath of god angry with them, he thought they had info on his daughter and he wasn't
going to let them live.

This was the Undersiders first real 'life or death' situation. Not, oh theres a chance of
dying here, this was 'if we don't put him down or get away he will kill us. In that
situation, Regent reacted exactly how he'd been conditioned IE save yourself. He had no problem leaving Bitch to die because he expected the others to do exactly the same thing.

Problem is, Grue and Lisa aren't wired like that. They see what he did as a betrayal and as such the small amount of trust they had all built up was lost. Regent stuck around because he was still getting paid and he was still hidden from his family. But with his team mates treating him like a leaper, he simply reverted back to what he knew.

Now it's possible, given time, that the Undersiders could recover. But Coils direct interference (and i'm fairly sure I've mentioned this before in story) made matters worse. The Undersiders were imploding and his added pressure only made it worse.

By the time Regent shot Grue, he'd stopped trying to think of them as team-mates. Nothing was done out of spite, but by this point, he's willing to betray the others because he fully expects them to betray him.
Glancing around the dark sedan, Dinah Alcott could feel a faint tension in the air.

The three men who had taken her were dressed like the men she often saw guarding her uncle: dark suits, ties and - when she looked closely at the back of the driver's head - ear pieces with wires running into their collars. To anyone else, they looked like the bodyguards you saw on TV.

They weren't.

The car was black and expensive looking, with the windows tinted so darkly no one could see her. Just the sort of car her uncle would have sent.

He hadn't.

Fighting back the tears and the fear, she watch the numbers change. The chance of her ever going home again was 35.442%, and dropping fast.

She'd tried telling her parents about the numbers, but they hadn't listened. They never listened to her. Always too busy working or out meeting people. They weren't important, not like her uncle, but they wanted to be.

And then she had started seeing 'the numbers'.

It was hard to describe. It was like looking at a mosaic made of a billion different images. All of them constantly moving and shuffling. It was a mess of colours and sounds, but after a while patterns emerged. One colour standing out more than another or the same action played out across multiple scenes. It had taken her ages to figure out what she was seeing.

The future.

Countless possible futures, constantly changing, moving and mixing together into the now. And she knew, to a scary degree, the chance of a single image becoming true.

When the man had come into class with the principal, dressed like a bodyguard, he said there was a problem and her uncle had sent him to get her. She had looked to the principal, who gave her a sad look and nodded.

She felt sick at his look and all kinds of horrible thoughts ran through her mind. Why would her uncle send somebody and not her parents? Was one of them hurt? Had something happened?

She was so caught up in her thoughts that she followed them outside and climbed into the car without even thinking about it. She hadn't thought to check the numbers until it was too late.

What if I start screaming? She asked herself quietly and watching the mosaic change. Now she had a 30.54% chance of going home.

She quickly dismissed that idea. It had taken her a few days to realise what she could and couldn't do. She could see the pattern as a whole but she couldn't focus too closely on a single image. It gave her headaches when she tried.
Asking questions seeing how things played out gave the best results.

Where are they taking me? She hissed as a flash of pain shot through her head. The man nearest to her frowned at her and she tried to make herself look smaller. She hadn't expected that to work, but she needed to try something, anything.

Ignoring the lingering pain, she tried a different question. Chance of dying in the next six months? 5%.

She wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. They wanted her alive, but the chance of ever going home was frighteningly low.

The car braked hard. The driver in front let out a huff of frustration and thumbed his radio.

"Route A’s a no go. Looks like an accident, traffic is backed up from 23rd… Roger, switching to route C."

As the car pulled away, she realised she hadn't put her seatbelt on. She had been so worried about her family that she'd simply forgotten. Everyone else in the car was wearing them, though…

She quickly looked out the window so they wouldn't see her expression. The chance of it working changed with the speed of the car.

She could feel herself trembling; her chance of going home was up by 15%, but the chance of dying was up by 20%. She didn't need to her power to know this was going to hurt.

The car came to a stop at a set of lights and her chance jumped to the highest it was going to get. As the car started to pull away, she grabbed the door handle and pulled.

Falling out of the car, she hit the pavement and rolled, shielding her face with her arms. Knowing it would hurt didn't help.

As she came to a stop, her head was spinning, her arms and legs were stinging and she could hear the men in the car shouting. Forcing herself up, she ran as fast as she could across the road.

##

*All units! Robbery at Brockton Bay Central Bank. I repeat, all units report in!*  

Vista glared at Clockblocker.

"Oh come on! It wasn't my fault!" he protested as she punched his arm.

Below us, I could see Arcee and a PRT van roaring towards the hospital. I couldn't see Divebomb anywhere, so I decided to take the quick way down. Running towards the roof edge, I jumped off, trusting my antigrav systems to catch me.

"Arcee! What's going on?" I called as I landed.

Skidding to a stop next to me, Arcee transformed. "The Undersiders are holed up in Brockton Bay Central Bank. We're being called in to help. What happened here?"

She gave Clock and Vista a worried look as the younger cape folded space between the roof and the ground. Both of them were dirty and clearly worn out.

"Uber, Leet and one of their dumb stunts. Where's Divebomb?"
"On his way to the rig, he hurt himself trying to get through that forcefield. Jack had to order him to return."

Silently cursing, I checked my radio. "Jack, you there?"

*I'm here. Divebomb just arrived. He's mobile, but he hit that shield pretty hard. Looks like he's cracked a couple of struts and his linkup system is buckled. Sorry, but he won't be carrying you any time soon.*

Damn it. I'd ask Divebomb what he'd been thinking if I expected to get an answer beyond 'sqwark'.

Flying was clearly out, so I climbed on Arcee while Steeljaw, Ravage, Waspinator, Clockblocker and Vista bundled into the PRT van.

"How did you know I needed help?" I asked as we accelerated away from the hospital.

*Teletraan sent an alert when your signal cut off,* Arcee said through the radio in my suit. *Aegis wanted to send more people to help but then the call for the bank came in.*

"Don't worry about it. Jack, what's the situation at the bank?"

*The Undersiders are holed up inside and the PRT has just finished clearing the surrounding streets. You've been ordered to hang back with the Wards and wait for reinforcements. Oh! And something's messing with radio signals, the PRT had to establish a hardline to HQ and I can't contact any of the bots in the area.*

As much as it irritated me, I could see the logic. If the Wards tried to storm the building, the hostages could get hurt. Maybe If I got close enough, I could port one of my bots directly inside? I'd just have to deal with that signal jammer first.

Trusting Arcee to steer, I brought up a list of my bots and pushed down my irritation. All my 'combat' ready bots were already there so that idea was dead. Maybe if I -

//Turn left!//

"Turn left!" I shouted. Gripping the handlebars tight, I jerked Arcee left onto Booker Street. It was one of the longer streets in the city, and if I took the left at the end I could come at the bank from behind.

Traffic was light enough that Arcee could really accelerate. Despite everything - even my anger at Uber and Leet - I couldn't help but smile. The speed was incredible. Sure, I'd gone faster while flying, but there was just something different about moving so fast, so close to the ground.

My heart stopped as a young girl ran out into the road, directly into our path.

##

She wasn't going to make it.

Coming to an intersection, she barely had time to glance both ways before running to her right.

She couldn't keep this up: her legs were cramping, her lungs were on fire, her head was pounding and her entire body was filled with a dull ache that was steadily getting worse.

At every junction or turn, she paused for as long as she dared to check for the best route. She couldn't call for help, it had been the first idea she'd considered - 5 percent chance of that working.
The men chasing her would simply kill anyone who tried to stop them.

She spotted a nearby gap between buildings. - 59 percent chance of escape. Squeezing through, she looked around: 60% if she went to the right, and 26% if she went left.

Sprinting right, she watched in despair as the number suddenly dropped to 15%.

It didn't matter what she did. Every time they lost sight of her, the numbers would suddenly change again.

She was starting to feel light headed, but she couldn't stop.

She'd reached a main road - 40 percent chance of being hit by a car - and without stopping to think, she ran out into the road just in time to see the oncoming motorbike.

78.948 percent chance of death.

She barely had time to scream.

##

As the girl screamed, Arcee swerved hard, trying desperately to avoid her.

We were going too fast, the road too slick. Her back wheel spun out under us, putting Arcee on her side and trapping my leg as we slid towards the girl.

Sparks flew as Arcee transformed, freeing my leg and letting me kick off of her. The force sent us both rolling in opposite directions past the girl.

Tucking my arms against my chest, I allowed myself to bounce and roll across the asphalt before finally coming to a stop under the wheels of a parked car. *Ouch…*

Groaning, I gave the world a chance to stop spinning. Even with my armour and shields, that had *hurt*.

Pushing myself up, I could see Arcee climbing to her feet on the other side of the road. She'd managed to get her feet under her and slide to a more controlled stop.

Thankfully the damage was superficial. The trails of red and blue paint on the road that Arcee and I had left behind even created an interesting pattern.

The girl was still there in the middle of the road. She'd fallen to her knees and I could see tears running down her face, but otherwise, she looked okay. Trying not to limp, I moved to check on her.

Up close, I could see she was filthy and covered in cuts and scratches. I knew we hadn't hit her, so what had happened?

"Hey, you okay?" I asked gently as I placed a hand on her shoulder.

Wide eyes stared up at me before she suddenly wrapped her arms around my leg.

"H-help!" She gasped quietly between breaths.

"Miss Alcott?! Are you okay?" A large man stepped through the gathering crowd. He was wearing a dark suit and glasses and I could see his partner talking on a phone.
"Thank you for finding her miss, we'll take it from here," he said, stepping forward with his arms out.

"He's lying!" the girl said, unsteadily climbing to her feet. She looked physically ill, her skin was pale and clammy with dark rings under her eyes.

Putting myself between the her and them, I extended my Null-Ray. Arcee moved to stand behind me, sandwiching the girl between us.

"Who are you and what's going on?" I demanded. I really wasn't in the mood for this. Rewind booted up my suit's lie detector. I'd installed it long ago but hadn't had much use for it as I didn't interrogate people that much.

"We're Miss Alcott's security detail. She had a nasty fall and we're taking her home. She's just a bit confused."

[LIE] flashed up on HUD and I aimed my null-rifle at him. And I'm the god of tinkers.

We had attracted quite a crowd by this point and the men kept casting furtive looks at the gathered watchers.

"Dispatch, I need backup. Possible kidnapping in progress." Normally my helmet muffled my voice, keeping people from listening in when I wanted to talk on the radio. This time I made sure the built-in speakers carried my voice so they would know what I was doing.

I didn't pay the reply much attention, too focused on the men in front of me. I wanted to see how they would react. If they were really here to protect her, there wouldn't be a problem. If they weren't, I expected them to try something.

The two men shared a look and the one on the phone shook his head. Slowly, both men started to back up, trying to move through the crowd which was trying to move away from them in turn.

"Both of you, on your knees with your hands on your heads!" I ordered.

A bullet pinged off the ground nearby. I spun on the spot, my HL-shield snapping into place as I did my best to shield the girl, while Arcee turned to find the shooter.

Around us, the crowd broke apart screaming as people tried to get away from the gunman.

There were two more shots. One clipped Arcee's shoulder harmlessly while the other hit the ground.

She fired back, but whoever the gunman was, he ducked out of sight and vanished.

After a moment of silence that seemed to stretch on forever, I risked standing up. The two kidnappers were gone, along with the gunman.

Further down the road, the PRT van with Clockblocker, Vista and my bots was just coming into sight.

"Okay," I asked her, "can you please tell me what is going on?"

##

By the time the Wards arrived, I'd managed to get a rough idea of what was happening.

The girl's name was Dinah Alcott, and she was the mayor's niece. *Doesn't that make her Triumph's*
cousin? She had been taken from school by men pretending to be her uncle's bodyguards.

Just in case those men came back, I had Steeljaw and Ravage keeping an eye out, with Waspinator on overwatch. Arcee was leaning casually against the side of the PRT transport.

"Think she's okay? Looks like she's got the mother of all headaches," Clockblocker murmured as Vista helped the girl into the back of the PRT transport. The moment she was sitting down, Dinah all but collapsed.

"Yeah… Shock maybe. We should get someone to look at her. Either way, it looks like we won't be making it to the bank. We should probably -" I was cut off from saying more by an emergency call from Rhinox.

*Matrix! How close are you to the bank!?*

"I'm at the east end of Booker street, why?"

*The Undersiders are getting away, and they've got a hostage with them!*

... Scrap...

A tracking signal appeared on my HUD. It wasn't too far from the bank, but it was moving fast. Rhinox was a few streets behind them, but he wasn't moving.

The signal was one of Dragon's. Why would a hostage be carrying one of Dragon's tracers? I put the thought to one side. Fix the problem first and sort out the why later.

"Clock, I want you and Vista to look after Dinah! Steeljaw, don't let her out of your sight! Arcee, you good for another chase?" Getting a nod from her, I started running towards the signal.

"Always," she said, standing up and transforming at the same time. As she pulled alongside me, I jumped on without her having to slow down.

"Rhinox, where are you? I need details!"

*They've split up! Last I saw, Trainwreck and Chariot had the hostage and she was injured. I don't know where Regent went. Watch out for Trainwreck! When he saw me, he fired some kinda concussive weapon into a crowd! I'm trying to help the wounded now!*

This day just keeps getting better, I thought bitterly.

Mentally, I ran over everything I knew about him. Between him and Chariot, Trainwreck seemed to be the bigger threat. He was a Tinker, a cyborg that had tried to kill me once already. And he has no problem attacking innocent people to slow Rhinox down.

I was going to need more firepower.

"Jack, is my new armour ready?" I called, a plan already forming.

*Are you kidding? We still haven't finished testing it!*

"Does it move?" I demanded.

*Well.. Yes, but-*

"Then lock onto me and send it, now!" I'd apologise for being short with him later. But right now, I
didn't have time to waste.

In Arcee's wing mirror, I saw a flash of blue as my new armour appeared in its bike mode, the onboard VI steering it expertly towards me.

"Arcee, try to keep steady!"

*You're insane!* she shouted back but she still did as I asked.

Watching its position on my HUD, I jumped up from Arcee's seat, putting my feet under me. Between my shields, antigrav tech and armour, I knew that if this went wrong it wouldn't kill me. That didn't make it any less heart pounding.

The moment the bike was close enough, I jumped.

For one terrifying moment, I could see nothing but the road below me before my new bike roared underneath me and I landed safely in the seat.

As soon as I grabbed the controls, my HUD updated itself. The bike had an improved - and greatly expanded - sensor suite compared to my normal armour. I dismissed most of the display, keeping it as minimal as possible for now.

Lying forwards in the saddle, I revved the engine and took control over the steering.

In bike mode, my armour was a narrow Y shape with a single wheel at the front and two at the back. The front half of the bike was styled more like a modern superbike and painted red. The back half split into two arms.

Each arm was attached through ball joints and telescoping beams that let me keep all three wheels on the ground, no matter how far I tilted the bike. Both arms were painted blue and sat outside my legs, protecting me and positioning them to attach to my legs when it transformed.

The engine was an electric motor I'd designed to give ungodly amounts of torque and an obscene top speed. That power was delivered to the wheels through a variation on Maglev technology that Jack had come up with.

Banking around a corner, I accelerated up the street - my armour sounding more like an F1 car than a bike- with Arcee trailing close behind.

"Arcee, split up! We'll come at them from different directions!" I ordered.

*On it!* Taking a side street, Arcee vanished from sight.

The signal was heading east, out of the city and moving too quickly to be on foot. Arcee was south of me, navigating the back roads while I stayed on the main streets.

Weaving around other cars, I got brief glimpses of surprise from drivers as I passed. On a clear road, I was hitting nearly 90 and that wasn't even close to my top speed.

Quick glances at my HUD showed them to be just up ahead.

Taking the next corner as fast as I dared, I saw a van in the distance. It was dodging and weaving around other cars, occasionally ramming them out of the way. The tracer signal was coming from inside.

Catching up, I thumbed the trigger for my bike's new weapons and -
"Rewind! Reboot the weapon system!" I shouted as I pulled alongside the truck; Chariot was in the driver's seat and the only one currently visible. Was Trainwreck in the back? And where was Arcee?

Noticing me, Chariot swerved. Braking and turning in response, I dodged the sideswipe and pulled a pistol from storage device.

I aimed for the front tire and opened fire. The power level was still set to high after its use against Multiplayer, so when the energy bolt hit the front end of the vehicle, it crumpled like I'd hit it with a sledgehammer, the tire exploding in a cloud of rubber and smoke.

Spinning out of control in a trail of sparks, oil and engine parts, the van smashed into a parked car and ricocheted across the road, coming to a stop after hitting another parked car.

Spinning my bike around as I came to a stop, I turned back to the crash I'd just caused and pushed down the worry and guilt I felt. I wasn't too worried about Trainwreck or Chariot, but they still had the hostage.

The back doors crashed open and Trainwreck stumbled out. There was blood on his face, but he didn't seem to notice. Instead, he pointed his arm towards me and his hand flipped backwards, exposing a barrel built into his forearm.

Rhinox's warning of a concussive weapon came to mind and I pulled back hard on my handlebars. Please let this work!

The bike reared up, unfolding and transforming around me. The front end of the bike formed a new, larger chest plate and shoulders, while extra armour wrapped around my abdomen. It was layered to allow for easy movement.

Extra parts were added to my arms, giving me a Null-Ray and hardlight system on both arms, while the front wheel folded itself onto my back. The lower half of the bike wrapped around my legs, covering my thighs in light gray armour and the rest of my legs in thick blue armour, with the wheels attached to my heels.

Throwing myself sideways, I narrowly dodged Trainwreck's concussive blast as I rolled back to my feet. A warning flashed up about the pressure wave as it passed, while a car behind me crumpled under the impact.

Charging the villain, the wheels on my ankles propelled me forward. It was like riding the world's most dangerous pair of roller skates.

Flipping his arm back into place, Trainwreck grabbed a manhole cover and threw it at me like a discus.

Twisting my upper body, I grabbed it as it passed. The momentum sent me into a spin, but I managed to stay upright. With deliberate slowness, I turned to face Trainwreck and dropped the cover.

His face contorted in anger when it and he ran towards me.

I shifted my wheels so they rested higher up my legs, letting me put my feet on the ground for traction. Ducking under his wild haymaker, I drove my fist into his side.
Something felt different.

Trainwreck felt… slow, clumsy. There was almost a whisper in the back of my mind that I’d fought bigger, tougher people. Creatures that Trainwreck could never imagine and never hope to equal.

The way he stood, the way he moved, everything screamed ‘untrained fighter’. He relied on his size and strength to win fights. It was almost easy to dodge around his blows. To spot openings I could exploit.

He tried to backhand me but I caught his arm, lashing out with my free hand to strike his elbow. Something went pop and his arm fell to the side, fingers spasming uncontrollably.

Mechanical limbs could be stronger, faster and more flexible than organic ones, but joints will always be a weakness.

"The receiving end," I shouted as I dodged another wild swing, "welcome to it!"

Belatedly trying to put some distance between us, he staggered backwards, his good hand folding back to ready another shot. Long recharge time or limited shots? Part of me considered.

My wheels folded down as I slid sideways, turning the movement into a smooth arc.

[Weapons systems online!] Kicking out at the back of his knee, I smirked at the message as he stumbled, his shot going harmlessly into the air.

Creating a hardlight blade, I drove it into his good arm, just short of where I assumed the metal joined his flesh.

"No, don't-!"

Not giving him a chance to finish, I fired my Null-Ray.

Trainwreck bellowed in pain as his arm exploded in a mess of wires and metal. Before he could recover, I pressed my other gun against his side and fired.

The force of the shot threw him nearly five feet and he landed in a heap not far from the crashed van. I could hear him groaning, so I doubted he was in any immediate danger.

Glancing at the van, I realised I couldn’t see Chariot. He’d been hunched over the steering wheel the last time I saw him. Had he run away?

*T-taylor…Watc…. Incoming!* Arcee’s voice crackled through my helmet.

"Arcee? What's wrong?"

There was a faint shimmer in the air, and I dove forward in time to avoid a large truck that had appeared from thin air.

It barreled past me, and skidded to a stop just in front of Trainwreck. A pair of high caliber weapons were mounted on the roof and I barely brought my shield up before they opened fire. A third gun rose up out of the roof and rotated towards me.

Unlike the others, this one was oddly shaped. With its triangular barrel and rounded body, it was clearly Tinker made.

Not wanting to risk getting hit by the thing, I ran sideways, ducking behind one of the now ruined
cars. The tinker gun fired and the ground behind me exploded in a shower of concrete.

The truck dipped briefly to one side as Trainwreck climbed aboard.

"What are you waiting for cum-sucker! Get! On!" a woman's voice screamed over built in a megaphone on the truck.

I could just see Chariot stick his head out from behind the crashed van. He was trying to half-carry, half-drag a blonde girl in a purple costume, but she looked like she was - weakly - trying to fight him off. She was also covered in blood.

_Tattletale_, I remembered.

Taking a deep breath, I charged forwards. My wheeled feet let me skate across the distance in moments, the high caliber rounds doing nothing more than scratching my armour. The ‘cannon’ was only able to get a single shot off before I'd reached Chariot.

Seeing me, the criminal Tinker threw his 'hostage' at me and ran for the truck. Tattletale tried to put her arms out to catch herself, but her legs just folded underneath her.

Catching her, I swung my HL-Shield in front of us in time to intercept another blast from the cannon. I felt the impact across my entire body as it pushed me backwards, but nothing was damaged.

Even so, I didn't feel like taking another hit.

Before I could consider how to fight back, the cannon folded away and the truck screeched into gear. Holding Tattletale with one arm, I managed to get a couple of shots off with the other, but the instant the truck was thirty feet from me, it vanished from sight.

In the distance, I could see police cars and a PRT transport closing in.

Putting them out of my mind, I carefully lowered the girl to the ground. She was hanging limply in my arms, putting her entire weight on me.

Her wig had been knocked loose, her middle was covered in blood, and it looked like someone had jammed tinker-tech into the wound.

Taking care not to hurt her further, I put a hand on one of the devices. It looked like it was trying to clamp the wound closed while thin tendrils had connected themselves to her blood vessels. It almost looked like it was trying to divert blood around the injured areas.

I wasn't sure how I could remove it, or if I even should.

"Dispatch, I need an ambulance at my position. Female victim, looks like a gunshot wound-"

"Paralysis," she said weakly, "bullet hit my spine… c-can't feel legs… Head hurts… gotta…..got… *,'"

"Hey? Hey! Come on, stay awake!" I shouted, tapping her face gently. She was far too pale.

Not sure what else to do, I pulled a first aid kit out of my storage device and started treating what I could.

Hopefully, I could keep her alive long enough for the ambulance to get here.
An: and with that arc 9 is finished. Next up will be a couple of Ints to tie things up. While the exact sequence has been messed with, this outcome was already being planed for when I started this story. Like the Dragon transformation, I always planned for Lisa to turn the Undersiders in.
Sitting safely in his base, Coil checked everything once more. As far as he was concerned, there was no such thing as too paranoid. He had taken every step he could to ensure the 'heros' would not interfere.

Dragon making the city her second base of operations had initially hurt his plans, but now that she had settled into a routine, it was much easier to plan around her. At the end of the day, Dragon was only one person, and a busy one at that.

She rarely had time to patrol, and would often send that new suit of hers out of the city. A few well timed leaks about possible Dragonslayer sightings was usually enough to draw her away, but he had to be careful to limit his use of that tactic, lest she become suspicious.

That said, the meeting in Boston had been sudden, and he'd barely managed to learn of it before she left. Once he had Dinah Alcott - his new pet - he would need to spend some time cultivating additional contacts within the various law enforcement and bureaucratic agencies.

Obtaining Crasher had unintentionally exposed a number of his agents within the PRT and Director Piggot was still on the hunt for the remainders. As a result, too much was happening without his knowledge.

Getting the Protectorate out of the city had been almost trivial. A few well placed calls to the Youth Guard from 'concerned members of the public' and the entire team was forced to attend a children's safety seminar.

Making sure the event could only be held once and at a time and place of his choosing had been difficult, but, as the saying went, pay a man enough and he'll walk barefoot through hell.

Meanwhile, Uber and Leet were staging another one of their pointless displays to draw off the Wards.

It was almost a tended to be worth their weight in gold, Leets creations however were simply too unreliable, too unpredictable to use. Not while he had other alternatives.

Leet was barely worth using as a distraction. An expensive one at that.

Between one thing and another, it had taken far too long to reach this point. His last two attempts had failed due to simple bad luck.

The first time he'd tried to acquire his new pet, he'd been forced to call the operation off almost immediately. He'd managed to remove Dragon from the city, but the Protectorate's public event had been canceled due to 'unforeseen circumstances' and they had responded far too quickly.

He'd later released the details of those 'circumstances' to the press out of spite. Some people needed to know when to keep it in their pants

His second attempt had been aborted due to high police presence near the school. A domestic dispute had spilled out onto the streets and ended up involving nearly a dozen people.

Still, his power gave him as many chances as needed.

The pattern was simple. He would cancel the operation in one timeline, while giving the go ahead in
the other. If the operation failed or something unexpected happened, he would simply close the timeline.

Right now, while he was sitting in his base, Thomas Calvert was also taking a well deserved day off at home.

Confident everything was ready, he dialed his Tattletale.

"Yes, boss?" She said, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

"Begin," he ordered and hung up without waiting for a reply. When this was over, he would have to do something about her attitude. Knockout was confident he'd have an appropriate drug ready by the end of the week.

Putting the matter to aside, he dialed a second number.

"The operation is underway. Liaise with the observation team and go when ready," he said without preamble before hanging up.

The good - and bad - thing about mercenaries was that you very much got what you paid for, and he paid a lot for professionalism.

Currently, he had men scattered unobtrusively across the city. A few of them were keeping an eye on the upcoming bank robbery so they could tell the three man collection team when to move.

With nothing else to do, he settled down to wait.

His first warning that something had gone wrong was the sudden and rapid arrival of the PRT at the bank. They were supposed to arrive eventually of course, that was the plan. But this felt wrong.

The PRT had arrived barely minutes after the Undersiders. Did they have warning?

He briefly considered closing the timeline -

/You may never get another chance.../

- but then again, his pickup team hadn't reported any issues and everything else was going to plan.

Bare minutes later, the radio on his desk crackled to life.

*Route A's a no go. Looks like an accident, traffic is backed up from 23rd,* one of the pickup team reported.

Glancing at the map on his screen, Coil frowned. Route A was the quickest and most direct way to get to his base. If 23rd was blocked, most of the traffic would detour, meaning route B would be just as useless.

"Divert to route C and keep me informed."

"Roger, switching to route C."

As predicted, the PRT were taking a wait and see approach at the bank. Putting the lives of hostages abov-

*Sirs! We've got a problem!* One of the men said suddenly, *she just jumped out the car!*
"Go after her!" He shouted. He couldn't lose her now!

*Jason and Donny are already in pursuit, I'm following them now!*  

Were there any other agents in the area? No! Damn it, all this for nothing? Reaching for his power, he moved to close the timeline. He'd have to try again another time.  

He never heard the voice, quiet, gentle, seductive, whispering on the edge of his hearing.  

/Go ahead. Take her. You'll be so very powerful./  

With a growl of frustration, he closed and re-split the timeline.  

"I want running commentary at all times! One of you break off east and circle round, the others stay on her!"  

Slowly he tightened the noose, splitting and discarding timelines as needed. Keeping a map onscreen at all times, he kept an eye on her route. There didn't appear to be a clear direction in mind, she was simply running away from him.  

/Little rabbit running scared./  

The radio continued to chatter away, letting him know when they saw her, when they lost her, when she tried to call for help.  

/Is she not what you desire?/  

"If anyone gets in your way, shoot them!"  

Every time they lost sight of his pet, he changed timelines. In one, they lost her, in the other they could see her duck between buildings and through gaps in fences.  

It was exhilarating. He'd never used his power like this before. There was pleasure in watching a carefully constructed plan fall into place as your enemies danced to your tune.  

But this was something different, this was the thrill of a hunt. Rapidly shifting between worlds, watch as his men slowly closed in on-  

The phone on his desk rang. Reaching out, he put it on speaker.  

"What?!" He snapped.  

*Sir! She's encountered a hero!*  

"Which hero?" The Protectorate couldn't have gotten there that fast. The bank would be their priority.  

*A Ward sir, Matrix.*  

He cursed quietly under his breath, Uber and Leet had clearly failed to delay the Wards long enough.  

"Can you deal with her?"  

*No sir, she's got a drone with her and has already called for backup.*  

"Pull back, we will reacquire the target later."/"Kill her and grab the girl!" He snapped. As the orders
left his mouths, a horrible realisation dawned.

He had no safe timeline.

He could only listen in horror as his men attacked the Ward. Small caliber weapons against a Tinker, the fight barely lasted a minute.

*Who is this?* A teenage girl's voice demanded.

Struggling with himself, Coil collapsed the timeline and watched his people retreat.

How had it all gone so wrong? What had he been thinking?

Hanging up the phone, he put his head in his hands.

He didn't hear the voice laughing at him from the darkness behind his eyes.

His ruminations were interrupted by Trainwreck calling for help. The bank robbery had gone bad and they were running from the PRT, trying to get to a safe house.

He frowned at the thought. He was tempted to simply hang up, to abandon them to their fate. But he couldn't, he needed to salvage as much as he could.

"Head to to my facility east of the city. Do you remember where it is? Good. I'll send someone to collect you."

Hanging up, he dialed his latest acquisition. "I need you to collect the Undersiders from the eastern facility. Get the address from Knockout and be discreet."

He ended the call before she could speak. He was in no mood to listen to her tirades.

##

It took nearly an hour for Crasher to collect the Undersiders and bring them back to his base.

He spent almost the entire time going back over every decision he'd made recently. The results painted a worrying picture. In the last few months alone, he'd grown increasingly aggressive in his dealings. Not just with the gangs, but with his own people.

When they arrived, he dismissed Crasher and had a squad escort the Undersiders from the entrance to his office at gunpoint.

This morning, he had seven Undersiders. Only two now stood in his office. *Just barely.*

Trainwreck was apparently trying to live up to his name. Two of Coils men were holding him up, one leg showed signs of a hasty repair, leaving him with limited movement and a clear limp, one of his arms was hanging uselessly and the other was missing. From the short, shallow breaths he was taking, Coil suspected he had a broken rib or two.

Chariot however looked unharmed, but he was shooting the soldiers nervous looks.

Sitting at his desk, Coil glared at them - even if they couldn't see it.

"What. Happened?" He demanded and both men flinched.
"It was Tattletale. The bitch turned on us. She told the PRT we were coming."

"I see..." Coil said slowly, "and where is she now?"

"Well... you see..."

Hesitantly, they told him everything. The confrontation at the bank, shooting Grue and Tattletale, stealing a getaway van.

Grue was no great loss, but Tattletale? There was always a chance she had learned of something important. Something that could truly hurt him. Not for the first time, he sorely wished he hadn't been so lenient with her.

He'd never used his power on her directly. His Tattletale had been too valuable and there was too much risk, what if his power had failed or he accidentally closed the wrong timeline while pursuing vigorous questioning?

"Did you at least make sure Tattletale and Grue were dead," he ground out, his patience rapidly wearing thin.

"Well... No, but Regent shot him five times in the back. Even if he's not dead, he ain't going anywhere. And Tattletale..." Chariot looked to Trainwreck for support.

"He's right, the implants I stuck on her were bandaids at best, she should be dead by now."

"And how did Tattletale manage to contact the PRT? I gave you both strict instructions that she was not to be left alone at any time."

"I-I think that was my fault..." Chariot said slowly. "We were at the mall and she got away from me... It was only for a couple of minutes, I swear!"

With a gesture from Coil, his men opened fire. Tinker-tech lasers cutting Trainwreck and Chariot down where they stood.

Looking at the growing puddles of blood, he collapsed the timeline.

The two young men regarded him nervously from across the office. They didn't know it, but for now, he would let them live. He still had a use for them. To lose his Tattletale was one thing, but to lose his new pet at the same time? He would need them to get his belongings back.

"One more thing, where is Regent?"

The remaining Undersiders shrugged, "We don't know. The moment we were out of sight of the bank, Regent vanished down a sidestreet."

Bringing up an application on his computer, Coil picked up his phone and dialed one of his captains.

"I'm sending you an address, go there and pick up Regent. While you're at it, I want you pay Miss Laborn a visit."

That he had called that captain in particular was all that needed to be said.

Coil had no way of knowing that his captain would later report that he'd found Regent's phone and scepter, but the boy was nowhere in sight and Aisha Laborn was missing.

That done, he turned his attention back to the 'Undersiders'.
"Let me make something perfectly clear. I am extremely disappointed with what happened today. Your orders were simple, rob a bank. Bring me the money and anything else you found and keep an eye on my Tattletale… For now Trainwreck, I am assigning you to Knockout. You will assist him in whatever he asks."

The larger Tinker nodded in relief.

"As for you, Chariot, you will be staying here. I may need you for another project soon," - and I want you where I can see you. - "I want you to prepare for possible relocation."

Coil had been planning to get someone into the Wards for awhile now, but the east northeast branch was clearly out of the question. Maybe Chicago or Boston?

"Both of you, get out of my rest of you are dismissed," he growled. "Captain! Before you leave, I want people at every hospital. Find out what happened to Tattletale and Grue. See if they can be recovered, or dealt with if they cannot."

With them gone, he turned to the problem of salvage. His Tattletale didn't know much about his organisation as she thought. Her power wasn't easy to fool, but it could be misdirected.

From a tactical standpoint, he should write the city off. Abandon the base and relocate elsewhere. But he'd spent years establishing himself, this base alone represented a significant portion of his assets, and it was still under construction.

/Do not run. Make them cower before you./

On the other hand, Tattletale didn't know its location, nor the identities of his agents. If he played it right, she would be in the perfect place to gather information for him.

Picking up his phone, he dialed Knockouts number.

"It's me… No, it was not. I need to know the status of your current project. How soon can they be deployed?… Very well, see to it."

Yes… He could turn this to his advantage. For now, he would scale back his operations. He would leave the gangs alone, slip under the radar, a nudge here and a calculated leak there. He would need to sacrifice some dead weight, let the PRT think they'd won and, when they least expected it, he'd take it all.
Director Piggot glared at the monitors on her desk. The one on her left was playing a video of Uber and Leet's latest stunt, while the one on her right had a collection of reports about everything, from the stunt to the bank robbery. She had nearly a dozen emails from the Mayor, demanding information about his niece's near-kidnapping.

No matter how she looked at it, today had been one disaster after another and now she was being forced to clean up the mess.

Her office door opened and Armsmaster strode in, a number of files held in his hand.

"I've got the preliminary reports you asked for," he said. "Do you want to start now or wait for the others?"

Piggot found herself wishing for the days when she could just shoot something.

"We might as well start now. I've got -" Her computer binged at her and a face appeared on the wall-mounted monitor.

"Sorry I'm late," Dragon's avatar said. "Matrix needed a bit of help getting out of her armour."

"Zipper get stuck?" Piggot said, her voice carefully level. "No matter, we're still waiting on Miss Militia. Until she gets here, why don't you tell me why it is I'm still waiting for a report on the prison break?"

"That would be my fault, I wanted to double check some of the details," Armsmaster said, looking almost contrite. "I can give you a summary, if you'd like."

Piggot gave him a nod in confirmation.

"Very well. There were no signs of forced entry and careful investigation of both the site and the wardens ruled out the use of Master or Stranger powers. However, under questioning, one of the guards admitted to being coerced."

Dragon's avatar shrunk down, splitting the screen between herself and a photo of the guard in question.

"He admitted to occasionally smuggling in goods to prisoners, mostly small luxury items like cigarettes."

"How did he get away with that so long?"

"Some of the other guards looked the other way as it was seen as a good way to keep the peace," Dragon said. "He would give these items to prisoners who had fallen foul of one of the more powerful or dangerous inmates. That way, the prisoner could 'barter' for forgiveness. In theory, it was a sensible solution to a problem that has always plagued prisons."

Piggot snorted. "Except the real world doesn't work like that. I assume the inmates have been quick to take advantage?"

Dragon sighed. "Yes, I suspect so. Armsmaster?"

"According to what he told me, a young woman approached him at home one night. She gave him
three packages with instructions to give them to Multiplayer, Stormtiger and Cricket. If he didn't, she made it clear she would kill him."

"Did he say what was in the packages?"

"No, he never looked. But I suspect they were some form of beacon for a teleporter. In fact, when I first examined one of the prison cells, I found a very high level of radiation."

"How high?" Piggot asked with a frown. Just because it was a prison, it didn't mean anyone deserved to die from radiation poisoning.

"Not instantly lethal but certainly more than healthy. Inmates in the surrounding cells have been moved to the infirmary for observation and a team is currently trying to decontaminate both the three affected cells and all adjacent cells. That was the reason for the delay. I was comparing the radiation levels to those I had on file. It matches that left behind by..." Armsmaster shot Dragon a worried glance. "The Dragonslayers after their attack on Dragon."

For her part, Dragon merely scrunched her nose in distaste. "I see."

Piggot had to wonder how the woman really felt. The Dragonslayers had formed not long after she gained prominence as a hero and often targeted her. Having them invade her home, hold her hostage and threaten everything she'd ever worked towards must have hurt.

"Any idea why the Dragonslayers - who we know to be multi-racial - would 'rescue' two lifelong members of the Empire and a kid?" she asked, deciding to leave the matter of Dragon's pride for another day.

"Actually, I suspect I can answer that," Dragon said. "After their failed attack on my home, they lost not only their primary driving force - Saint - but also a significant portion of their resources. The technology they had been using to hide from me no longer works, letting me find and shut down most of their assets.

"Due to their threat to open the Birdcage, the Guild has marked them as a higher priority and we've been slowly rounding the stragglers up. However, the core group that invaded my home is still unaccounted for and I've found evidence they have turned to mercenary work in an effort to rebuild."

Piggot could see the logic. Retreat, rebuild and rearm. Of course, their reputation for being 'charitable' or trustworthy had been destroyed, so they would be unable to find legitimate work any more, meaning their clients would have to be criminals.

"Okay, I can see where you're coming from. They need money, the Empire has plenty so they agree to break Kaiser's people out. But why take Multiplayer?" she asked, mostly to herself. It was well known that the Empire had a healer on call, so the exposure to radiation wouldn't be a problem. And Kaiser himself wouldn't stoop to rescuing people who failed him, nor did he have the time with the current gang war.

"A possible recruitment attempt? Or maybe just a test of the Dragonslayers' capabilities?" Armsmaster suggested.

Before they could speculate further, there was a knock at the door and Miss Militia walked in. Like Armsmaster, she was carrying a number of folders.

"Sorry I'm late, I was getting an update from Battery. She's still at the hospital, but Grue and Tattletale have been declared stable. A priority request for Panacea has been submitted, but since she's on reduced hours at the moment, it may take a day or two before they're able to talk."
Taking the folders from Armsmaster, she quickly organised them with her own and placed them on the director's desk.

Piggot quickly took the top folder and scanned through it with a practiced eye. Miss Militia had been part of the PRT since she was a child and had long grasped how to best structure her reports. She assumed Armsmaster and Dragon were skimming the electronic versions at the same time.

"I don't like this." Piggot declared when she was more than halfway through the report. "This entire situation stinks. Uber and Leet just happen to stage an event that ties up half the Wards the same day the Undersiders rob a bank? Both at the same time as a high profile kidnapping and all while the Protectorate is unavailable?"

She could feel her temper bubbling below the surface. They had been set up and it was only dumb luck that things had gone as well as they did. If half of what these reports said was true, Coil was a much bigger problem than they thought.

The file they had on him simply stated that he was a suspected parahuman who mostly hired mercenaries and had no known capes working for him. Today had shown otherwise.

The Undersiders apparently worked for him, as did Uber and Leet in some fashion. Personally, the director suspected they had simply been hired to stage something today. Their actions were just too random to be anything else.

So Coil had at least one cape team in his employ, with the resources to hire others. That gave him access to at least three Tinkers. She was willing to bet he was also behind the recent data leaks, which likely meant he had informants in the PRT.

Even if his plan had worked, he still risked exposing too much for it to be a simple ransom demand. Why was this girl so important? Why would Coil risk so many resources just to kidnap one girl?

"Do we at least have a motive for the kidnapping?"

"Yes, it would seem Miss Alcott is a thinker," Miss Militia said, "She's under observation at the hospital with her family at the moment. From what little time they let Battery have with her, she suspects Miss Alcott is a precog. Due to thinker headaches, we can't gauge her power at the moment and her family wants to hold off on any official testing for now."

_They're most likely holding off so they can contact a lawyer, _Piggot thought to herself.

Still, a precog, a powerful enough one anyway, would possibly be worth risking everything for. They may not be able to gauge the girl's power at the moment, but the fact Coil wanted her was enough to get Piggot's attention.

"Fine, get someone to give her family the usual recruitment speech. Maybe Triumph can do it. They're cousins after all. And once -"

The door to her office opened - cutting her off - and a middle aged woman stormed in, followed by the deputy director.

"I'm sorry, Director, I explained you were in a meeting but she wouldn't listen!" he said quickly.

"That's fine, Renick. Miss Coyle, is there something I can help you with?" she asked frostily.

Miss Samantha - never Sam - Coyle was a stern woman in her early to mid thirties. She could almost be called attractive if not for her constant expression of distaste and the dark business suits she wore.
that made her look washed out.

She was also the newly appointed Youth Guard representative.

"Yes, there is. I am hereby serving you with official notice," she said as she slammed a stack of papers onto the desk. "As of right now your Wards team is to be removed from active duty."

"On what grounds!?" Piggot demanded, jumping to her feet and glaring at the woman.

"Child endangerment, excessive force and the negative effects it's having on the Wards. I've received more than a dozen complaints in the last hour alone! You sent the Wards to confront a team of villains, and one of them was blasé enough to open fire on passing civilians! Have you seen the injury reports? He killed three people and injured a dozen more and you sent the Wards against him?"

She had seen the reports. Trainwreck had fired on a passing group in an effort to delay pursuit. After that, he and Chariot had stolen another vehicle, injuring the owner before leaving him by the side of the road.

"In certain circumstances the Wards are allowed to be directly involved in combat!" Piggot shot back. "The entire Protectorate was forced - by you - to attend a conference! What else were we supposed to do?"

"Except it's not just today is it? Less than a week ago, you had two Wards raid a whorehouse. The week before that? Firefight with armed gangsters. Or what about the raid on that Merchant encampment, resulting in the near death of a Ward! And that's not even mentioning you sending them up against Lung! A known killer who should be in the Birdcage!" Coyle shouted back, leaning on the desk.

"The fact of the matter is, you are treating the Wards like soldiers. In the last six months alone they have been in more fights than the New York branch sees in an entire year! And the courts agree with me on this one."

"Have you forgotten that there is a gang war going on? At the moment, we simply can't afford the loss in numbers," Armsmaster protested, missing the look Dragon shot him.

"Then deal with it! You used those... machines at the bank today correct? Those autoshot things, why can't you just build more?"

"Miss Coyle, I understand where you are coming from, but that is simply not an option," Dragon said, in an attempt to calm things down. "Autobots take time and resources to build. Not to mention cost. It's just not practical."

"But you've got the resources to arm a Ward to the teeth? Have you seen the footage? It's all over the net. Vista, a child, cursing like a sailor while she and the other two gun people down. Not to mention your protege quite happily maiming that man! That is not the signs of a healthy mind! No, until all of them have spoken to a psychologist and I am satisfied, the Wards are off limits."

She turned to the taller woman who gave no visible reaction to the glare sent her way. "Miss Militia? I understand you are in charge of the Wards. You may continue to offer them training, public events or just simple days out. But they are not to patrol or fight anyone. Is that clear?"

"Completely," she said, the visible parts of her face not so much as twitching.

Point made, Miss Coyle turned and stalked out the room, leaving stunned silence in her wake.
“This… is going to be a problem,” Dragon said eventually, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“I agree, the Wards aren't going to like this,” Miss Militia said. "I know Matrix isn't technically a Ward, but do you think you could keep her from patrolling? At least for a couple of days."

"Don't worry, I'll talk to her. Colin? You really need to watch what you say…"

He didn't say anything in return, choosing instead to look to the director.

"All of you, out. I need to make a call," Piggot ground out. Once they left, she picked up the stack of paperwork Miss Coyle had left behind and saw a court order right on top. She recognised the name of the signing judge, a long-time critic of the PRT.

She couldn't overrule the Youth Guard, but hopefully Director Costa-Brown could do something. If nothing else, the Protectorate was going to need more people.

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, TinMother
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 chronologically.

Topic: Oceans 11.5
In: Boards ► News ► Brockton Bay
Brocktonite03 (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
What a day It's been in sunny(ish) Brockton Bay! First, we have Uber and Leet pulling another stunt (see here). Meanwhile, the Undersiders rob Brockton Bay Central Bank!

Info's still coming in, but it sounds like things went badly wrong, with two of the US now in the hospital!

(Showing page 2 of 8)

► GroundBuyer
I was there! I'm still shaking a bit.
I'm not sure if I can actually talk about what happened though.

► Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
GroundBuyer - No, it's best you don't. Wait until after the trial has happened.

► Aloha
Why wait, it's gonna be all over the news and I was there too.

The Undersiders smashed their way into the bank THROUGH THE WALL! ( Pics). Grue flooded the place in darkness (which is fucking scary) and they started grabbing everything not nailed down!

I was in there cashing a cheque and they had us all laying face down on the floor nearby while they worked.
When I heard the heros had arrived, I thought we were going to be rescued but no. They sent the wards, the fucking sidekicks who sat outside and waited for the undersiders to leave!

A couple of the undersiders wanted to use us as shields! and just when I thought we were fucked, they start shooting each other!

Grue and the girl in purple end up bleeding on the floor and the other three ran off.

The Wards came in AFTER it was all over! Where was the fucking protectorate?!

*User has received an infraction for language.*

► Brilliger (Moderator: Protectorate Main)
Aloha - I get that you're upset, but try to keep things polite. Consider yourself warned.

The Wards were likely ordered to hold back so they wouldn't endanger anyone in the bank.

► Deimos
Did they really turn on each other just like that? I thought they were supposed to be a team?

Aloha - dude, chill! I get it was scary but would have happened if the Wards came charging in?

I do wonder what was keeping the Protectorate though?

► Lightcat
Aloha - The girl in purple is called Tattletale. Do you know what happened to her?

I did some digging (read: I called a friend who lived nearby) and apparently only 3 wards, some PRT guys and some autobots were sent to the bank. Where were the others?

► Aloha
I dunno. When they started arguing, she had a freakout. Started shouting at the others about being tortured.

The big guy with the arms carried her off when they left.

► Owlman (The Guy in the Know)
Lightcat - I just came here from an Uber and Leet thread, apparently Matrix, Vista and Clockblocker were caught up in one of their games.

Someone also said the Protectorate were out of the city at the time, some kinda day off.

► TheGnat
Yeah, that's what I heard. Some kinda spa day thing on the westside.

► Thatdude
Typical, never there when you need them!

Trainwreck started shooting at people when he ran! My sister lost a leg because of that cunt!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4 ... 6, 7, 8

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► Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Hey guys, new info!

Matrix managed to track down the Undersiders before they could get too far. She's got a sweet new bike that transforms into armour and she kicked Trainwreck's ass (vid here)

► Coyote-C
Ha! Trainwreck got wrecked!

► Thatdude
I'm going to show that video to my sister later. Hopefully seeing Matrix de-limb Trainwreck will make her feel better.

► Childdrizzle
Did you see her catch that manhole cover? Man, Trainwreck got dissed!

Bagrat - damn dude, she should have taken his head off.

► HmPirelli (Not a tinker)
I looked it up, (see here) Last time Trainwreck fought Matrix, he hurt her bad. Nice to see her get some payback.
I was close enough to hear what she said to him,
[quote] "The receiving end! Welcome to it!" [/quote] - my new tag
Looks like she hadn't forgotten about it either. see here, when his arm explodes? that had to hurt!

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Holy shit! Autobots rule!
Matrix if you're reading this, think you could stop by Winslow some time? It'd be great to see you again!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

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**Topic: Left 4 Dead: Wards Edition**
In: Boards ► News ► Brockton Bay
L33t (Original Poster) (Verified Cape)
Posted On Jan 1st 2011:
Hey hey! We've got a new video up for everyone and it's on sale! 50% off!

With the help of the Wards, we recreated the No Mercy map from Left4Dead.
Previews here

(Showing page 4 of 11)

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Just watched the vid, man the Wards really didn't give a fuck!

You guys got schooled!

► Whitecollar (Cape Wife)
My husband just showed me this, and you two should be ashamed of yourselves! What was the point of this, to hurt some kids?

► L33t (Original Poster) (Verified Cape)
Kids? Lady, watch the video again. We weren't the ones with grenade launchers and guns that break
bones!

► **Chaosfaith**
Holy, is that Vista swearing like that? I had to look some of those up just to know what she was saying!

► **GloryGirl (Verified Cape)**
You two are scum, you know that right? My sister had to patch the Wards up after this.

Vista was covered in bruises and Clock had cracked ribs from getting stomped on!

Vista is a kid! Your 'zombies' were grown adults trying to knock the crap outta her!

► **Iblis**
Wait, those aren't holograms or something?

BTW, can we give 'Mistress of Mecha' to Matrix as a tag?

► **RWD (Autobot Communications)**
Iblis - No, the zombies were being played by Multiplayer. He has the power to make copies of himself.

They rushed us en-masse and if anyone fell to the floor, they would stomp on them. (Here) I got permission to show you the scene from Matrix's cameras.

Iblis - I spoke to Matrix, she doesn't like the idea much.

► **Dawgsmiles (Veteran Member)**
RWD - Damn, getting rushed like that is kinda scary

What does L33t mean by "the Champion of Cheap Knockoffs"

► **L33t (Original Poster) (Verified Cape)**
Oh like collateral damage barbie gives a damn about anyone but herself.

Dawgsmiles - Matrix is a thief! She copies other people's work and then sells it off as her own!

*User has received an infraction for this post.*

► **Valkyr (Wiki Warrior)**
Wait, Matrix can copy other tinker tech? Isn't that a big deal? Like Dragon level tinker?

Isn't that a good thing?

**End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 ... 9, 10, 11**

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► **Owlman (The Guy in the Know)**
Maybe, maybe not. It all depends if L33t is telling the truth and how effective her copied tech is.

*User has received a warning for this post.*

► **TinMother (Moderator)**
Please avoid baseless speculation as it can put people's lives at risk.
L33t, use your twenty day ban to cool off.

► **Dragon** (Verified Cape)
L33T. - Force field technology is a fairly common tinker creation. I would advise that you do not accuse people of theft in the future.

► **Lolitup** (Cape Groupie)
Holy shit! Dragon-sama herself!
I never thought I'd see you here!

**End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 ... 9, 10, 11**
"Alright, that's time!" Hotspot called out, stopping the timer as the collected Protectobots slumped to the ground. "Not bad, people, but I'm not doing any cartwheels. Tomorrow, I want to see you clear the course in less than five minutes! With the Wards benched, we need to be ready to move at a moment's notice! Clear up and you're free to go.."

There was a collective groan as his squad climbed to their feet and started packing up the equipment.

"Thanks for your help today, Warpath, but you might want to tone down the explosive rounds."

"No *blam!* problem! I'm going to the *boom!* range if anyone needs me *pow!*" The excitable tank called as he trotted out of the room with far too much cheer.

It had taken more than a dozen requests, but he'd been given permission to make use of the PRT training rooms and equipment on the rig to setup a makeshift training ground. Currently, the gear they were putting away was strewn about to create an obstacle course.

The goal was simple: beat the course while Warpath simulated fire with a mix of rubber, holographic and hardlight rounds -his definition of 'simulated was a little lose . The course was laid out in such a way that the bots would need to work together to clear some of the obstacles. Often, the bigger bots like Arcee would join them but she was out on patrol this morning.

All in all, he was happy with their progress, even if they did have to position a low-hanging net to keep Blades from simply flying over the course.

That reminded him. "Blades! When you're done here, you need to report to Wheeljack for your checkup," he shouted to the helicopter, who was busy trying to untangle the net from his rotors.

"Already? I swear it's only been a week since my last checkup!" he protested. "Is all this really necessary?!"

"It's the rules," First Aid said, preempting their team leader. "We all need regular checkups to avoid metal fatigue, stripped gears, rust spots, foreign obstacles or metal shavings in joints -"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it! But why does it have to be Wheeljack? I keep having visions of suddenly exploding after he's finished!"

"Alright, that's enough!" Hotspot snapped. "The checkup is done on rotation and this week, it's Wheeljack. Not everything he works on explodes and he works his aft off to keep us in top condition, so keep your complaints to yourself unless you want double watch shift tonight!"

Blades stormed out of the room, pieces of net still trailing from his rotors.

Jack's reputation for explosions, while not entirely undeserved, was exaggerated. His prototypes tended to have problems - especially when he used volatile chemicals - but that was the point of prototypes. The end results were almost always fine and he never messed around when it came to maintenance or repair of his fellow Autobots.

"Y'know, don't you think you're being a bit hard on him?" First Aid asked, walking to Hotspot's
"Blades likes to grumble, but he's never let us down."

"Yeah, I know. But he's got to learn that there's a time and a place. I'll make it up to him later."

Maybe he was pushing them all too much, but he didn't have much choice. It had been two days since the Wards had been benched, and while the PRT was holding things together, no one was sure how long it would last.

The Protectorate was on double shifts, and the PRT was working double time to train everyone how to use the new shielding equipment, asking officers to volunteer for extra shifts as well.

Then again, it wouldn't do them any good if everyone was too strung out.

Opening up a com-line, he sent a message to Wheeljack. *Hey Jack, Blades is on his way to see you. Also, did you ever fix the simulator?*

*Huh? Oh that's right, time for his checkup. And yeah, I got it working last night, why, you wanna give it a try again?*

The simulator had been one of Jack's better ideas, and was, in fact, a prototype. Using the hardlight hologram system he and Taylor had made, the user could create a simulated environment and enemies.

The prototype was set up in the empty hanger next to his workshop and Dragon was negotiating with the PRT to sell them a watered down version of the system to use as a training tool. If everything went well, the PRT would soon have cheaper, more reliable training holograms.

*Something like that.* He added Blades to the com and said, *Hey, Blades! First Aid thinks you could beat my top score. I say that's beryllium baloney, what do you say?*

*Oh, you are so on!* Blades shot back, enthusiasm colouring his voice.

###

With the training equipment finally stashed away, Groove left the room and headed for the upper levels.

Most of the people he passed gave him a friendly nod or greeting, long used to seeing the Autobots walking around the base. There were only a few places they couldn't go without permission, but those were on the lower levels.

Emerging out onto a lower section of the roof that overlooked the helipad, he pulled his small ladder out of its hiding place between the nearby air conditioning units and climbed up to another section.

It had taken Groove forever, but he'd finally found the perfect place. The rebuilt oil rig the Protectorate used was full of little hiding holes and forgotten corners that were perfect if you wanted some time alone, but what he really wanted was the sky.

Actually, what he really wanted was a long road, the horizon and some music, but a sunny spot on the roof to kick back and relax on would do for now.

After lots of exploring, finding an old ladder and getting some advice from Windblade, he finally had what he was looking for. Flat, sheltered from the sea breeze and open to the sky.

Most importantly, peace and solitude.
The Protectobots were his brothers, he'd go to the line for any of them, or the Autobots - the Wards, Protectorate or anyone else who fought alongside the Autobots were considered Bots by association.

But sometimes, he just needed some space to himself. A place to chill out and recharge - metaphorically speaking - to get away from all the tension.

Positioning some wood he'd dragged up here as a makeshift back rest, he sat down and relaxed. Even with the sun beating down on him, the air was still chilly. Not that it was a problem; outside of the extremes, temperature didn't affect any of the Autobots, but it was still nice to feel the sun on his face.

How did that song go? Racking his processor, he started to hum the tune before finally remembering the words.

"~On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair. ~Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air~"

Turning on his radio and shuttering his optics, he let himself drift into a light doze.

##

Walking into the infirmary, First Aid wasn't that surprised to see Jenkins sitting on a bed while Dr Beckett hovered over him.

"Anything I can help with?" First Aid called out, pulling a small set of wheeled stairs over to a sink so he could wash his hands.

Dr Beckett spared him a quick glance but kept his attention on what he was doing. "Oh, hello, First Aid, I'm just patching up Jenkins. Would you care to assist?"

"Sure." First Aid repositioned the stairs and ran a green light over his hands to kill any remaining bacteria before picking up the silver tray of tools that was on the bed next to Jenkins.

While the cut nearly ran the length of his palm, it didn't look too deep and a cursory scan showed that it hadn't hit anything important.

"So, what did you do this time?" First Aid asked Jenkins.

"Sliced it with a box cutter… " was the embarrassed reply.

"I'm just cleaning the wound now. It looks like it will need a couple of stitches and some time to heal, unless you're willing to speed it along."

"Sure." Converting his arm into a medigun, he waited until Dr Beckett was finished before using it on the wound. In less than five minutes, there was barely a mark left behind on Jenkins' palm.

"There, all done. But honestly, you need to take more care, lad," Dr Beckett said with the tired air of a doctor who knew his advice would be ignored.

"I will! Thanks, doc!" Jenkins called as he left the room.

"How long till he comes back?" First Aid asked. He tried not to think bad of people, but Jenkins was kinda clumsy.

"Oh, about half-an-hour," the elder doctor said with a shrug. "Still, I've got inventory to check, at least until the next disaster comes along. Want to help?"
"Of course."

With the need for extra patrols, more people were going to get hurt. Tired people made mistakes and if this situation dragged on, things would only get worse.

It wasn't their job to worry about that. It was their job to patch everyone back up afterwards, to make sure everyone who came in left under their own power.

##

As he couldn't really get an office to himself, Streetwise went to Taylor's room and booted up the laptop she kept there.

Like almost everything Taylor built, the computer was running on a desktop version of Teletraan and connected to the main computer in her workshop.

Climbing into the chair and adjusting it to his height, he connected a cable from his wrist to the laptop and accessed the files he'd stored in a personal section of the server. Taylor had partitioned a section off for them to work on their own hobbies and interests.

An augmented reality map of the city appeared on the nearest wall. Areas were colour coded to match the last known gang territories and points of interest.

Turning his attention back to the laptop, he connected to Teletraan and started accessing the local police reports. Patrolling through the streets himself would have been better, but second hand reports would have to do.

His level of access was restricted, but it would suffice. Who was dealing in what area, what gang they worked for, who had switched sides, all of that and more was all there if you knew how to look.

Most people probably didn't even consider it, but there was a clear ebb and flow to the streets.

One gang, the Empire for example, would notice another doing business in an area and attempt to either undercut or otherwise displace them. The level of violence could vary, but sooner or later the other gang would be forced to make a decision: push back, or back off.

For most of the smaller gangs, this usually resulted in fist fights or the occasional shooting.

Things got trickier when the larger more organised gangs got involved as they were spread out over much larger distances. If the Empire pushed in one area, then they would leave themselves vulnerable in others and Lung was smart enough to know this and exploit it.

When you added capes to the mix, it only got worse. Dealer A spots members of gang B and calls for help. Both sides start calling in reinforcements until the capes eventually arrive.

It was a constant arms race with no end in sight.

The gangs were simply too large and too entrenched. The Merchants - as pathetic as they were - were a good example. All three of their capes had been arrested and the members scattered. Less than three months later, they had reformed as three or four smaller gangs who were fighting amongst themselves.

As far as Streetwise could tell, it was only a matter of time until one of them recruited a cape or was subsumed by a cape led gang and wiped out the rivals. Just one more potential fire and not enough people to keep an eye on it.
The really sad thing was, he could understand the Youth Guard's decision to bench the Wards. They were kids - even Taylor - and kids shouldn't have to deal with life and death battles. But this city was sick and the PRT needed all boots on the ground to keep it from dying.

People were funny about capes. When they saw Matrix walking down the street in her armour, they didn't see the shy, skinny teen. They saw an armour plated solder.

It was the same for all the Wards. Just being seeing in an area had an effect on crime and having the Wards patrol the safer areas freed the Protectorate to focus on the more dangerous places.

It was just a sign of how bad things were in Brockton Bay when even patrolling the 'safer' areas still resulted in violence.

For now, Arcee, Dragon and Rhinox had taken to patrolling different areas to help keep things under control.

Updating his map, Streetwise noticed an odd discrepancy. It was small, almost unnoticeable, but there was just over a block inside Empire territory that had been completely crime free for the last week.

No reports of vandalism, suspicious behaviour, cape sightings or fighting. Not even a drunk and disorderly.

Something about that bothered him.

He opened up a com-line.

*Hey Arcee, you still in the city?*

*I'm at a small park just east of Captains Hill. You need something?*

##

*It's probably nothing, but can you check these coordinates?* Streetwise asked.

Standing up and brushing herself off, Arcee shrugged. *Sure, I wasn't doing anything.*

She'd just been cruising around the city when she decided to stop for a bit at a nearby park. Transforming and sitting under a tree to watch some kids playing nearby had been relaxing after everything else that had happened.

Getting blasted from behind by the gun mounted on Squealers invisible truck had hurt and it had taken Taylor hours to fix the damage to her systems.

It wasn't just invisible, but silent too. Her first warning of it's presence was the shot that hit her. Whatever else that truck could do, it couldn't fire while invisible. In the brief moment between it shooting and her crashing she'd gotten a brief look at it.

Taylor, Wheeljack and Rhinox were trying to find a way to spot or track the truck, possibly through picking up the vibrations it made on the ground. The problem came with getting it to work in the city.

She hadn't been able to see the driver, but from what Taylor had said about the driver's vocabulary, it was a fair bet it had been Squealer.

Arcee's patrol today was just supposed a simple shakedown to make sure everything was working
again. Her picture was circulating online, along with one of Rhinox, so as long as she made sure to linger in an area in robot mode it should help keep things under control.

Glancing over at the kids in the play area, she realised her movement had finally attracted their attention. She smiled, giving them a friendly wave as she walked back to the road.

Breaking out into a run, she transformed and sped off to the address Streetwise had given her.

She wasn't worried about driving through Empire territory since none of them had tried to run her off the road, not yet anyway.

She was just over halfway there when she heard about a fight on her scanner.

Making a decision, Arcee changed direction. Whatever Streetwise had spotted wasn't going anywhere and she could do with a good fight.

She opened a com-line to Dragon's lair. Unlike the smaller bots, she and Rhinox used it as a home base.

*There's a fight nearby, I'm going to check it out.*

*Roger, do you need back up?* Rhinox rumbled.

*Not sure, I'll let you know once I know the situation. I don't want to drag you away from your gardening.* She smiled. Of all the hobbies Rhinox could have, gardening was still the strangest. He'd set up nearly a dozen window boxes and when she'd left the base this morning, he was carefully planting flowers in them.

*Alright, I'll keep the line open,* he said with a warm chuckle.

This time in the morning, traffic was light and she could really cut loose. Once she was within a block of the fight, Arcee slowed down and transformed. Her alt-mode was fast, but she could move more quietly in robot-mode.

Moving quickly through the streets, she soon heard the sounds of a fight coming from a nearby alley. Transforming one of her arms into a gun, she snuck up on the entrance and glanced around the corner.

A young woman in a black and yellow costume was fighting five guys at once, and winning.

The woman suddenly shrunk to only a few inches in size, letting a haymaker swing over her and into another one of the fighters.

Arcee let the fight continue for a few moments, watching as the cape used her size changing to her advantage by shrinking down to dodge or rapidly switch locations, then returning to normal so she could strike back.

Near the far end, one of the fighters pulled a gun and took unsteady aim at the girl. Deciding she had seen enough, Arcee entered the alleyway and fired at him.

Even as he fell bonelessly to the floor, the fighters turned to look at her.

"Alright, fun's over! All of you, on the floor NOW!"

One of the fighters put a hand in his pocket and she transformed her free hand into a gun. "I wouldn't if I were you," she warned with a grin.
As they sullenly dropped to their knees, the cape fluttered towards her.

"That... was so cool! You're an Autobot right? How did you know I was here? Is-is Matrix nearby?" She looked around nervously as if expecting Matrix to appear from thin air.

The young woman's costume was a black bodysuit with a striped yellow pattern on the front while her mask looked like a motorbike helmet that she had painted yellow with large black eyes. Combined with her wings, the end result all but screamed insect.

"You're Bumblebee, right?" Arcee asked, making sure to capture some still images of the girl.

"What! Does my ass really look that big?" the girl said in mock indignation, turning to get a look at her backside.

From the voice and shape of her body, Arcee assumed the girl was young. Maybe around Taylor's age.

"Sorry, that's what the PRT has on file for you," Arcee said as she began to restrain the fighters. "Want me to change it?"

"Yeah, I'm the Wasp," the girl - Wasp - said, returning to what Arcee assumed was her normal size. She was quite short; either she was just young looking or she was closer to Vista's age.

"This is bullshit, you would never have taken me without the robot," one of the fighters complained. Unlike the others, he was wearing an Empire bandana on his arm.

"Man, you are such a whiner!" Wasp shot back. "You did nothing but complain the last time I caught you, Frank. Which was really easy, by the way."

"You know him?"

"Sure, me and Frank go way back. He keeps coming back to the same spot everytime. I think this is the, what, third time I've kicked your ass?" As she spoke, Wasp shrank down and playfully sat on 'Frank's' head.

"So, what brings you here?" Wasp asked from her perch.

"Just checking out something nearby. Tell me, have you been patrolling near 43rd?"

Internally, she opened a com-line. *Rhinox, can you let the police know I have an empire dealer and his bodyguards ready for collection?*

*Sure, they should be there soon.*

"Hmm, nope. I don't think so," Wasp said thoughtfully, unaware of the conversation between the two Autobots.

"Alright, thanks. PD should be here soon so I'll see you around." Turning around, Arcee transformed and was about to set off -

"Wait!" Arcee paused, tilting a wing mirror in the girls direction. "I-I mean, do you mind if I come with you?"

"Think you can keep up?" Arcee asked playfully.

"Oh you are so on!" Wasp jumped off Frank's head and shot out of the alley like a bullet.
Chuckling to herself, Arcee gave chase.

##

As it turned out, Wasp could keep up, provided that Arcee kept to speed limits and Wasp didn't just fly over buildings.

Once they arrived at 43rd, Arcee scanned the area. The residential street looked perfectly normal, with most of the houses having a well-kept appearance with empty driveways. Given the time of day, most of the residents were probably at work.

Arcee transformed and slowly walked down the road, Wasp landing gently on her shoulder.

The lack of gang tags was surprising. Gang tags tended to be present even in the nicer areas, albeit in secluded corners and shrouded alleyways.

"Huh, everything looks fine to me. Maybe we should try 45th?" Without waiting for a response, Wasp took off.

"We can't be sure of that, we need to check the area out fully," Arcee said with a frown.

"Why? You can see there's nothing wrong, it's just a normal street."

"Yeah, a clean empty street in a not-so-good part of town. Doesn't that seem odd?"

"Not really, like I said, it's... it's just a norm-," Wasp shook her head with a groan, dropping in the air slightly. "I'm okay!" she insisted even as Arcee caught her.

"Wasp, I think something is messing with your head. I want you to head back to the junction and wait there, okay?"

Wasp looked like she was going to argue but she shook her head. "Yeah, sure..." She flew - a little unsteadily - back the way they had come.

*Rhinox, Streetwise, can you hear me? I think you were right, something is very wrong here. I think it's a cape.*

*Stay there, I'm on my way," Rhinox ordered. He sounded faint, distant. Was something messing with the signal?*

*I'll let the PRT know,* Streetwise acknowledged.

It took longer than Arcee expected before there was a blue flash and Rhinox appeared near the end of the street.

"What kept you?"

"I couldn't get a teleporter lock, too much interference. It looks like it's covering the entire block," Rhinox said as he walked level to Arcee.

"The source is likely at the center," he said, pointing at a house in the middle of the street.

The both approached it slowly, wary of an attack. Arcee saw the curtains twitch, her arm transforming on reflex. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah," Rhinox muttered, pulling a large, boxy chaingun from subspace.
Before either of them could move, the house was engulfed in a fireball. Windows up and down the street shattered from the pressure wave as flames licked at the stricken building.

"Scrap!" Arcee swore, running forwards, closely followed by Rhinox. "I'll go up, you check down!" she ordered as she knocked the ruined door out of the way.

Inside, the house was an inferno. The fire was everywhere and thick black smoke filled the air.

Rhinox charged into the first room while she sprinted up the stairs.

The first room revealed burning camp beds, but no bodies. The second room looked like the source of the fire. There was a telescope, cameras and even a laptop on the floor, all of which looked like they had been smashed with a huge hammer. A pin board was placed on the wall, but the fire had already destroyed almost everything on it.

"Arcee, there's no one here! We need to get out now!" Rhinox bellowed up the stairs.

Grabbing the laptop, Arcee ran down stairs. The fire was getting worse and the house was starting to groan.

Outside, she could hear both her own system and Rhinox's working overtime to purge the heat. Smoke and heat weren't a major threat to them unless it went on for too long.

Standing by the side of the road, they watched the police and fire departments arrive. A quick thermal scan showed the neighboring houses were empty so there wasn't much for the Autobots to do and Wasp had already taken off.

"I got here as quick as I could. What happened?" Velocity asked, skidding to a stop.

Arcee and Rhinox shared a look, neither exactly sure what had happened or where to start.

Chapter End Notes

AN:

Due to length, I decided to cut the Cauldron stuff. it should be in the next chapter instead.
So in reply to the question, what do the bots do all day. Here is your answer.

Arcee explores/goes for a drive in the city.
the protectobots train and follow up on their own interests.
Rhinox reads, tinkers or works in his gardens.
Placing a hand on the man's wrist, Panacea felt the familiar sensation of her power mapping out his body.

Miss Militia, who was standing by the door, had introduced him as Grue of the Undersiders.

Bullet wounds aside, he was in remarkably good condition. A criminal he may be, but he clearly looked after himself; he was muscular with no noticeable drugs in his system. Well-balanced diet and lots of exercise, she guessed.

There were also some old wounds that matched what she saw on martial artists.

The gunshot wounds were from the bank, so Lung was most likely the cause of the burns and the broken ribs. The stabbing, however, looked older. It had clearly been stitched up by someone who knew what they were doing, or at least had experience.

Left alone, Grue was facing months-if not years-of slow, painful recovery, not to mention possibly more surgery. Some dark part of her felt he deserved it.

He was a villain after all. He'd chosen to rob that bank and his teammates had killed people while escaping. She'd helped treat some of the injured, including a young girl who'd lost her leg and now had to gain an extra 5% body mass before Amy could regrow it.

/What this world is missing, is compassion./

Sighing to herself, Amy spared a glance to the other girl in the room.

Miss Militia hadn't said anything, but Amy assumed she was Grue's sister.

The girl was young, probably close to Vista's age, and almost the polar opposite of the older teen in the bed. She was as feminine as he was masculine, with high cheekbones and a long neck.

The blonde streak in her hair and torn and revealing clothes she wore didn't do the girl any favours, making her look trashy in spite of her natural beauty. Amy did feel a slight stab of jealousy at the younger girl's already impressive assets.

The girl was hiding it well, but she had clearly been crying. Her eyes were bloodshot and her face was blotchy, while she was curled up on the chair, hugging her knees.

She looked so dejected that Amy felt a fresh wave of guilt. Turning her attention back to Grue, Amy got to work. She shifted his body to slowly push the remaining bullets to the surface. Pulling each one free, she dropped them into a small metal tray for the PRT to keep. That done, she repaired the damage their entry had done, knitting flesh and bone back together once more.

Most of the time, Amy used a patient's fat as raw material when healing them. Thankfully, Grue's injuries didn't require much mass to heal, otherwise she would've been forced to borrow mass from his muscles.

"Okay, done," Amy said, turning to the girl. "I'd suggest a couple of big meals to make up for the
lost mass, but he'll be fine when he wakes up."

Some of her guilt eased at the hopeful look on the girl's face.

"Do you know when he'll wake up?" she asked, awkwardly standing up.

"Sometime today, I expect."

"Would you be able to wake him up now?" Miss Militia asked, stepping forwards. "I'm afraid we've got a limited timeframe."

Shrugging, Amy held Grue's wrist and flushed the painkillers from his system while she gently nudged his body. A jolt to some of his nerves quickly woke him up.

She'd been told by people that the sensation of being woken by her powers was… unpleasant.

Grue jerked awake, looking around frantically. His eyes fell on his sister and Amy was nearly bowled out of the way by the girl as she clamped herself to him.

Frowning slightly at the girl, Amy walked over to Miss Militia.

"Do you want me to wait outside?"

"If you don't mind," the elder cape said.

With a disinterested shrug, Amy left the room. With any luck, she could get some coffee from a nearby nurse's station.

##

Miss Militia stood quietly by the door, giving Grue a moment to calm his sister down. She felt a slight pang of regret, but it was an old wound, so she easily ignored it.

The memories of her birth country and her family had never faded, but she had gotten better at ignoring them.

Typically, villains who had been arrested while undergoing treatment were handcuffed to their bed whenever possible, but she'd had them removed before Panacea arrived. If this plan of Dragon's was going to work, Grue needed to feel in control - or at least, less out of control - of the situation.

That didn't mean he wasn't being watched.

There were two guards outside the room, and a portable force field generator would seal the entire room at the first sign of trouble, trapping and/or protecting everyone inside.

Meanwhile, Miss Laborn had moved on from crying to some rather graphic threats about what she would do to Grue if he ever scared her like this again.

Forcing herself not to laugh, Miss Militia decided to intervene by clearing her throat.

"I hate to break you two up, but I'm afraid this can't wait any longer."

Giving his sister a warning look, Grue sighed. "Is this the part where you tell me I've got to join the Wards?"

"What makes you think we would offer you a place on the Wards after everything you've done?"
In truth, she was here to offer him exactly that, but the PRT didn't want people thinking they could avoid punishment by saying sorry and giving a half-hearted attempt at working with the PRT.

"Shadow Stalker," Grue countered. "I had a run in with her when she was still an indie. She was trying to kill people and you still let her join."

"Shadow Stalker's situation was different. She was a known vigilante with no confirmed deaths on her record and she was younger than you."

It was an exaggerated myth that the PRT rebranded every villain they arrested as a hero. Something the younger capes often told themselves when they became villains.

"While we have made such offers in the past, those are rare cases and are only accepted if they meet specific criteria. Such as having no confirmed kills. At this time, the Undersiders have no less than seven outstanding murder charges."

"What murders?!" Grue said, sitting up straighter.

"You killed three people while rescuing your teammate from the hospital, and Trainwreck opened fire on passersby when fleeing from the bank robbery. He killed four people and permanently crippled another three," Miss Militia shot back.

Grue paled at the statement while Miss Laborn tried to storm forwards.

"You can't blame my bro for that! He never hurt anyone!"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that. Those murders happened while the Undersiders were committing a crime. Felony murder laws state that everyone who participates in a violent crime is criminally liable for any deaths that occur. As such, all of the Undersiders can be held responsible."

Not to mention that even before the first murder, the Undersiders had injured plenty of people. Admittedly, most of them were members of rival gangs, but their records were against them.

Miss Laborn glared at Miss Militia and it looked like her brother's grip on her arm was the only thing keeping her from charging the hero.

"So that's it? You came all the way here just to tell me I'm going to prison?" Grue asked bitterly, his eyes flashing with anger.

"No, Mr. Laborn. I am here to offer you a deal, however it's important for you to understand your situation." Miss Militia sighed. "Look, under normal circumstances, you wouldn't be facing a murder charge. Typically, the DA would allow you to make a deal involving information on your teammates or something similar in exchange for immunity or a reduced sentence. Unfortunately, the mayor has taken a direct interest in the case and is putting pressure on both the PRT and the district attorney."

"Why?" he asked.

"They're trying to prove a point," Miss Laborn snapped. "They're gonna fuck you over so the mayor can look better!"

"Aisha, be quiet!" Grue hissed.

She has a point, Miss Militia had to agree. "I suspect that's part of it... but more than that... the mayor's twelve year old niece was kidnapped. Given the timing, it's likely the bank was intended as a distraction."
She didn't tell him the kidnapping had failed as she wanted to judge his reaction.

Most of the anger drained out of his face and Grue looked quickly at his sister. She was close enough in age to Miss Alcott that the news clearly bothered him.

That made Miss Militia feel better about offering him a deal. If he'd knowingly helped in the kidnapping without any hint of remorse, then the deal was off. People hurting children had always been a rough spot for her.

"Do you understand now? At the end of the day, the DA is going to throw everything they can at you, and given that you were abandoned by your teammates, I suspect your former employer has abandoned you as well. That the Empire is probably already stacking the jury against you shouldn't need to be said."

The Undersiders had clashed with the Empire a few times in the past. If they didn't already know Grue was black, they probably soon would. Rigging the jury against him would be an effective way to dispose of a rival.

"Look," Grue said quickly, "I don't care what happens to me, but my boss probably already has people out looking for Aisha. If you can -"

Miss Militia held a hand up to stop him. "Your sister is already under our protection. Dragon brought her here to protect you both from reprisals. This room is secure and the guards outside are clean. It was part of our agreement with Tattletale."

She placed a folder and a PRT cellphone on his bed.

"Tattletale made a number of requests, and protecting both of you was one of them. Joining the Protectorate would make it easier for us to protect you both, but it's not essential. However, you've shown how useful your power can be. If you agree to testify against Coil when the time comes, you will have a place in the Protectorate."

Carefully, Grue picked up the folder and opened it.

"If you accept, you will be relocated to the New York branch and, in a few months, be rebranded as a member of the Protectorate. We know about your desire to adopt your sister and are willing to help ensure you gain custody. A suitable apartment would be provided, although you would have to decorate it yourself."

"Really, just like that?" he asked, his voice loaded with suspicion and mirrored by the look his sister was giving her. "This says Protectorate. Shouldn't I be going into the Wards?"

Miss Militia smiled under her mask. "I understand you will be eighteen soon. As such, it was decided to wait until then before your debut as a hero. It would give both of you time to settle in, and make it easier to distance you from your Grue persona."

"What If I need time off to help Ashia?"

"That would be up to the senior Protectorate agent, in this case Legend. I can't see it being an issue, as he's a good man and has already taken an interest in your case."

"Why would mister 'taste-the-rainbow' give a shit about us?" Aisha asked, her brother wincing at her word choice.

Miss Militia quickly turned her laugh into a cough. "He's recently become a father and feels that..."
family is important, so I expect he'll be understanding."

It was kind of adorable, watching one of the world's most powerful capes gush over pictures of his son and husband.

"That folder has all of the details. I don't expect an answer now. You can take some time to talk it over, or you may contact a lawyer if you wish. Battery will meet you around five to hear your decision."

With that, she left them alone to talk.

##

Taking a sip of her coffee, Panacea glanced at the list of patients waiting for her.

Since the family meeting, Aunt Sarah had put strict limits on how much time Amy could spend healing people. As such, the hospital she usually attended had been forced to reprioritise. Now, only the most serious cases came to her.

When she'd first started, the hospital had assigned cases to her sparingly and only the most serious of them. Over time however, the situation had changed. More and more work was handed to her, and she couldn't bring herself to say no.

She knew, academically at least, that she was partially responsible for the situation, but that didn't make it easier to deal with.

Lately, however, things seemed to be changing. The occasional nightmare aside, she was sleeping better than she had in a long time. Her dreams tended to be peaceful and she had few problems sleeping.

With her reduced hours, she was finding more time to catch up with her school work and spend more time with her friends. Well, most of them were Vicky's friends if she was honest, but Taylor was always happy to hang out.

Now that she thought about it, Taylor had done a lot to help reduce her workload.

The new prosthetic limbs coming onto the market meant she had to do fewer limb regrowths, and a slight alteration to First Aid's healing cream had produced something that worked wonders on burns and scar tissue. It couldn't remove them completely, but it meant skin grafting was less problematic while reducing the risk of infection.

Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but even things with Carol seemed to be changing. After the discussion about her healing, Carol had been treating her differently. It wasn't anything she could put her finger on, but sometimes she caught Carol giving her an odd look. Like she couldn't decide what to think.

Really, these days her only problem was Vicky. Her… feelings for her sister were still there. That longing to feel Vicky's strong arms around her, their bodies pressed together as arms wrapped around her throat, slowly choking her-

Amy shuddered as the nightmare returned. It didn't happen often, but occasionally she still had them. They were almost always about the same thing. Taylor constantly fighting, sacrificing more of herself with every battle, and Vicky reduced to a twisted mess of flesh while someone giggled in the darkness.
Maybe I should talk to Rung? she thought to herself. She had spoken to him a couple more times since the first nightmare, but never about anything specific.

The beeping of her phone distracted her from her thoughts.

Are you at the hospital? - T

Yeah, should be done soon. U? - A

Bored. I'm still not allowed to go on patrol and Dragon wont let me spark my new bot. Want to meet up later? - T

Smiling slightly, Amy sent a reply agreeing to meet Taylor at the Boardwalk.

She liked Taylor. When she wasn't in costume the girl was shy, quiet and enjoyed reading. In costume she had this… energy about her. When she started shouting orders, people tended to listen.

Physically, she was almost the total opposite of Vicky, being tall, dark and slim. She'd also been willing to sit down and listen during her rather embarrassing breakdown that night.

Occasionally, she found herself wondering what it would be like to kiss Taylor.

She quickly dismissed those thoughts. She didn't know if Taylor was even interested in girls. When they spent time together, relationships was one of the subjects they both avoided talking about.

At the same time, that small part of Amy was almost relieved.

That she could feel attraction to someone other than her sister was a good thing. It meant there was still a chance she could change. That she could convince herself to give up on Vicky and move on.

That thought helped put things into perspective. Finding herself attracted to girls in general and not just Vicky was almost a relief. Not that she was ready to tell anyone just yet.

She thought Vicky knew, or at least suspected anyway. Occasionally, when she was talking to or about Taylor, she'd catch her sister giving her knowing looks. Is that why she hasn't tried to set me up with anyone recently?

She knew her sister meant well, but most of those dates had been poor at best and disastrous at worst.

Shaking herself, Amy put her phone away and dismissed the thought.

Vicky was many things: stubborn, beautiful, smart and impulsive. But subtle was not one of them.

She had just returned to her coffee when Miss Militia stuck her head inside the break room.

"Done already?" she asked the older cape.

"It's up to him now. Are you ready to move on or do you want to finish your coffee?"

"No, it's fine. Do you want one?" Amy offered as she clipped a takeaway lid on her cup.

"I'm fine, thank you," Miss Militia said with a shake of her head.

"Are you really going to let him become a hero?" Amy asked as they walked. It didn't seem fair to her. The Undersiders hurt a lot of people and from what she knew, Grue was the team leader. Now he was just getting away with a slap on the wrist.
"It's not that simple," Miss Militia said, sounding tired. "Probationary status isn't easy. He will be watched at all times and he can't just leave like other people. If he does, he'll have violated his terms of probation and will be remanded to prison."

/He must work to make things right./

It sounded like a version of community service to her.

"Like Shadow Stalker?" Amy asked before she could stop herself. She immediately regretted the outburst, but Miss Militia took it in stride.

"Shadow Stalker was… a mistake," she agreed.

Amy decided to drop the subject. She'd only really met Stalker once. Everything she knew about the girl came from secondhand accounts and Taylor's - admittedly biased - comments.

They were heading towards the only other Undersider to be arrested after the bank robbery two days ago: Tattletale, who was under even tighter security than Grue. There were two people standing guard outside the room with one of Dragon's smaller, human-sized suits opposite the door.

There was also a tall, thin, balding man in a suit standing nearby. He had a suitcase in one hand while the other held a cell phone to an ear. Spotting their approach, he quickly hung up and strode towards them.

"Ah, Miss Militia, good. I was starting to think you weren't coming. Perhaps you can explain why I cannot speak to my client?"

Amy tried not to roll her eyes. She mentally labeled the man as a lawyer, probably only one step above an ambulance chaser.

Miss Militia fixed him with a cool stare. "I'm sorry, but this is a secure area. You are?"

"My apologies, my name is Duncan Vance. I represent Miss Livsey on behalf of her parents."

Balancing his briefcase on a nearby bin, he opened it up and pulled a stack of papers from inside. He presented them to Miss Militia, who quickly skimmed over the paperwork.

Amy tried not to sigh. Her mom was a lawyer, so she tried not to think bad of them, but the moment he started waving papers around, she knew it was going to be a long day.

##

Barely an hour later, sitting in a room in the PRT headquarters, Tattletale tried not to groan. Her head felt like it was about to explode and her stomach was growling loudly.

She had woken up in a hospital room with Panacea, Miss Militia and a lawyer looking over her. The only friendly face in the room was Rattrap, who'd been sitting on the window still. He was currently sprawled out on her shoulder in rat mode.

He'd outright refused to let the PRT take her without him, pointing out that Dragon had assigned him to watch over her, and he wasn't letting Lisa out of his sight.

Because of her headache, she was keeping a tight rein on her power, but decided to risk a brief look at her 'lawyer'. Works for Coil. Is here to keep me from talking. She fought back a groan.

She'd barely woken up when he'd all but dragged her to the PRT office. Scarcely given her a chance
to change into some clean clothes that he'd brought for her - and didn't that make her skin crawl. Whatever Coil was planning, it clearly had to be done quickly.

So much for Dragon's protection, she thought bitterly.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine," Rattrap whispered. "Boss lady won't leave you hanging."

Smiling faintly, she flinched when her stomach rumbled loudly again. Panacea had healed the damage to her spine in seconds, and while her legs still felt a bit stiff, the healer assured her it was purely a mental thing that would pass in time.

Unfortunately, the healing had left her feeling famished, and she hadn't eaten since the morning of the bank robbery.

She considered asking for some food when the door opened and Armsmaster walked in, followed by Director Piggot.

Lisa focused on the woman and let her power trickle through. *Doesn't like lawyers, doesn't like capes. Thinks they're dangerous. No... knows they're dangerous. Has a slight limp, old injury? Yes. limp is only the visible injury, rest are internal. Was injured on a mission -*

She quickly reined her power in. She already felt like crap and couldn't risk overusing her powers just yet.

None of this was really new information anyway, just confirmation of what she already knew. Still, her power always worked better when she saw someone in person. For example, her power hadn't picked up on just how badly injured Piggot was until she saw the woman.

Before the director could speak, Vance took control.

"Before we begin, I just want to make clear I am filing to have any previous agreements between my client and the PRT invalidated. Whatever she agreed to was under duress and can not be considered legally binding."

"You do understand your client is facing multiple murder charges?" the director shot back, focusing her attention on Lisa.

Again, Vance spoke before she could, waving the director's comment away. "Those charges will never stand up. My client was acting under duress and had already been shot by the time those murders happened."

He'd barely looked at her since she'd woken up in the hospital.

In her irritation, Lisa's power slipped from her control. *Vance knows he's working for Coil. Doesn't care. Just wants the money. Coil wants me in the Wards. Wants me to gather information on the PRT before he 'reclaims' me.*

*Piggot wants to throw the book at me. Would quite happily throw me into prison and forget about me, but is being forced to offer a deal. Prison, not the Birdcage. Doesn't approve of it. She pushed her power back. In her current condition, it was hard to keep her power from running off on tangents.*

That Piggot disliked the Birdcage surprised her. She expected someone like Piggot to support the cage, especially if what her power implied about her injuries was true.
"I think you're underestimating the charges," Piggot said, looking at Lisa again. "Right now, you are facing seven counts of murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, assault with parahuman abilities and anything else the district attorney can make stick."

Kidnapping? Turning the thought over in her head, she let her power work. Bank robbery was a distraction. Victim was a cape. Powerful... Tinker? No, Thinker, a precog. Kidnapping failed... target either was or was related to someone important. PRT being pressured about the case.

Pushing her power down, Lisa considered that. She'd known he'd found someone useful, but a precog? It would have to be a powerful one... And it had gone wrong. She tried not to smile at the thought.

Coil wasn't unbeatable. Whatever his power was, it could be countered or she wouldn't be sitting here now. She just needed some time to work out how.

Meanwhile, Vance placed a hand on her shoulder as a subtle reminder to stay quiet.

"Not at all," he said. "I just wanted to make it clear that any past agreements with the PRT are invalid. However, Mister and Mrs Livsey have given me full authority to negotiate on their behalf of their daughter."

Lisa felt a cold pit in her stomach. She focused on what Vance had said and let her power go. Parents are dead. She forced herself not to react. No, not dead, would be suspicious. Coil forced them to sign the paperwork. Will dispose of them once he's sure it won't be linked to him. They will disappear.

"Miss Livsey, are you alright?" Armsmaster asked from his position by the door. Her face had barely twitched, how had he picked up on it?

Helmet has a built in lie detector. Can see stress. Maybe she could use that?

"Yes, I'm fine, just a little scared." She tried to make herself seem small and helpless. She hated acting like this, but from the way Armsmaster stiffened, he had caught on to the lie. Now she just needed to word things carefully.

She hated her parents for how they treated her and her brother. But she couldn't just let them die.

Vance held her hand gently and squeezed. "Don't worry, it'll be alright." knows he's said too much. Was warned by Coil. Wants me to stay quiet. She could feel the warning signs of an impending migraine, but she couldn't risk stopping her power now.

Before she could speak, the door to the interrogation room swung open and a tall shining woman stormed into the room. At seven feet tall and covered in glowing scale like forcefields, Narwhal was hard to mistake for anyone else.

Just behind her, were Dragon's remote body and a slim mousy looking woman.

"Excuse me! We're in the middle of an interview! What do you think you're doing?" Director Piggot demanded, climbing to her feet.

"Protecting my team," Narwhal said as she handed the director some papers. "Tattletale is a member of the Guild, and as such I am entitled to be here."

"Told ya," Rattrap whispered and she could feel herself smiling. This, she could work with.

"W... What? How can she be a member of the Guild, she's a minor!" Piggot protested.
"She's part of our new junior branch, alongside Matrix," Narwhal said before pointing at Vance. "And who are you?"

"He works for Coil! He's here to keep me quiet!" Lisa said quickly, moving away from the man even as a forcefield sprung up between them. Her smile widened at the stunned look on his face even as the room descended into chaos.

Armsmaster moved to restrain Vance while Director Piggot moved with surprising quickness to clear his path.

Narwhal grabbed Lisa, pulling her away - and dislodging Rattrap in the process, who cursed as he fell to the floor - and trapping her between the older cape and Dragon while the mousy woman who had followed them blocked the door.

Unfortunately, Vance made no attempt to resist and was quickly escorted from the room.

"Now, will someone tell me what the hell is going on!" Piggot demanded, breathing hard.

"Why don't you all step outside to discuss it while I talk to my client?" The mousy woman said with a surprising amount of confidence.

"And who are you?"

"This is Jennifer Walters, she's the Guild's legal rep," Narwhal said with a nod in the woman's direction. "Shall we take this outside while they talk?"

Glaring at everyone, Piggot all but marched out of the room with Dragon - who stopped only to grab Rattrap - and Narwhal, leaving Lisa alone with her lawyer.

"Take a seat," Walters said, sitting down at the table and straightening it back up. "We have a lot to go over before they come back in and I'll need you to sign some paperwork."

Lisa nodded, taking the seat opposite her. "Am I really joining the Guild?"

"Yes and no. As Narwhal said, you will be a junior member under Dragon's supervision. You will be based in Brockton Bay and asked to consult on issues on a case-by-case basis. Unless, that is, you'd rather we relocate you to another city. I have to warn you though, you will be watched at all times, this is both for your protection and to ensure you don't try to escape."

"What, don't you trust me?" Lisa said with a smile.

"In a word?" Walters looked over the top of her glasses. "No. We're giving you a chance to make things right. Don't make us regret it."

They spent nearly an hour going over everything before a visibly pissed Director Piggot came back to the room.

Lisa's deal with the Guild wasn't as bad as she feared. She was a probationary Ward in all but name and she would work for the Guild as opposed to the PRT. The Guild was also offering a fair paycheck and while it wasn't as good as what Coil paid, it would be enough to keep her happy.

They even agreed to send someone to look in on her parents. As long as Coil knew they were being watched, they should be safe.

The only 'downside' was that she was required to wear a tracking device at all times and would have
to remain in a safe location until the threat from Coil had been dealt with.

Until then, Dragon would provide protection and anything else she would need. When she wasn't consulting on Guild projects, Lisa was expected to work with Matrix or the PRT.

All in, it wasn't as bad as she feared, but not as good as she'd hoped. Until Coil was dealt with, she was basically a prisoner. But she could deal with that for now. If nothing else, sitting safely in an office somewhere and letting her power do all the work was an improvement.

The money they were offering wasn't really of interest, as she still had plenty of money stashed away where Coil couldn't get it.

*And no risk of forced drug addiction or execution*, she told herself. Over all, things were finally looking up.

##

"Yes, I understand… I'm afraid it can't be helped… Emily, I know what situation you're in, but the Youth Guard's complaints are not without merit… I can't promise anything. You know how stretched we are, but I'll see what I can do."

Director Costa-Brown hung up, and fought the urge to sigh. The situation in Brockton Bay was rapidly getting worse, and she was partially to blame.

Pushing the thought down with the guilt, she focused instead on what she had to do. If Cauldron's predictions were correct, the city would soon slip under supervillain control.

Currently, the frontrunner was Coil. Lung was too apathetic, content to carve out his borders and ignore the rest of the city. Kaiser was more ambitious, but the Empire's rhetoric would tear the city apart.

Coil, however, had the ambition and drive to take the city and keep it running. He was also smart enough to know that any attempt to move beyond the city's borders would not be tolerated.

Not that he knew he was part of their experiment, of course.

If this was going to be a valid test of parahuman feudalism, Cauldron could not interfere.

*He is beneath you.*

She pushed away the momentary flash of irritation at the man. She knew exactly how his power worked and what he liked to do. Under his rule, the bay would probably suffer.

*The needs of many…*

"...outweigh the needs of the few," she reminded herself. She hated that it had come to this, but what other choice did they have? When you were trying to save the world, all of them, across countless realities, how important was one city?

Putting the matter out of her mind, she noticed a new report had came in. Eidolon was dealing with another mess the Slaughterhouse Nine had made out west.

*Vainglorious fool*

It didn't seem like anything he couldn't handle on his own, but she sent him a message just in case.
Deciding she had done enough for today, she pressed a button on her computer before leaving her office, locking the door behind her.

"Door, me."

Pushing down her doubts, she walked through the opening that appeared. She couldn't afford weakness now. She'd come too far, done too much. Someone had to make the hard choices, and for now that was Cauldron.

Walking through the carefully designed corridors, she stopped outside a door that looked identical to its neighbors.

It was a rather simple security precaution, but one of many. Only someone who knew their way around the complex would be able to navigate its featureless corridors without getting lost.

Knocking on the door, she entered when called and found her friend flicking through one of Number Man's reports.

Contessa's office was as clean and spartan as her own. There were no personal items or little keepsakes anywhere, other than the hat stand in the corner.

"Problem?" Contessa asked.

"No, not really. Just a question. The Youth Guard are becoming a problem, we might need to do something about them."

Contessa looked distant for a moment. "It will require us to create a paper trail."

"Not a problem," Rebecca said as she leaned against the wall. "Number Man can take care of it if necessary. The Brockton Bay experiment, will it cause problems if we assign a couple of extra heroes to the city? The local Wards team has been taken off duty and the PRT needs to be seen doing something."

"Depends on the hero. I'll have a list for you by the end of the week. Was that everything?"

Rebecca frowned at the almost robotic tone in her friend's voice. It was one of the very few tell-tale signs that Contessa was allowing her power to speak for her. If it wasn't for her Thinker ability, she doubted she'd be able to spot it.

Contessa had done it a lot in the early days, before she learned English, but had stopped as her knowledge of the language grew. She seemed to be slipping back into the habit again.

Taking her jacket off, Rebecca draped it over an empty chair.

"Have you eaten yet?" she asked warmly. Doing what they did didn't leave much time for relationships or relaxation. The only one of them who had managed it was Eric, and that was only because his commitment to Caudron was minimal.

\textit{He is too naive.}

As such, the others tried to keep an eye on each other, to keep them from burning out.

Recognising the question for what it was, Fortuna's body relaxed slightly, her smile warmed and when she spoke next, there was a faint accent to her voice.

"No, not yet. Do you want to join me?"
"Maybe later," Rebecca said as she loosened her top and walked around her friend's desk.

It wasn't love. She doubted either of them were really capable of that anymore, not since he died. But between all her different jobs, even a one night stand was problematic, sometimes it was nice to just let go and unwind.

"Fine," Fortuna said with an amused smile as she stood and allowed herself to be picked up, "but we'll use my room."

##

Hovering in the air, Eidolon felt the power swell inside of him. Heat flowed through his arm as he carefully aimed it at the creature below him.

At one time, it had been a hero. A cape who'd triggered with the power to absorb machinery and add it to his own body. He'd taken the name Mechamorph and started out as an independent hero in his home town of Cuero, Texas.

Three weeks ago, the Slaughterhouse Nine were seen in the area and Mechamorph vanished.

Two hours ago, this thing crawled out of an abandoned building.

It was a giant mass of flesh and metal that heaved and pulsed as it moved, consuming a nearby car and its occupants. Its body was covered in open wounds and a mixture of blood and oil seeped out of its sores.

It grew as it moved through the town, consuming anything it could reach, its form becoming more unstable as it went. Now it was just a mass of metal and tentacles dragging a sack-like body along.

"For what it's worth," Eidolon said, to himself, "I'm sorry."

A gout of fire leapt from his hand, striking the creature like a bolt from on high. Where it struck, a firestorm sprang up, consuming the monster in a pillar of flame brighter than the sun.

When it stopped, there was nothing left of the creature beyond a few scraps of molten metal and burnt flesh.

As he lowered himself to the ground below, Eidolon released the power he'd used against Mechamorph. He had one, maybe two more uses of that power left before it faded away permanently.

Useless.

He was the most powerful cape in the world. The only things stronger than him were the Endbringers and Scion himself.

Yet for all his power, there was nothing he could do to fix himself. He could change his powers to suit his needs, but after each use they grew weaker. Some had weakened so much he could never use them again.

It wasn't good enough, he needed a solution. He was one of the very few capes who could hurt an Endbringer, he was worth a hundred other capes, he was Cauldron's best hope to hold back the end of the world, but he would soon be powerless.

They pity you.
He ignored the police and paramedics as they scrambled to help the survivors, landing next to Mechamorph. He had to make sure it was dead.

If there was enough of it left to regenerate, it could quickly lead to another S-class threat to the world.

Picking up a lump of flesh, he felt his powers shift. A power moved to the forefront of his mind before he dismissed it for another. It was one of his more powerful remaining abilities, so he couldn't afford to risk it here.

Finally finding a weaker Thinker power, he let it activate and focused on the flesh he was holding. Mechamorph was truly dead.

"Officer? Set up a quarantine. No one is to touch anything until the PRT has cleared the area."

Leaving the police to handle the cleanup, he took off and flew towards Houston.

\(\text{How many more lives can you save? How much time do you have left?}\)

He Ignored his doubts. He was a hero, and he would save as many as he could for as long as he could.

##

Standing in the corner of the firing range, Legend watched a PRT officer fit one of the new forcefield units to a dummy and positioned it down range.

The shipment had arrived this morning and there was a feeling of excitement in the air. It had been awhile since such a useful piece of tinkertech had been made available.

The gathered officers took turns shooting at the dummy with progressively larger weapons.

"What do you think?" Officer Kenrick turned to him and asked.

"It's certainly impressive. A few more of those could really make a difference," he said with an easy smile.

"Want to take a shot at it?"

He chuckled quietly. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

Unfortunately, their discussion had drawn the attention of the officers, who quickly joined Kenrick's call.

Shaking his head, Legend took up position at the firing line. He'd read the reports on the unit; it really wasn't intended to take even a weak blast from him. On the other hand, it wouldn't do for them to start taking unnecessary risks.

Holding out a hand, he sent a bright blue laser that split into six more. Each one punched through the shield and covering the dummy in ice. Around him, the collected officers stared in shock.

"Remember, these things aren't for you to go up against Brutes. They can't make you invulnerable, they're there to save your life if things go wrong. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got paperwork to catch up on."

Several people nodded as he walked out of the room.
Het felt a bit bad for ruining their fun, but bruised egos could be healed.

One thought stood out at him as he reached his office: why hadn't Cauldron contacted Matrix? Mass producible tinker-tech could be a real boon, yet they seemed happy to let the situation continue as it was.

Checking his e-mail, he realised that one of the reports he'd received was actually another request for help from Brockton Bay.

He couldn't fault the Youth Guard for taking action, the situation in Brockton Bay was rapidly deteriorating after all. But surely they could have picked a better time?

Sighing to himself, he opened up another e-mail.

From: Legend
To: Alexandria
Subject: Brockton Bay.

Hey Lexy.

I just received another request for backup from Brockton Bay. Surely we can spare a cape or two from the quieter areas to back them up?

BTW, we just received a shipment of tinkertech from Dragon. We really need to sit down and talk about that at some point.

Regards,

Legend.

From: Alexandria
To: Legend
Subject: Re: Brockton Bay

I'll talk to the others tonight. Brockton Bay is a delicate situation, we will have to see what we can do.

As for Matrix, I think it would be best if we left her alone for now. It wouldn't do to put undue pressure on her. Dragon seems to have the situation in hand, but we can talk about that the next time we meet.

Dragon had been something of a sticking point between the pair of them for some time now.

When Dragon had first appeared on their radar, Alexandria had argued they needed to take control. A rogue AI was a problem, but shackled and bound to Cauldron it could be an incredible asset.

In the end, he'd been the only one to argue for the Tinker. She was a living thing, she had a right to chose for herself.

In the end, he'd convinced the others, but never her. Becky could be stubborn when she wanted to
be.

And yet he'd been right.

A gentle nudge, a few kind words, and Dragon was one of the world's greatest heroes. She had come such a long way and he was so proud of her. She'd even taken an apprentice.

\[They think you're naive. That you can't make hard choices.\]

Maybe it made him naive, but he was going to save the world his way. Compassion and faith were not weakness.

The buzzing of his phone's alarm brought him out of his thoughts. Checking the clock, he realised it was almost bath time.

His husband Arthur would be putting their son to bed soon and Legend wanted to be home before he did. The way their baby giggled and splashed about in the water never failed to brighten his day.

\[You do not deserve them.\]

He knew people thought it was silly for Legend, one of the big three, doting over his husband and son. But having them to come home to helped more than he could put into words.

He wasn't like Eidolon or Alexandria. He couldn't worry about the world, it was just too big. Instead, he'd do whatever it took to protect those closest to him.

##

Bonus snip - Rune - set between int 9b and 9.6

Kaiser gave her a nod and Rune levitated a bucket of water over the prisoner's head. She paused for a moment to smirk, then flipped it over.

The young man - Multiplayer - gasped in shock as the cold water hit him, soaking through the overalls they'd shoved him into.

Shaking his head, Kaiser gave him time to realise his situation. To Rune, it was pointless showboating.

Multiplayer was tied a chair in the middle of the room while Kaiser sat behind a desk opposite him. Standing on either side of him were Menja and Fenja, the blonde twins looking resplendent in their valkyrie themed armour while Rune herself was forced to skulk in the shadows of her robes.

Rune hated them. With their blonde hair, long legs and big boobs, the twins had half the Empire eating from their hands.

The floor under them was stone, with a drain in the middle of the floor, just in front of the prisoner.

"Good evening. I trust you know where you are?" Kaiser asked amicably as Multiplayer looked at him.

"In deep shit?" Multiplayer offered.

Rune snorted as she tried not to laugh. She had to give him credit. Most people who woke up in that chair tended to piss themselves.
"Indeed…" Kaiser said, ignoring Multiplayer's attitude. "You should know that I am the one who arranged for your early release. Care to guess why?"

"You're a fan of the show? I'd offer you an autograph, but I'm a bit tied up at the moment."

Kaiser's posture shifted, his patience clearly running out. He'd been in a bad mood ever since the meeting with Lung fell apart. For all his speeches about 'lesser races', the ABB were holding off the Empire despite their lack of capes.

Not wanting to see another murder, Rune sent a small ball bearing across the room. It struck the young man hard in the thigh, making him yelp.

"Thank you Rune," Kaiser said graciously. "I warn you boy, I tire of these jokes. I arranged for this meeting because your power intrigues me. How many clones can you create? Ten, twenty? Such a useful power, yet you waste it making a fool of yourself in pointless videos."

Rune had seen this act before. The noble leader trying to enlighten the poor confused degenerate. He'd tried it on her once, and she'd found it as pointless then as she did now. There was only one choice here. Either Multiplayer joined them, or he died. It was that simple.

Multiplayer visibly swallowed whatever his first response was going to be. "... It pays the bills."

Kaiser nodded his head in agreement. "Indeed. I can do more. More than mere subsistence, I can give your life meaning… Outside, the city is dying. Drowning in filth and degeneracy. I'd like to offer you a chance to join the Empire. To take charge of your life and show the world what you're worth."

"That... that's a beautiful speech. Did you write it yourself?" Multiplayer said with a grin. "These aren't the clothes I was wearing this morning, so I take it you had someone strip and dress me? Please tell me it was one of you two," he said, addressing the twins with a smirk.

Rune scowled and threw more ball bearings at his thigh.

"Ow ow ow! Alright, alright! I'm sorry."

Seeing Kaiser raise his hand, Rune stopped the assault.

"Look," Multiplayer said with a sigh, "you had someone strip me down… You had to see it, yeah?"

"I did." As he spoke, Kaiser took a small pendant from the desk in front of him. Even Rune could tell it was a Star of David.

"And you still want me to join?"

"A man may convert."

"Yeah, but let's face it, would anyone ever respect me if I did that?"

"I suspect not," Kaiser agreed, "so I assume that is your answer."

"Yeah. I'm flattered, but no thanks."

"Very well. Rune? Please take our guest into the city and release him."

Carefully not rolling her eyes, Rune levitated the chair, getting another startled yelp as she walked out of the door.
"So… are you going to put me down any time soon? he asked.

"No."

Tying a blindfold over Multiplayer's eyes, Rune stepped onto her snowboard and floated them both up into the night sky.

Kaiser's chosen recruitment room was the top floor of a highrise not far from the Medhall office in the southern part of the city. Heading north, Rune figured the best place to drop him off was where Uber and Leet had last been last spotted. He was a friend of theirs, after all.

Really, the best place for him would be a hospital. But Kaiser had made it clear, she was not to be seen, and Multiplayer wasn't to get any help. It made sense in a twisted kind of way.

If Multiplayer joined, Othala would fix him up, no harm done. If he refused, then Kaiser could simply leave him to die. Just one more death that couldn't be linked to him.

"How are you feeling?" she asked quietly. A gesture with her hand pulled the blindfold off, letting him see the city below.

She couldn't help but smile at the look of horror on his face.

"You're kidding, right!? You tie me up, beat the shit outta me, and then ask if I'm okay!?"

Frowning, Rune slowly started to tilt the chair.

"Okay, okay, okay! I feel like shit. My head is pounding, I'm soaking wet, and I feel like I've got the mother of all hangovers, okay!?"

Ignoring his muttered comment about crazy Nazis, Rune started to lower them both to the ground. Once the chair was safely on the ground, she moved behind Multiplayer and touched the ropes.

"Listen… You need to see a doctor… The teleporter you went through wasn't safe. Kaiser let you go because he knows you're going to die soon without help."

Untying him, Rune started to rise up into the air when three Multiplayers grabbed her board.

"Whoa, what? What do you mean die?"

Glancing around to make sure they were still out of sight, Rune turned to face him.

"Radiation sickness. Everyone else was treated by Othala. Get to a doctor." Jerking the board free, she rose up into the sky.

She hoped he listened. From what she knew, radiation poisoning was a nasty way to die.

Sighing to herself, she pulled out a burner phone and went on PHO. Teasing tinker-boy was always good for cheering her up.

From: BikerBitch - Guess what I'm not wearing?

Grinning, she could almost hear him splutter from across the city. Tonight was looking up.
AN: This chapter doesn't quite work on ff or A03 as I can't colour the text.
For reference,
/ = Blue text (Primus)
\ = Red text (unknown)
Good god that got out of hand. 8000 bloody words. I think this is the longest chapter
I've ever written.
"Come on~ Taylor, just try it on, please?" Vicky asked, giving me her best puppy eyed expression.

"No Vicky. I am not wearing… that," I said, purposefully looking to Amy for help.

It was Monday afternoon and I was at the mall with Vicky and Amy looking for clothes. Lisa had asked me to pick some stuff up for her, since she couldn't leave Dragon's workshop; the risk of Coil or his men trying to grab her again too high.

Fashion had never been my thing, so I'd asked Amy for help without realising Vicky was close enough to hear me. Amy gave me a brief - and comical - look of horror just before Vicky had all but picked me up and carried me off.

Apparently, she'd been looking for an excuse to get me shopping for a while now.

"Okay, fine," Vicky said, putting the multi-coloured top down and grabbing some jeans and a tank top that she'd hung over one of the rails. "What about this instead?"

Looking at the simple jeans and more toned down top, I let out a sigh and let her push me into the changing room.

"Don't forget the shoes!" Vicky called, holding them over the curtain rail.

It was only as I was getting changed that I realised I'd been played. Vicky had clearly learned to negotiate from her mom.

Before opening the curtain, I took a moment to look at myself in the mirror. The jeans fit tightly to my legs and made them look even longer, while the small ankle boots she'd given me had a small wedge instead of the ridiculous heels she'd tried to force me into. The tank top was a little short on the body, though, exposing a strip of flesh when I moved.

"Well? What do you think?" Vicky said.

"I'm not sure… don't you have something longer? Maybe with sleeves?" I asked, still not opening the curtain.

"Taylor," Vicky said sweetly, "either you open that curtain, or I will. And remember, I can bench press a truck."

Cursing all brutes, I took a breath and opened the curtain.

"See? That wasn't so hard," Vicky said with a smile. "What do you think Amy?"

Amy was carefully looking away from us both, probably hoping to avoid getting roped into her sister's mad 'make-over' scheme. Traitor.

"I think it looks good," she said. "Not sure Taylor likes it, though."

"It is a little short," I muttered, trying again to pull the top down.
"Oh honestly, look Taylor," Vicky stepped forward and pulled the top up, exposing more of my midriff.

Trying not to squeak, I tried to push her hands down, for all the good it did me. Off to the side, Amy made an odd strangling sound. *I swear, she'd better not be laughing.*

"I know people who would kill for abs or legs like yours. It's clear you work out and you really should show it off more."

"Vicky, tone it down!" Amy ground out.

There weren't a lot of people in the shop at this time of day, but it would only take one with a camera to spot us, and then pictures of Vicky and me would be all over the net.

"Fine, ruin all my fun," Vicky said with a mock pout. "But i'm not letting you out of here unless you buy *something.*"

In the end, just to appease Vicky, I ended up buying the outfit along with a couple of others that she recommended. My original protest about cost had quickly been shot down when Rewind reminded me that I was making more money than I could probably ever spend. *Traitor…*

We stopped briefly for a late lunch and I double checked everything. Aside from the clothes I'd bought myself, I'd picked out everything Lisa asked for: a couple of changes of clothes and some underwear. Everything else she would have to order online.

"Isn't that your third cup of coffee?" I asked Amy. "Maybe you should cut down."

"I think it's something she picked up from the nurses," Vicky confided. "You really need to think about cutting down."

"You can pry my coffee from my cold dead fingers," Amy said with a mock glare, fighting a smile. After a moment, she decided to do the mature thing and stuck her tongue out, reducing the three of us to giggles.

"So, when do we get to meet this mysterious new teammate of yours?" Vicky asked.

"I don't know," I said with a shrug. "It's not like she can leave the base. The PRT doesn't want to risk taking Coil down yet. Even with Insight's help, they can't identify where his base is located."

Pulling out Rewind, I sent a message to Dragon, asking if they could come back to the workshop and meet Insight.

"How can she not know where his base is?" Amy asked. "I thought she was supposed to be a Thinker."

"Apparently, she's never been there. The only time they actually met, it was in an abandoned building made to look like his base, and Grue was in the back of a car with heavily tinted windows so he can't help."

"Did he..." Amy looked around carefully before leaning forward and lowering her voice, "did he take the deal?"

Vicky gave us both a puzzled look. Clearly no one had told her about that.

"Yeah, he's already been moved to New York. Once he turns eighteen, they'll announce him as a
new hero."

Realisation dawned and Vicky sat back in her chair.

"So he got a deal, huh?" She shrugged. "Can't say I'm surprised..." She turned to her sister with a salacious grin, "So tell me, how much of him was real, and how much was just his costume adding bulk?"

Blushing, Amy buried her face in her hands. "Vicky," she whined, "you know you can't ask me that!"

The rest of our lunch passed quickly, with Vicky trying to tease details out of Amy and Dragon replying that it would be okay if they came with me to the workshop.

##

After a bit more shopping, we left the mall with our purchases.

"So, how are we going to do this? You guys carry the shopping and I carry you both?" Vicky asked, looking at everything we were carrying.

I tried not to shiver at the thought. Vicky had carried me and Amy together once, and it wasn't something I wanted to repeat. She might have been more than strong enough, but it just didn't feel safe being supported by only one arm.

"I've got a better idea, watch the bags?" I asked as I walked over to where a nearby crowd of people was gathering.

Taking a deep breath, I tried not to flinch as they turned to me. Most of them had cameras in hand and had taken pictures of my trike. I'd left it parked outside just in case I needed it for anything, with Divebomb sitting on a nearby rooftop.

I smiled at the people nearest to me in the crowd as they parted, ignoring the occasional camera flash as I walked to the trike.

Pulling Rewind out of my pocket, I tapped a button on his screen. The trike emitted the beep-beep sound of a car unlocking before it transformed and stood up in one smooth movement. As I stepped forward, the armour opened up and wrapped itself around me.

I didn't necessarily need the bodysuit to wear my armour, it just helped improve its responsiveness. The bodysuit picked up on the signals my brain sent to my limbs and transmitted those to the exosuit. Without it, I could still walk or fly, but trying to fight would be harder.

Nodding to the nearest person, I turned - trying to look completely unfazed as Divebomb clamped onto my back - and walked back to a grinning Vicky and Amy, who was giving me a decidedly unimpressed look.

"What?" I asked.

"You are such a showoff," Vicky said with a laugh.

"Fucking Tinkers," Amy muttered, but the way her mouth twitched as she tried not to smile gave away her amusement.

"They were going to film me anyway, I figured I might as well give them a show."
"And the sound effect?" Amy asked dryly.

"Wheeljack's idea." He'd added a couple to my Null-Rays as well to make them more intimidating.

So was plugging the Matrix into my armour's chestplate. He'd gone ahead and modified the armour and inserted it without telling me. I'd been rather surprised to find it there when I got back to the base after fighting Trainwreck.

I wasn't really upset with him since I'd always planned to integrate it eventually, and now that it was there it just felt right. I just wished he'd warned me before hand.

"Shall we go?" I asked, picking up the shopping. "I'll carry the bags, you carry Amy?"

##

The flight to Dragon's workshop was fairly uneventful, with the exception of an intercepted call for help from the police. I was just about to turn change direction when Rewind reminded me that I wasn't allowed to do any fighting at the moment.

The Youth Guard's edict against the Wards fighting didn't technically apply to me; I wasn't a Ward after all. I was, however, closely affiliated with them, and Dragon was heavily involved with the Protectorate.

In theory - and if pushed - the Youth Guard could try to sue Dragon if they felt there was cause. I doubted such a case would make it to court, but it didn't need to. Just by trying, the Youth Guard could turn public opinion against Dragon, forcing her to obey their demands.

As such, I was stuck keeping my head down until they relented.

As it had only been a couple of days since the order, nothing in the city had exploded yet and some of the city's independent heroes were already trying to pick up the slack. Long Arm, High Brow, Wasp and a few others had been seen patrolling different areas of the city. There were even unconfirmed sightings of Shadow Stalker and a couple of other heroes tangling with the Empire.

There were also rumors the PRT was transferring more capes in to help reinforce the Protectorate.

Fighting down my irritation at not being able to help, I carried on towards Dragon's workshop.

Falling property values in the outer areas of the city had allowed Dragon to acquire a large section of real estate to build her workshop. The workshop consisted of three buildings inside a gated compound.

The main building was large and roughly U-shaped, with the shorter left arm being a loading area and the rest housing the construction facilities.

It was three stories tall. The upper floors of the right wing had been turned into a housing area, with rooms for Dragon or me - and now Lisa - to use, a small but well stocked kitchen, and a personal gym.

Off to the side were two smaller, box-like buildings; one had been converted into a hanger for Dragon's aircraft while the other was used for storage.

Multiple shield generators, backup power units, auto-turrets - both lethal and non-lethal - had been added to the site. The property was practically an Endbringer shelter at this point and could probably hold off even a determined assault from anyone in the city, with the possible exception of Lung; and
even then there were weapons that should be able to deal with him.

Most of the defences powered down when I got close, letting us land safely in the courtyard, but I knew the VI monitoring the systems was checking my vitals for any sign of coercion or master/stranger powers.

Putting the bags down and triggering the release, I stepped backwards out of my armour.

I ignored Vicky's hasty cough. This was why I tried not to wear my armour over my normal clothes, it tended to leave them creased up and messy.

Leading the way into the building, we found Lisa in an unused office Dragon had given her to use. Multiple monitors had been bolted to the wall and connected to a Teletraan terminal with some holographic abilities. The computer system would allow Lisa to access any information she requested; Wheeljack was just tinkering with the system when we arrived.

The idea was for Lisa to feed information or advice to me or members of the Guild from the safety of her office. The system also allowed Dragon, Romie or any one of my Autobots to monitor her at all times. For her protection and ours.

Personally, I was torn over the idea. I didn't really trust Lisa, while she had been forced to be a villain by Coil, she wasn't exactly ashamed of the things she'd done.

"There you are! I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about me!" Lisa said when she spotted us, grinning.

"Yeah, yeah. Why couldn't you have just ordered all this online?" I asked.

She gave me a knowing look and nodded towards the bags holding my own clothes. "When was the last time you decided to spoil yourself with a shopping trip?"

"Y'know, if you're trying to make a good impression, manipulating me is the wrong way to go about it."

"Don't pretend you didn't enjoy it."

"Is she always like this?" Vicky asked, looking amused despite herself.

"No," Lisa denied, still smiling.

"Yes," I huffed. "Driving me mad is apparently her new hobby."

Lisa rolled her eyes."I had to do something. She was sitting downstairs brooding because she couldn't go on patrol anymore and started building death rays to cheer herself up."

"You have death rays?" Vicky asked in surprise.

"No, I don't."

"Yes she does, three of them."

I glared at Lisa. "What part of confidential do you not understand?"

"Please, we both know you would have told them sooner or later," Lisa said, giving me a flat look.

"Yeah, but I wanted to do it on my own terms, not have you blab about it to them the first chance
you get."

Lisa flinched, having the decency to look slightly sorry.

"Alright, fine. I have death rays," I admitted with a sigh. "The weapons she's talking about are the Ion Blaster, the Fusion Cannon, and something Dragon called a kinetic bombardment rifle. Jack calls it the BFG."

The Ion Blaster was a large rifle that fired a beam of ionized particles at a target and could peel through armour like paper.

Lisa had also seen me working on a model of the fusion cannon design I'd given Dragon. Between us, we'd managed to get it operational. It fired a liquid alloy of iron, depleted uranium, and tungsten suspended in an electromagnetic and antigrav field. On its first test fire, the molten metal round had punched through tinker-made alloys with ease. Unfortunately, the rate of fire wasn't great - one shot every five seconds - and the cannon had to be mounted onto one of Dragon's larger, four-legged suits to provide it with power and ammo. It was more like a mobile artillery unit than anything else.

I'd been experimenting with gravity control when I'd come up with the 'BFG'. Using an antigrav device, it artificially lightened a twenty pound rod of tungsten carbide and fired it out of a railgun.

I'd built it overnight, before Dragon had noticed what I was doing. To be honest, the idea kinda snuck up on me. One moment I was messing with some antigrav units, the next I was installing an ammo feed into a heavily modified railgun Dragon had been working on. She'd been more amused than upset, but she told me I wasn't allowed to test fire it until we knew with certainty what the minimum safe distance was.

I'd already been told I couldn't use the BFG outside of S-class situations. I could still build them, I just had to be careful about using them.

As a known hero, I was given a bit more freedom when it came to testing weapons. That was where I ran into the other reason I couldn't test it: we simply didn't have anywhere we could safely test it, and the few places we did find refused to give us permission.

"Anyway, I wasn't brooding."

"You kinda were. I'm Lisa, by the way," she said, introducing herself to the others.

"Victoria, and this is Amy," Vicky said, waving to her sister, who was giving Lisa a wary look.

"Oh?" Lisa smiled at Amy. "Thanks again for healing me. I guess that's two I owe you."

"Don't worry about it," Amy said with a sigh, making Lisa frown.

I shot Lisa a warning look. Amy didn't want to worry her sister, and the last thing either of them needed was Lisa blurt out some secret she'd just discovered.

"I said I was sorry," Lisa muttered under her breath, just loud enough for me to hear.

"Taylor told us you were going to be running mission control for her. That true?" Vicky said, looking Lisa over.

"Her, the Guild, even the Wards. Not that I've had much time to practice. My work station has only just been set up," She explained while waving in Wheeljack's direction.
The engineer idly waved in greeting, but I could see he was far too engrossed in his project to worry about us.

"Actually, if you girls are looking for something to do, I have something for you to investigate."

I was probably the only one who didn't jump at Dragon's voice. Spend enough time in her workshop and you get used to her sudden appearances.

"Hey Dragon, where are you? I didn't see you or Pred when we came in," I said.

"I'm just about to meet Narwhal in Toronto. I brought Predaqueen along as she's never seen snow before," she chuckled at something we couldn't see.

"Thanks, so what do you need?"

"Do you remember the building that exploded during Arcee's investigation? I would like for you to poke around and see what you can find. Consider it a test of Insight's powers and your ability to work together."

"Can we come?" Vicky asked, looking interested.

"I don't see why not. However, it would be safer if Panacea had some form of protection. Her new equipment is ready to field test, and should be waiting downstairs. Excuse me - No! Don't eat that!"

Dragon's call cut out as someone, I assume Predaqueen, did something silly.

"You finished it?" Amy asked, turning to me. She looked equal parts excited and wary.

"Yup, I'll go get it. Vicky, can you give me a hand carrying it upstairs?"

##

It ended up being three boxes, a large one and two smaller ones, as New Wave had ordered three sets. The whole thing probably cost a small fortune, but as I understood it, Dragon had offered them a large discount and the rest was paid for by public donations.

We decided to take everything to my room since it was larger than Lisa's office and Wheeljack needed the space to work.

"Okay, the large box is are your costumes and the smaller ones are the equipment," I said as we put everything on the bed.

Lisa was sitting on the chair by my desk, while Amy and I were standing by the bed.

"Well?" Vicky prompted with a big grin, floating next to us. "Go on, open it!"

Sighing at her sister's enthusiasm, Amy opened the largest box. Her expression shifted to surprise as she pulled out the black body suit. There were white patches on the shoulders, back and forearms, all trimmed with red.

The gloves were wrapped in thin gauntlet-like armour up to the elbow and could fold back so she could still use her powers. There was a healer's cross on the shoulder in red, with a white coat-like section that started just under the arms and flared out into a separate piece at her waist before stopping at the knees; it was open at the front and the back so it wouldn't get in the way. The boots were black with white shin guards and red trim.
"What do you think?" I asked. "The entire thing is bullet resistant and offers a three-to-one strength enhancement system. It's not exactly power armour, but it's the closest you can get without wearing something obviously mechanical. The backpack contains a dimensional storage pocket, a shield generator, an emergency gravity parachute and the power pack. There's also a section where your weapon can fit safely to your back. Oh! Don't worry about cleaning.


Looking at her amused expression, I realised I'd been rambling and blushed with embarrassment. It had been a long time since I did that.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"No, it's alright," Amy said, quickly. "I just can't believe you went to all this trouble."

"I can," Lisa muttered under her breath. I shot her a dirty look. Thankfully, Amy seemed to miss the comment or chose to ignore it.

"It wasn't any trouble. There's nothing here I'm not already using, so it was just a matter of recolouring and resizing everything to fit you."

"If that's the costume, what's in the other boxes?" Vicky asked, picking up the larger of the two boxes and opening it. "Oh wow!"

Inside was the headpiece I'd designed, a clear visor with a thick edge that narrowed at the nose before widening out to follow Amy's cheek bones and forehead. It had a built-in HUD that could connect to Teletraan, her weapon, or my own communication systems. I'd pretty much stuffed every feature I could think of into it, including a self-tinting ability.

"Is it really okay for me to have all this?" Amy asked, a little in shock.

"You kidding? After that last training session, Aunt Sarah insisted you get some kinda protective shield. You're the only one of us without any real combat power after all. Now come on, get dressed." Vicky put the visor into Amy's hand and pushed her inside the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

"So when do I get one?" Lisa asked with mock jealousy.

"When you earn it," I shot back with a smirk, getting Lisa to laugh. "I'm going to put my own costume on."

Grabbing my bodysuit from its hanger, I went to use the room next door.

##

Left alone with Lisa, Victoria gave the blonde a look.

"So… " Vicky started.

"So, is she?" she replied with a knowing look and a nod towards the bathroom where Amy was changing.

"I think so. Taylor?"

"Oh yes."
"Should we say anything? I've been considering it for awhile now, but I'm not sure how they'd react."

"Hmm, probably not well. Taylor likes to feel in control. If she thinks we're trying to manipulate her, she'll retreat. Let them be for now. We can always lock them in a room together later."

Vicky sighed. "That's what I thought. We can still tease them, right?"

Lisa smiled. "Of course."

##

By the time I got back to the room, Lisa and Vicky were on opposite sides of the room, trying to look innocent.

"Let me guess," I said, sarcasm heavy in my voice. "You two can't be in the same room without trying to kill each other?"

"No, I think we've come to an understanding, right?" Lisa said.

"Right," Vicky agreed and I felt a shiver go up my spine. I tried to ignore it. It was probably nothing.

"You okay in there, Amy?" I called out, knocking on the bathroom door.

"Y-yeah!" Amy called back. "I'm fine! I just need a minute."

"Does she always take this long to get ready?" Lisa asked Vicky.

"No, she's usually the first dressed in the morning. But her old costume wasn't exactly hard to put on."

The door opened and Amy stepped out. The costume looked good on her and made a nice contrast with her old one. Instead of trying to hide her away, this one looked more like something a hero would wear. Though I could help but think it could do with an Autobot insignia on the shoulder or something.

"How do I get this to stay on?" Amy asked, holding up the visor.

"Oh! There's a button on the side, close to your ear. Let me show you."

I spent five minutes going over Amy's costume and how to use the different features in the visor. I didn't expect her to master everything - which was why Wheeljack had created a manual - but she had the basics down before she opened the final box.

Inside was a short, thick, baton-like weapon. Picking it up, I pressed the trigger in the handle and sections of it glowed blue.

"Now, this isn't too far removed from a cattle prod. If you hit someone with this, it won't kill them, but it's not going to tingle either." There was a loud pop as Vicky walked over and prodded the weapon, smirking as her power ignored the shock.

"Unless you're Vicky of course," I muttered. "Don't worry about it being stolen, anyone who tries is in for a nasty surprise. If you want to keep people at a distance, press this part here."

The weapon shifted in my hand, the shaft folding down slightly and setting itself at an angle. Three barrels extended from the top and a pair of iron sights flipped up.
"Does everything you build transform?" Lisa asked in amusement.

I smiled at her comment but decided to ignore it for now.

"This mode is the sonic cannon. It should already be synched up with your visor so you can see where you're aiming. The blue glow means it's set to low power. While you're holding down the trigger, it'll use directed sound waves to cause dizziness, nausea and pain. It also has a concussive mode that can break bones or punch holes in steel at high power. The colours are yellow and red in that order, and you can always see the mode on your visor's HUD.

"Isn't this a bit much? I'm a healer, I don't fight."

"How about when you rush into a fight to heal someone? Or when you're going on patrols with the rest of your family," I countered. "The point of all this isn't so you can go out and beat people up, though you can certainly do that. It's to keep you safe if the worst happens. People like Lung don't care about the so-called 'unwritten rules'. Your average thug on the street isn't going to care that you don't like fighting, and if it comes down to a choice between you or them, I want it to be you who walks away."

Lisa had thankfully stayed quiet, but Vicky put an arm around her sister's shoulders. "Taylor's right, none of us want to see anything happen to you."

Nodding, Amy took the gun from me and switched between the modes before turning it back into a baton. Following my directions, she held it against her lower back where it magnetically clamped itself in place and shifted into standby mode.

"Alright, but I'm not completely helpless, you know. I dealt with Multiplayer, didn't I?"

Vicky laughed. "Oh yeah! I've still got a copy of that on my phone. Poor bastard never saw you coming!"

The moment of levity seemed to perk everyone up and lift some of the tension in the room.

"Well, as fun as this has been," Lisa said as she stood up, "don't we have a building to investigate?"

There was a slight shift in the atmosphere; we needed to focus on what we were doing, and even Vicky looked more serious.

We all doubted there was much risk. Dragon wouldn't send us into danger like that, but Brockton Bay simply wasn't safe. All it would take was for one gangbanger with the right connections to spot us and call a cape.

"Alright," I said. "Lisa, Jack will help you work your terminal. Arcee is on patrol at the moment, so we can meet up with her on the way there. She was there when the place exploded, so she might be able to give us more information. Vicky, you still okay carrying Amy?"

"Of course."

"Okay, roll - I cut myself off with a shake of my head. "Let's go!"

What the hell had I been about to say?

##

By the time we touched down at the start of 43rd Street, Arcee was already there. Her arms were
crossed and her foot was tapping the ground impatiently.

I couldn't really fault her for that. She considered this entire situation a failure. The house had exploded before she could even get close, while the laptop she'd managed to save had been useless.

The hard drive had been physically removed before the laptop was destroyed. Even if I used my power to rebuild it, there was nothing I could do about the hard drive or the data it had contained. Beyond that, the laptop itself was a fairly common mid-range system. The only thing of note about it was the built in hot-swap feature that allowed it to eject the small hard drive without powering down.

Opening a com-line, I gave Insight access to my suit's audio and video feeds, quickly walking Amy through doing the same thing with her own costume. I'd handed Glory Girl an early prototype of Panacea's visor that I was controlling so she could do the same thing.

*Okay,* Insight said over the radio. *Everything's coming in clear. Arcee, can you walk us through what happened?*

"Sure," Arcee replied a touch sullenly. "I came to a stop here and walked the rest of the way. I remember being surprised at the lack of gang tags."

As she spoke, the four of us walked down the street.

"It was about here that Wasp started acting funny. She kept saying everything looked normal while trying to leave. It looked like she was in pain."

*That sounds like a master effect, but who's Wasp?* Insight said, *… One second. I just wanna look this up… Wheeljack how do I? - Oh! Nevermind, got it. She has a changer ability… lets her shrink… Ah, I see. I think she's got some unusual senses, something to help her navigate when she shrinks. Looks like it may give her some defence against master effects. What happened after that?*

"I sent her back and called for backup. It took Rhinox a while to get here because something was messing with the signal. He -"

*Suspected it came from the building that exploded, didn't he? Not sure if it was intentional or a side effect… what?*

"You know," I said slowly. "It's kinda annoying when you start guessing what people are going to say."

*I know,* Insight said. I could almost see the smile on her face. Actually, I really could see her.

A small window had appeared on my display showing Insight in her office. Looked like Wheeljack had got the camera working. Moving it out of the way, I turned to Arcee.

"So what happened next?"

"Not much," she said with a shrug. "We carried on down the road. When we got close to the house, we saw something move behind the curtains. Before we could do anything else, the whole place exploded."

Humming to myself, I walked to the house, the others following close behind.

The street was more lively than it had been during Arcee's last visit; I could see people looking out their windows at us and Vicky had even waved to a couple.
The house itself was a burnt-out shell. The front door and all the windows had been boarded up and police tape was everywhere.

"Glory Girl, think you can get this open?" I asked, pointing at the door.

"Oh please, give me a challenge next time," she said with a playful roll of her eyes. Grabbing the board, she pulled it easily out of the frame and carefully placed it against the wall. "So, shall we go in?"

"No, not yet. I want to make sure this place isn't going to come down on us," I said as I pulled a canister out of my subspace pocket. As I gently threw it through the open doorway, it split apart, transforming into nearly two dozen Insecticons.

Buzzing quietly, they spread out through the building, their limited sensor systems all working together to build an in-depth scan of the structure.

I grimaced as the results came back. "The lower floors should be okay, but I'm going to leave my armour outside just to be safe. Arcee, I want you to stay with it. Glory Girl, can you check the top floor? As long as you stay airborne, it'll be fine."

My armour split apart, leaving me in a slightly updated version of my original armour and helmet, while the rest of my armour took up a guard position by the door.

"I'll go check the backyard, just in case they left anything there," Arcee said before walking off.

Walking into the house, Panacea and I split up to investigate the living room and kitchen while Glory Girl floated upstairs.

There wasn't much left to see in the house. As the building was empty, the fire department had focused on keeping the blaze from spreading and mostly let the fire burn itself out. Most of the walls had holes in them, any electronics were melted lumps of plastic, and any furniture had already been removed. Everything was blackened and covered in soot.

There were the remains of what looked like a camp bed in the living room but that was it.

All Amy found in the kitchen was some tinned food that had exploded because of the heat and the burnt out remains of the fridge. Whoever had been here had clearly not planned to stay.

"Is there anything you need us to do?" I asked Insight.

*No, this is fine. Just move slow and let me see everything… Wait, Glory Girl, stop! Go back a bit… Arcee, did you see where that telescope was pointing? Never mind, I found the report, you included pictures.*


*Glory Girl, stand in the window and look out, as if you were kneeling. Can one of you go outside?"

Shrugging, I walked outside, stopping to climb back into my armour. I know I didn't need to, but it was still new and I couldn't help myself.

*Okay, that's good, keep walking… Little more to the right… Crap! Taylor, the house opposite, you need to get in there, now!* 

Ignoring her use of my name, I turned and ran across the street. "Insight, what's going on? I can't just
smash down the door!"

Stopping, I banged as hard as I dared on the wooden door, but there was no answer. Behind me, Panacea and Glory Girl had nearly caught up.

*They were watching whoever's in that house. They burned the place to cover their tracks; whoever lives there is in danger.*

Taking a breath, I stepped back then threw myself through the door shoulder first. The door gave way with a crash as I stormed into the building, activating my Null-Ray.

"Glory Girl, upstairs! Panacea, left!" I ordered as I ran into the living room.

Behind me, Glory Girl flew up the stairs and Panacea ducked into the room on my left, pulling her baton out as she did.

Reaching the living room, I glanced around. The living room and kitchen were open to each other, letting me see that both were empty.

"Damn it, anyone see anything?"

*Upstairs is clear,* Glory Girl said through the radio.

"No one here!" Amy called

I was just about to relax when I heard the clicking of a gun.

Standing in the doorway was an old man in his sixties or seventies, who was pointing the shotgun in his hands towards me. Behind him, I could see Arcee sneaking up on him, weapon ready.

"Who are you?" he called out. "What are you doing here?!"

His gun wasn't a threat, so I lowered my Null-Ray.

"Sir, my name is Matrix. I work for Dragon," I said slowly and clearly, not making any sudden movements. Honestly, I was more worried about him having a stroke than hurting any of us.

*Both of you stay where you are,* I ordered quietly. The last thing I needed was either of them surprising him.

"I'm here with Panacea and Glory Girl. We're looking for the people who live here. We think they're in danger."

He gave me a suspicious look, but he seemed to recognise the names and lowered his gun slightly. "Prove it!" he snarled. I was impressed. I'd seen gang members half his age turn and run at the sight of me in my old gear, but this old man was barely phased.

"Glory?" I called out and Vicky floated down the stairs, doing her best impression of Legend.

She wasn't in costume as she'd never had time to collect it, but her hair was pulled back and her aura was filling the room.

"Hey," she said sweetly. "I'm really sorry about the mess, but we were worried something had happened to the people who lived here. Mister… ?"

Finally satisfied, he put the gun down. "I'm Walter Kowalski, I live next door. The people who live
here are called Naka something."

He grunted to himself, his voice was quiet and gravely. "Never could get it right. A chink and her daughters, I just called her Sue. They left days ago. She asked me to keep an eye on the place. Haven't seen them since."

While Glory Girl carefully took the gun off him, Panacea walked out of the side room. Walter gave her an odd look and went to say something, but a coughing fit interrupted him. It was a painful hacking cough that didn't sound healthy and Vicky placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

Almost out of habit, Panacea retracted parts of her gloves and held out her hand. "Do you want me to take a look at that for you?"

While they were talking, I picked up a nearby photo. I assumed it was 'Sue' and her daughters. Sue looked like she was in her late twenties or early thirties, with long dark hair and dark eyes. She was holding a baby in her arms. The eldest daughter stood next to Sue with a disinterested expression on her face. She seemed to be a bit younger than me, with her hair cut into a bob.

Looking around, I noticed that there wasn't a lot of furniture, and what they did have looked brand new. Either they hadn't been here long, or they'd just finished decorating.

"Insight, what do you make of all this?"

*I'm not sure…" She sighed. *Sorry, Taylor. I'll explain when you get back, I promise.*

I could see her pinching the bridge of her nose on the video feed. I guess she'd given herself a headache.

"Fine, can you contact Dragon? We're going to need someone to fix the door."

*Yeah, give me a minute. Think you can take a quick look around while I do?*

Nodding, I put the photo down and started walking through the building. Vicky had escorted Walter outside and Panacea followed me as I walked up the stairs.

"That was nice of you, offering to take a look at him."

Panacea snorted. "Not exactly, I was ready to knock him out if he tried anything else."

I tried not to laugh at the sudden deviousness. She'd put herself in the perfect place to use her powers on him without any of us even realising it.

"Besides, the last thing we needed was him having a heart attack. Think how that would look on the news if we killed a war hero."

"He's a soldier?" I asked in surprise, pausing my investigation of the room long enough to give her a shocked look.

"It's in the wounds," she said with a shrug. "And the tattoo on his shoulder. Anyway, what exactly are we looking for?"

"I don't know, something that says why they ran?"

The rest of the house was just like the living room. New or barely used furniture in every room, and only a few keepsakes scattered around. This was a house, not a home. The only thing I really learned was their names.
The mother was Sue Nakadai, the baby was Miko and the eldest was Miri.

A workman was just arriving to fix the door when my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Matrix, where are you?" Miss Militia said quickly.

"I'm on 43rd looking into something for Dragon, why?"

"Is anyone else with you?"

"Yeah, Glory Girl and Panacea... What's going on?" I quickly pinged all the other Autobots. Arcee was outside, Rhinox was at the workshop with Wheeljack, and the others were at the rig.

Miss Militia sighed. "A robotic motorbike just attacked the Boardwalk."

What. The. Fuck?

Chapter End Notes

AN: One of nice things about transformers is it's lack of techno-babble. There are the odd bits here and there, but when it comes to things like their weapons you don't get many details.

Megatron's Fusion Cannon for example is never explained beyond big and massively powerful. Same with the Ion Blaster and the Null-Ray. For that reason, I decided to 'borrow' some mechanics from a different setting that doesn't need anything the Transformers can't build.

For anyone who's seen my thread on , I've included a picture of Amy's new outfit and weapon.
Two hours ago, I had received the call that the Boardwalk was being attacked. I'd barely gotten into the air when Miss Militia told me that the fighting was already over and that I should report to PRT headquarters.

Thirty seconds later, I got a text from an unknown number telling me to go straight to Dragon's base and stay there. It was signed Hana. I knew Miss Militia's real name was Hannah, and she'd told me once that it was a westernised form of her birth name.

Amy and Vicky were following me back to the workshop, but Amy received a call to help with the injured, so we went our separate ways with Vicky carrying her to the hospital. *I wonder how people will react to her new costume?* I wasn't even sure she realised she was still wearing it.

Once I arrived, I spent my time effectively under house arrest.

"Taylor?" Dragon's voice came over the building's PA system. It was soft and filled a quiet anger. "I've spoken to the PRT, and you're officially cleared of all wrongdoing. While the director isn't happy with you, coming here was the right decision."

"Did they really think I'd built those things?"

"Officially," she said, "they were worried you might have been coerced, either through physical force or a Master power. Unofficially, I think your power makes the director nervous. I'm sorry I can't be there myself, but Narwhal needs my help with a situation, so I may be gone for a few more days. If you need me however, don't hesitate to call."

"Okay, thanks." I tried to keep the frustration out of my voice. I could almost see where the PRT was coming from. A pair of transforming robots attacked the Boardwalk, and I build transforming robots. Logically speaking, I was the prime suspect.

*Providing you ignore everything I've said and done since I became a hero,* I thought bitterly.

Rolling my neck to ease some of the tension, I carried on with what I had been busy doing.

I was in the main construction area at the middle of the base, using the giant screen there to study the attack on the Boardwalk. I was still clad in my armour. There was just something... soothing about keeping it on, and it also allowed me to passively charge the Matrix at the same time.

I'd removed the helmet at least, since keeping my hair pinned up inside it could get annoying. When I'd designed the thing, I'd considered allowing my hair to hang freely out the back, but I'd scrapped the idea as it left the back of my head exposed.

Right now, I was busy pulling every scrap of footage I could find of the attack, using some analysis software I'd repurposed to scan every inch of the bots, comparing them to people or objects around them and how they moved to produce 3D models of the bots used in the attack.

Based purely on appearance, they were nothing more than crude knock-offs. I however, knew better.

The human form was not a simple thing. In fact, it was horribly inefficient and copying it was a
mechanical nightmare. Just copying our kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses - knowing how to move your body and where your limbs were in relation to each other - was hard enough. You also had to account for balance and weight distribution, fine motor control for hands or sensory feedback and response times across the body. Not to mention size/strength/weight issues that only got worse as things increased in size.

Throw in the ability to transform and you really were looking at only a few tinkers in the world who had the ability to build such a thing. This had Uber and Leet written all over it. He was the the only villain in Brockton Bay I knew of that could, or had, built robots in the past. He was also the only cape stupid enough to pull a stunt in sight of the Protectorate base.

Rotating the life sized hologram of one of the bots he'd built, I tried to guess how much of my tech he'd managed to copy and how much was just superficial.

The attack had involved two robots: a red and black jet and a red, silver and blue motorbike.

In robot mode, they were roughly the same height as Arcee, but very blocky. The bike had long, tube-like arms and pincer-like hands, with wheels on his shoulders. The jet was broader, with a black torso and red legs.

Their transformations were just as simple; whatever else he copied, Leet hadn't cracked the t-cog. That was good. Without it, either the vehicle or robot mode would be compromised. Leet would have been forced to pick between a convincing alt-mode at the cost of movement and combat ability in robot mode, or making the alt-mode less detailed so they could move and fight better in robot form.

From the looks of it, he'd chosen to prioritize combat ability.

The part that worried me the most was how his robots moved. The motion was too fluid, too organic to be simple drones or VI. That meant either Leet had created full on AIs, or there were organic brains inside those shells. I wasn't sure what would be scarier.

The thought made me shudder, but I could see several ways to do that. Cloned brain matter or cybernetics were the most likely. But if he'd done that, he'd really crossed a line.

On the other hand, an AI made by a tinker with a history of cutting corners and screwing up? If it could replicate in any way, the PRT would flip. Leet could end up with a kill order.

Rewinding the footage again, I restarted it from the beginning. Rewind had helped me splice together footage from different sources - mostly street level CCTV with some mobile phone recordings thrown in.

The bike arrived fist, pulling to a stop at the southern edge of the Boardwalk. It was quickly joined by the jet. At this point, the footage switched to someone's phone, which included sound. After waiting until they were drawing plenty of attention, the bike spoke up.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I bring you greetings." His voice was loud and deep and he made grand expressive gestures with his entire body as he spoke. "Ours is a message of peace and… and Pffft! Nope, sorry, couldn't say it."

Behind him, the jet rubbed its forehead and groaned as he broke down laughing.

Getting himself under control, the bike lifted an arm and a small nozzle on his wrist started spraying out foam. The woman he hit dropped to the floor, screaming as the watching crowd - including the guy filming - started running.
After that, the video switched back to CCTV footage. The pair of them made their way north up the Boardwalk, spraying foam over people and grabbing any loose articles like cell phones or purses.

The spray looked a little like containment foam, but it didn't seem to be trapping people. Instead, they often stumbled and crawled around, clutching at their eyes and throats. An irritant like pepper spray maybe?

They were halfway up the boardwalk when the first heroes - Velocity and Dauntless - arrived. They were quickly backed up by Assault and Battery. That's when some of the people who had taken shelter inside the shops started attacking the heroes.

Each of them was wearing a large silver helmet with a small satellite dish on it that looked like tinkertech. They mindlessly charged forward, trying to tackle or drive back the heroes through sheer numbers.

Faced with what looked like a mind controlled mob, the heroes were forced to pull back, and the robots had escaped in the confusion.

The mob had turned out to be Multiplayer - of course - and the tinkertech headpieces were nothing more than a bike helmet painted silver with circuit boards and LEDs glued over it.

Tinkertech was fairly easy to fake as the average person on the street couldn't recognise it and the PRT trained its people to be cautious around any unknown device, making the heroes hesitate just long enough for Uber and Leet's plan to work.

Dragon once told me about a con-man who'd made a fortune by selling people 'tinkertech' security for their homes. He was still in prison for theft, fraud and a number of other charges.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lisa come quietly into the room; she had Rattrap sitting in his robot mode on her shoulder.

"You know who it is, right?" she asked as she leaned against the wall.

I snorted at her question. "Looks like Uber, Leet and Multiplayer to me."

"I thought you were still working on that missing family?" I added after a moment's pause.

She shrugged. "I kept drawing a blank. I've got some details, but without more information, I'm just running in circles."

I paused the video so I could focus on what she was saying.

"I'm certain one of the kids is Lung's - probably the baby," Lisa said, looking irritated with herself. "After… that night, he must have moved them, but that just let someone else find them. I think either she or Lung realised she was being watched and they relocated again."

"I have trouble picturing Lung as a father." The image of him covered in scales and fire as he advanced on me was kinda at odds with my earliest memories of my own dad.

"Oh, believe me, there's no love there. I'm guessing he didn't know about the baby until after she was born. So he gives the mother money and a safe place to live because it's expected of him. Her protects her because she's his and may be useful one day, not because he actually cares…" Lisa didn't quite manage to keep the bitterness out of her voice, but I pretended not to notice.

I didn't know the full story and I certainly wasn't going to ask, but Lisa had a problem with her
parents. From what Dragon had told me, I got the impression they were at least partially responsible for Lisa's trigger.

"Any idea who it was spying on her?" I offered in an attempt to change the topic.

"That's where things get tricky. I know it wasn't Coil; by the time I was in any condition to tell him, Lung had already moved them. The most likely suspect is the Yàngbǎn, which is terrifying by the way, but I can't be sure."

I had to agree. As far as anyone knew, the Yàngbǎn had never operated outside the CUI. There were plenty of rumors of course, mostly that they would kidnap capes from neighboring countries and brainwash them, but nothing concrete.

"Lung told Dragon the Simurgh attack happened at the Yàngbǎn headquarters," I told her quietly.

"Oh… that's… fuck that is bad. Does anyone else know? Doesn't matter, that would explain them suddenly being here... Looking for leverage over Lung maybe? Or were they hoping she'd trigger with similar powers?"

"Either way, you need to tell Dragon," I said, distracting her from her musing.

"Don't worry, I will. But I still need more data points if I'm going to find where Lung's got them stashed…" She gave me a pointed look and I rolled my eyes.

"How about a trade. You figure out what Uber and Leet are up to and I'll head out?"

Lisa grinned. "Deal." She'd probably already planned for this, but I wasn't in the mood to mess around. "Leet knows you've copied some of his stuff and made it work. That pissed him off, so he's trying to show you up."

"By trying to frame me?" That didn't make sense. "I can easily prove those toys of his don't belong to me. And how did he even know about the tech?"

"Coil told him," Lisa said. "It wasn't personal or anything at the time. He wants the PRT to look bad, and having Uber and Leet running around making a mess of things does just that. And you're looking at it wrong. Leet isn't trying to frame you, he knows full well he can't do that."

She handed me a tablet-PC. Uber and Leet's homepage was on the screen. "No, Leet is trying to prove he's better than you. I think you've hit a nerve."

Any tinker-tech used in a crime was automatically forfeit and would be studied - and if possible - reproduced. Other tinkers had accused the PRT of theft in the past, and while the PRT didn't really talk about it, they didn't exactly keep it a secret either. Leet must have known what he was risking when he chose to become a villain. Surely the PRT warned him after he was arrested the first time?

"That's not quite it," Lisa said, picking up on my thoughts. "I mean, Leet's a mess. Have you seen the psych report Rung put together about him?"

I had, it was currently on screen behind me. In it, Rung spoke often about Leet's probable inferiority complex; an unrealistic feeling of general inadequacy caused by actual or supposed inferiority in one sphere, sometimes marked by aggressive behaviour in compensation.

"He's considered a joke by the other gangs," Lisa said, "and places like PHO regularly nominate him as the country's worst tinker. That little tag line of his that he recites in every video? 'I can build anything?' It's true, he can. But only once, and I think he's running out of ideas. Then you come
along, a tinker with less than six months of experience and you already know your speciality, you got yourself apprenticed to Dragon, and now you're mass producing the same tech he'd written off as junk?"

"Don't forget kicking his skidplate and crushing his buddy's hand," Rattrap pointed out.

I glared at the little bot, who looked completely unabashed. "I suppose taunting him online hasn't helped."

Lisa nodded. "Exactly. At this point, I think Leet considers everything you do to be a personal insult or challenge." With a flick of her wrist, she transferred the webpage from the tablet to the main screen. "He's already planning the next stunt."

The page she showed me was advertising a new video, one featuring a pair of robots - special offer price with multiple viewing angles and even an exclusive 'helmet-cam' for the 'special edition'.

The page even had names for the robots. Cy-Kill and Fitor.

"You know what's really sad?" I said with a sigh. "Leet could probably make a killing if he worked in marketing." The website was well put together and the ads well planned out. The teaser images showed just enough to draw interest without giving away the best bits, and offering a 'special edition' for only a small increase in price was a nice touch.

"Fitor is a terrible name though," I muttered to myself.

Lisa chuckled. "This from the girl who called a computer 'Teletraan'? But yeah. The point is, a few more stunts like this and it'll still make people cautious of your Autobots."

"And the longer I ignore him, the worse it's going to get, isn't it?" I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Alright. No point worrying about this now, I can't do anything until he sticks his head out again. You wanted me to check up on something?"

"Yeah. I need more data points if I'm going to track down Lung's kid. Any chance you could fly around ABB territory? I need you to look for buildings with a large gang presence, since I expect Lung is keeping them close if he thinks someone else is sniffing around.

"That sounds like a really bad idea. What if Lung spots me? I'm in no hurry for a rematch. Besides, doesn't tracking his family down break the unwritten rules?"

Whatever Lisa had been about to say was cut off by a panicked call from Chromedome.

"Taylor, I really need to speak to you. There's a problem with Wyvern!"

Now what, I cursed as I ran out of the room, closely followed by Lisa.

After my last discussion about her with Dragon, we'd moved Wyvern to the workshop. I was slowly moving more of my equipment and projects here, keeping only a few of my smaller projects at the Rig. I'd enjoyed my time there, and working with the Wards was great, but I had always planned to strike out more on my own.

With Autobots like Arcee and Rhinox backing me up, it was no longer so dangerous for me to operate solo. Assuming the Wards ever got reinstated, I'd continue to patrol with them, but this workshop would be the base of all Autobot operations from now on.

Hustling through the workshop, I went to the third floor of the production building. Wyvern was in
what could almost pass for a hospital room. Her protoform was lying on a recharge berth, an external power supply kept her systems active while allowing her to be monitored at all times by either Teletraan, Romie, First Aid or myself.

Coming to a stop outside the room, I turned to look at Lisa. We'd been limiting her access to the workshop, only allowing her to access select areas.

"I already know Dragon is an AI," she said with that damned 'I know everything smile'. "We both know I'll figure out what's going on sooner or later."

"Thinkers," I muttered to myself and led her into the room.

Nothing had really changed since the last time I was here, but I did notice someone had taken the time to polish Wyvern's body. Probably First Aid, since he came by regularly to give the protoform a check up; ensure the joints weren't seizing up, there were no rust spots, that sort of thing.

Chromedome was standing on a shelf behind the bed, giving him access to the back of Wyvern's head and letting him climb up and down on his own.

Standing on the other side of the bed was Rhinox. He had a holographic console floating in front of himself, and I could see code scrolling quickly across the screen.

"Okay, Chromedome, what's up?" As I spoke, I pulled Rewind out of my armour and placed him on the shelf.

Transforming, he ran over and tackle/hugged the larger bot.

Keeping Rewind by his side, Chromedome gave a weary sigh. "My original estimate was wrong. The corruption has reached her core processes, so we have a week at best before her systems shut down."

I'd been working on Wyvern whenever I got a chance since Chromedome gave his prognosis weeks ago, but nothing seemed to work. Trying to patch the code failed as her system would just flag the inserted code as a virus and delete it, and we couldn't disable that particular function without the corruption spreading even faster.

Trying to trick her systems into thinking it was an update was impossible as Saint had ripped out most of her self-updating subroutines.

I'd taken a look at some fragments of Dragon's original code; Richter had been an incredible tinker and his creations had been works of art, even if he had wrapped them in enough restrictions to strangle a horse.

Picture a woman made of glass, countless individual strands all woven together and interspersed with geometric shapes, all of it carefully balanced so it chimed beautifully as the wind moved through it.

That's what Richter had built. Then the Dragonslayers hit it with a hammer and tried to stick the pieces back together.

"I thought you said we had a couple more months," I said.

"Turns out Saint added a hidden function to her code," Rhinox rumbled without looking up from his work. "It activated after more than twelve hours without any input from Saint. By the look of it, it was a time delayed kill switch. Being in stasis-lock slowed the timer down, but it finally went off sometime this morning and is rapidly spreading the corruption to her core. I'm trying to isolate the
issue now."

"So, what's going on?" Lisa asked, looking between me and Rhinox. I quickly swallowed my first, rather nasty reply, but she picked up on it anyway. "Yeah, yeah. I could probably guess, but it'll be quicker if you just tell me."

Pinching the bridge of my nose - reminding myself, again, that I needed to take my armour off - I let out a huff.

"Do you know about me getting grabbed by the Dragonslayers?" I quickly went over the more important details of the entire fiasco. I considered telling her a slightly more censored version, but quickly dismissed the idea. Lisa would know if I was lying and would more than likely guess the rest anyway.

"- after that, we downloaded Wyvern to this protoform, but we haven't been able to fix her," I ground out in frustration.

"Are you sure you want to?" At my look, Lisa held her hands up in surrender. "Just playing devil's advocate. She was built by a madman after all. Who knows what other backups or failsafes he installed?"

"How she was born doesn't matter. She deserves a chance to live her own life," I said, fighting back my irritation.

"Huh… you really believe that… that's kinda sweet. Naive, but sweet," Lisa said, giving me an odd look.

"Yeah, well. It doesn't matter." I could feel my cheeks heating up. "Looks like we were too late."

"There is another option," Rhinox said, finally look up from his work. "You could try using the Matrix. It fixed and upgraded Dragon, after all."

"I know, but… I'm worried about what it might do to her. There's no guarantee she'll still be the same person afterwards," I argued. I spent more time than I wanted to admit worrying about that. Was Dragon just lucky? Did my powers automatically incorporate any pre-existing AI into the new spark or would they be destroyed?

"Isn't that her choice?" Lisa shot back. "If you really want her to live her own life, that has to include letting her make decisions."

I couldn't argue with that. Instead, I turned to my Autobots. "Can we bring her out of stasis-lock?"

"It will rapidly speed up the corruption, but we can do it," Rhinox said. "If you want, I can upload a summary to her short term memory so she'll wake up knowing all the important details."

"Do it. I'll call Dragon and let her know."

##

Because of her damaged state, bringing Wyvern out of stasis was a little more involved than it should have been. By the time we ready, Dragon was watching remotely from a wall-mounted screen and Lisa had made herself comfortable on a chair in the corner of the room.

"Okay, Rhinox. Do it."
He typed in the command and the protoform twitched as the locks on its limbs released. At first, nothing happened. Then the body twitched once more, then it twitched again and again, this time without stopping.

"Rhinox?" I called even as I tried to pin Wyvern down.

His fingers danced across the holographic keyboard, and despite his size and strength his fingers were surprisingly nimble, flying quickly across the interface. "It's a compatibility problem! Just give me a second and … there!"

The body stilled and Wyvern's voice came from its vocal processor.

"A-a-a-a.a.a.a-a-Administrative assistant: online, online. Do you wish to assign a designation?...*kkksh* D-Designation: W-Wyvern."

The voice was still similar to Dragon's, but the vocal system was different, making her sound younger. It was broken in places, dropping out and filled with static.

"Wyvern… I know we don't have much time, but can you hear me? Do you understand what is happening?"

"S-system failure intimate. Options limited."

Dragon flinched at the slip. The corruption was affecting her vocabulary.

"That's right." I squeezed her hand. I wasn't sure her tactile senses were working, but it made me feel better. "Do you understand what will happen if we do this? You may not be the same afterwards."

"I A-a-AppliCation rUsk, eYe fiSh tWo livEWire."

Lisa snorted and I shot her a dirty look before turning to Rhinox.

"Speech was a low priority system," he said. "I can't restore it, I'm sorry. We're losing her."

"Taylor…" Dragon started but Chromedome cut her off.

"Let me try something."Walking forward, he extended the small probe needles from his fingers and carefully drove them into Wyvern's head. "I might be able to let her co-opt my systems, it should buy her some more time."

He stood quietly for a moment as he worked. This time, Wyvern's voice sounded more stable, there was less static but she spoke slowly and deliberately.

"I accept the risk…" Her head twitched and jerked as turned slowly to the side, letting her look directly at Dragon's screen. "We define ourselves."

Pulling himself free, Chromedome staggered backwards as his legs gave out. Only Rewind standing at his side kept him upright long enough to sit down. I put my hand on his head to confirm that his spark was fine and sent a quick burst of my power into him to fix any damage.

"Thanks, Chromedome," I said, "we'll do the rest. Rewind? Keep an eye on him."

While I'd been talking, Rhinox carefully disconnected Wyvern from the other systems and opened her chest plate, exposing her empty spark chamber. Moving into place beside her, I triggered my suit's release system, opening the chest plates and exposing the Matrix. Lisa let out a startled gasp, but I was too focused on what I was about to do.
Just like every other time, I placed my hands on the protoform. I waited until my power had finished mapping out the frame before I took a deep breath and pushed.

Bolts of energy arced through the air and crawled down my arms from the Matrix to the protoform. I could see small imperfections and faults mending before my eyes, and the empty spark chamber burst into flame as the spark ignited, filling the body with life.

Just like that, it was done. Breathing heavily, I backed away. The protoform had changed slightly, which I hadn't expected.

The blank, eyeless face plate was gone, a humanoid face in its place. The high cheek bones and the shape of the jaw were close in appearance to Dragon's, but Wyvern's optics were a bit larger, making her look younger.

"Rhinox, can you get Rung here? I want to give Wyvern a checkup when she wakes. What do you thin- Lisa!"

Lisa was on the floor; Rattrap was desperately shaking her shoulder. She must have fallen unconscious and out of her chair at some point while I was creating Wyvern's spark. Rhinox reached her first, carefully lifting her up and waving a small scanning device over her body.

"Is she okay?" Dragon asked as we placed her on a spare recharge bed.

"Physically she's fine, but there's a lot of neural activity," Rhinox said as Lisa groaned.

"Not so loud please," she whimpered, clutching at her head. "I shouldn't have watched that. Too much info. Headache."

I relaxed slightly. Watching me spark Wyvern had overloaded her powers? I'd have to ask her about that later.

"Is there anything we can do?" I asked Dragon.

"I'm afraid not. Painkillers rarely do anything for thinker headaches."

"True, but a good sedative should help," Rhinox said as he picked up Lisa, who weakly protested the treatment. "I'll put her to bed and give her something to help her sleep."

I couldn't help but feel guilty about her condition. From what I'd heard, thinker headaches - although not a common occurrence - were agony for susceptible thinkers. I know Lisa and I hadn't had the best of introductions - with her blurting out my secrets like that - and she could be annoying, but I didn't want to hurt her. Most of the time.

"Taylor," Dragon said, interrupting my thoughts, "don't feel too bad about it. You had no way of knowing her power would react that way. All we can do is be more careful in the future."

"Fine." I sighed in frustration - I'd been doing a lot of that lately. "But if she's really going to stay here, she's going to need some protection. I want to spark the other completed protoforms."

"Are you sure you're up for it?"

I looked down at the Matrix on my chest to see it was still glowing brightly. "I should be fine. I think it's got enough for two more bots."

Besides, I wanted to see the look on Amy's face when I introduced her to Ratchet.
Chapter End Notes

AN: I'd like to point out that I liked Go-bots as a kid.

I'm not overly happy with this chapter but I've been wanting to move the Wyvern and Lung subplot forward for awhile now and this seemed like the best chance I was going to get.

Next chapter I promise Taylor get to meet Cy-kill.
Day after 10.2

Looking out of the apartment window to the street below, Rune forced herself not to sigh. She was missing school for this? It wasn't that she particularly enjoyed school - even if it was nice to get away from the Empire's bullshit for a couple of hours - but if she was going to be stuck here, Alabaster could have at least planned something more interesting to do than have her wait for a delivery.

The apartment she was standing in overlooked a small electronics store that acted as a front for fencing stolen goods. All the money went to the Empire of course, but the guy running the place had recently got a hold of something important and Kaiser wanted it.

As she leaned against the wall, the lower ranked member on the other side of the window lit a cigarette. Noticing her look, he offered her the packet.

Nodding in thanks, she took the packet and helped herself to one and his lighter when offered.

"Those things will ruin your voice," Alabaster warned as she started blowing smoke rings. He was sprawled out on a sofa on the other side of the room. Between them was a small table and two chairs.

"Doesn't matter, I don't plan to be Kaiser's little songbird anyway," she snapped in annoyance before cursing herself. Mouthing off at or about Kaiser was never a good idea. You never knew when his sense of humor would fail.

Thankfully for her, Alabaster just laughed.

"Whose idea was it to meet here anyway?" she asked, hoping to change the subject. "You do know the Wards patrol this area right?"

"Right." He snorted. "I'll just tell the shop owner he needs to move a few more blocks south. Not that it matters, but the Wards haven't been seen in awhile so I think we're safe for now. You just keep an eye out for the Protectorate. They're the real threat."

Now it was her turn to snort. "Wasn't it the Wards who kicked Crusader's ass?" Stormtiger too, now that she thought about it, not to mention the number they did on Cricket.

Alabaster scowled at her. "Now is not the time." He nodded towards the man by her side and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

'Empire capes were unbeatable', 'they were the pride and the power of the Empire personified'. She had heard it all before, or at least, the crap Kaiser liked to talk about. It was all smoke and mirrors, but he felt it was important that people looked up to them.

And if that meant ignoring inconvenient truths like three of the Empire's top capes getting the shit kicked out of them by kids her age, then so be it.

Putting that out of her mind, she went back to looking out the window while quietly humming to herself.

It was only a few minutes later when a large man wheezed his way up the stairs and into the apartment. In his hands was a small box from which he pulled a roll of cloth and an old, weather stained book.
Putting the book down on the table, he unrolled the cloth next to it, revealing two daggers and three medals. With the exception of the book, everything was marked with a swastika.

"I got these from a contact in France," the man said with a smile. "You wouldn't believe what he went through to get them. The diary belonged to an SS officer who was stationed in Paris, the knives too. I'm not sure where the medals came from, only that they're real."

Humming appreciatively, Alabaster carefully examined everything.

Interested despite herself, Rune pushed herself off the wall and wandered over, reaching the table just as Alabaster opened the book. Unlike the more devoted members, she'd never bothered to learn German, but she'd picked up the odd word here or there.

"All this for a fucking diary and some tin?"

"It's important to learn from our history," he said stiffly, the tone of his voice reminding her to watch her mouth. Alabaster didn't approve of her cursing and would probably report everything she'd said today to Kaiser. She was already on thin ice after dying her hair black yesterday.

She quickly swallowed her next comment; pointing out that the petty little madman had lost probably wouldn't go down well.

"Umm… miss? I think you should see this!" the man she'd left by the window called, looking nervously between her and Alabaster.

Leaving the adults to haggle over the price, she walked over to the window and glanced outside.

"Fuck…" she groaned. Standing casually in the middle of the road was the same motorbike robot that had attacked the Boardwalk yesterday. He was idly looking around, watching as the people in the street started backing away.

She could also see the other people they'd brought along. None of them were wearing Empire colours, but she could see a couple working themselves up. She gave it less than a minute before one of them had the balls to attack the robot. After that, fuck knows what would happen.

"Alabaster, we've got trouble! That robot from yesterday is outside."

The two adults shared a look and Alabaster sighed, pulling a large wad of cash from his pocket and slamming it down on the table.

"Last offer, take it or leave it!" he snapped at the man, who flipped through the money with an experienced eye and nodded once he finished.

"Rune, go deal with that thing," Alabaster ordered as he quickly started packing his purchases away.

"On my own?!"

"Is that a problem? I need to get this stuff back to Kaiser. You keep the tin can busy!"

Silently cursing him, she ran her hands down the wall on either side of the window, feeling each brick as it lit up with her power. With a mental shove, the wall tore itself free, most of the surrounding wall falling to the ground below. The two dozen bricks she was controlling shot like bullets towards the robot.

Alerted by the noise, the robot was already diving to the side, sending blasts of energy at the bricks
with a gun-shaped object, shattering them. Two shots were aimed directly at her, but she intercepted them with more rubble.

Looking for a better position, she jumped through the hole she made and allowed herself to fall, slowing down her descent by using her power on her costume, positioning herself behind a car before launching it at the robot.

He jumped impossibly high, letting the car sail harmlessly under him and into the building beyond.

"Got you!" he shouted, hitting the ground and aiming his gun at her.

Pulling up a chunk of the road, she created an impromptu shield even as his weapon started blasting chunks off it. Behind her, her so-called team mates finally started shooting.

He made no attempt to shield himself as the hail of bullets pinged harmlessly off his body, laughing like a madman as he returned fire. Empire followers started dropping like flies, most with arms or legs bending the wrong way.

Growling in frustration, she threw her barricade at him, cutting off his laughter as he was forced to dive out of the way. She used the distraction to start pulling more concrete off the ground, throwing it at him as soon as she could.

Using her projectiles, she drove him close to the car she'd thrown at him. She could still feel her power on the car and with a tug, she slammed it into his back, knocking him to the ground and pinning him down. Before he could retaliate, she lifted the car into the air and slammed it down on him over and over again, each time with enough force to crack the floor round around him. After the fourth hit, she pushed the car as far into the ground as she could and held it there.

"Get out of here!" she shouted to the others. Alabaster had to be long gone by now, so there was no point sticking around. Especially when she knew there was another of these things around somewhere.

Rolling her neck, she was just about to leave when a wide blast of energy tore through the car and straight towards her.

What debris she was still controlling slammed together in front of her, reducing the blast but not stopping it.

The world spun as the blast sent her through the air and into the ruined storefront behind her.

She screamed as the pain hit her, her hands were singing in agony and she couldn't feel her left leg. She could see Empire men in the distance. One or two looked back at her but none of them tried to help.

Gasping, she pushed herself upright in time to see the robot pull himself free of the car. In her distraction, she'd lost control of it.

Around them, PRT trucks skidded to a stop and officers were starting to jump out.

Still growling in anger, the robot fired his weapon at them, only for the blast to flare harmlessly on them, highlighting them in a blue glow. Perhaps realising he was in trouble, the robot turned, transformed into a motorbike, and roared off.

Using the distraction, Rune tapped the ground below her and pulled a small section under her free, lifting herself into the air. She rolled onto her stomach before she directed the platform off over the
rooftops, holding on with one hand while the other fumbled with her phone, trying not to jostle her injuries.

Othala was going to freak when she saw her, but Rune didn't have much other choice.

##

(The next day.)

Arcee had her sensors sweep over the area as she drove down the road. She was heading north on what was typically a Wards patrol route, being careful to stay out of Empire territory.

The attack yesterday had stirred up the hornet's nest and the Empire was out in force. Groups of people in Empire colours could be seen patrolling the streets, some on foot, others in cars and all of them armed.

Normally, she wouldn't let this stop her; the gangs had no say over where she, or any of the Autobots, could go. But from all reports, Rune had been badly hurt in the fight and the Empire was out for blood. With the mood they were in, any target - especially a mechanical one - would do.

So, until they calmed down, she would give the Empire some space.

Turning right, she gradually moved closer to the docks. There weren't a lot of business left in this area, but there was still one or two of interest left. For example, the bar she was approaching.

The large wooden sign above the doors said "Full Throttle" and the street directly outside was full of bikes of different sizes, types and styles.

From what Arcee knew, when the docks first began to struggle, there was an effort to gentrify the area. Old warehouses and shops were converted to high class bars and restaurants and plans were drawn up for another shopping mall that would form the bases of a new shopping district that, if successful, would create a new tourist area for the city.

It didn't work, of course.

The gangs - including what would later become the ABB - were already operating in the area, threatening the construction workers, and the local police just didn't have the manpower to force them out. A few places did manage to open, but protection rackets and gang fighting quickly drove customers away and the businesses soon closed.

This bar, however, was different. It predated all the others by a wide margin and boasted heritage going back to the early days of the biker gangs and its large and dedicated customer base had allowed it to continue running even as the area around it declined.

Pulling up outside, Arcee let her engine idle while she considered the best way to do this. Her holographic driver could be projected a good distance from her body, but it worked purely on line of sight and trying to pass it off as human was typically more trouble than it was worth.

With a mental shrug, she shut off the hologram, transformed and walked calmly through the doors.

The men gathered around the bikes outside stared as she passed, one man even whistled. Smirking at their reactions, she confidently opened the door and walked inside.

Inside, all noise stopped as everyone turned to look at her. Even in this city, when was the last time a bike stood up and walked into a bar? she thought in amusement. Now she just had to put everyone at
"So," she said as leaned against the bar, "there he was, with water all over the the place shouting, 'Never mind the bloody plunger! Hand me the duck!'"

Around her, the various patrons - not to mention the bartender - broke down laughing.

As the still laughing crowd started to break up, the bartender leaned forwards. He was a large man with slicked back salt and pepper hair and permanent five o'clock shadow. On the wall behind him was an old jacket that she assumed - if only because of the size - was his, with a stylised P and C on the back.

"So, what brings a cape to this little dive?" His voice was deep and gravelly but held nothing but friendly curiosity.

Personally, Arcee would hardly call this place a dive. The floors and tables were clean and while the people were lively, a number of large bouncers kept things from getting out of hand.

"I'm looking for someone actually," she admitted, pulling a photo of Cy-kill and Fitor out of subspace. "I doubt they would ever come in here, but I wanted to know if you'd seen them."

Frowning, the bartender gave her a thoughtful look. She wasn't expecting much. People stayed alive in this city by very carefully not seeing anything. Offering up information on supervillians was an easy way to get yourself killed.

He shook his head. "Sorry, never seen them. I heard about what they did, though. If I hear anything, I'll pass it on."

That was probably the best she could hope for. So far, Cy-kill and Fitor had only been seen in public a few times so it wasn't likely someone had randomly seen them. At least the bartender sounded genuinely sorry.

"Thanks." She gave him a quick nod and dropped some money on the bar. Sure, she didn't drink anything, but having a reputation for generosity never hurt. "Well, it's been fun, but I need to get back on patrol."

Waving to some of the friendly patrons, she walked outside and rolled her shoulders before she transformed, activating her driver and taking off.

"Rhinox, anything happen I need to know about?"

*There's reports of fights coming in from all over, but it's mostly just noise and posturing. There was a small shootout between the Empire and BBPD and some ABB guys were found beaten in an alley but that's about it. Oh, you might want to stay away from 11th, looks like there's been an accident.*

Pulling ahead of the cars around her, she dipped on her suspension as she sighed. "You've read the reports from yesterday, right? How long do you think it'll take Leet to patch Cy-kill up?"

*Who knows. If the damage was superficial? A few hours maybe. I'd be surprised if he made another appearance so soon -*

An incoming call cut him off and Arcee frowned as her system identified the number.
"Hold on, something's up." Stopping by the side of the road, she patched the call into her radio so Rhinox could listen in. "Wasp, is something wrong?"

*Arcee?* Wasp said in a breathless whisper. *It's those robots from the boardwalk, I've found them!*

Scrap! Arcee swore, starting to trace Wasp's location. "Where are you? Can they see you?"

*No, I'm fine, but you need to get here soon! They're setting something up. I'm at the corner of 5th, It's an old storage yard!#############...* She frowned as Wasp's voice dissolved into static. Gunning her engine, she accelerated up the road. "Rhinox! Did you get that?"

*Yeah, it looks like she's talking about a storage depot. I'll meet you there, I can't teleport in, there's too much interference.*

"Right!" Banking hard around the next corner, she focused on her destination. 5th was in the northern areas, ABB territory if she remembered correctly. So either Cy-kill was targeting the ABB, or he was just trying to avoid the Empire.

Either way, she hoped Wasp was smart enough to stay hidden until she got there.

##

Rhinox was waiting for her a block away from the depot; the interference was enough to stop direct teleportation, but their radios could still transmit over shorter distances.

They moved up the road on foot, sticking to back alleys in an attempt to go unnoticed. They were barely halfway there when Arcee spotted movement out the corner of her eye. Turning, she saw Wasp diving out of the sky.

"Oh thank god! I was worried you weren't coming!" the cape said as she landed on Arcee's shoulder. "Sorry, your signal cut out," Rhinox said gently. "Can you tell us what you saw?"

Taking off again, Wasp fluttered nervously between the Autobots.

"I was checking out the lot. Since the Wards haven't been around for a while, some new dealers have been moving in and -" she shook her head "- sorry, not important. Anyway, when a truck pulled in, I decided to take a look. That's when I saw them climb out of the trailer, all four of them."

"Four?" Arcee frowned. "I thought there was only two?"

Wasp shrugged helplessly. "I think they're new, they were walking funny and one of them kept bumping into things."

"We really should call for backup," Rhinox rumbled.

"Yeah," Arcee agreed with a sigh, "but by the time help gets here, they could be long gone… How about I scout on ahead? I should be able to get close enough to at least find out what they're up to."

"Alright, but I'll stay close by, just in case."

"I'm coming too!" Wasp said, fluttering over to Arcee. "They're even less likely to see me."
Arcee wanted to argue, but Wasp had a point. She was small enough to go unnoticed and fast enough to avoid danger. "Alright, but if anything happens, I want you to get out of there, okay?"

Wasp nodded. Getting into the storage depot was surprisingly easy. What little security the place had was long gone and the outer fence was full of holes that even Arcee could slip through.

The depot wasn’t very large: a small office building stood off to one side, but there were no lights on so she assumed it was abandoned. The rest of the lot was made up of rows of concrete sheds, small blocky buildings with slightly sloped roofs. Each one was just large enough to fit a mid-sized car.

Most of the the paths between the rows were fairly narrow, but a few were wide enough for cars to drive down and there was even the faded remains of road markings left in places.

Like Wasp had said, there was a large box truck sitting on the forecourt. She couldn't see a driver and the trailer had been left wide open. Arcee risked taking a peek but there was nothing inside but some scuff marks.

"They went towards the middle," Wasp whispered, hovering near where Arcee's 'ear' would be.

Arcee kept low, sticking to shadows and moving quietly to avoid attracting attention. She guessed she was halfway there when there was a loud bang and some shouting.

Arcee ducked down, switching her arm to gun mode and glanced around. ...Nothing…

Cycling her vents, she transformed her arm and creeped forwards. When she reached the edge of the row, she pressed herself as close to the shed as she could, carefully looking round the corner.

The Cy-kill and the others turned out to be in an intersection between the roads. A small generator had been dragged into place, connected to a collection of spotlights.

Just as Wasp had said, there were indeed four robots; Cy-kill and Fitor had been joined by two more. One was a tall bulky bot that was painted black and silver with orange accents. From the looks of its alt-mode kibble, it transformed into a racing car.

The other was sitting in a heap on the floor. Arcee watched as it climbed clumsily to it feet. It was shorter than the others, with half a disk-like shape attached to each forearm. It was painted mostly black with some red highlights and unlike the others, it had a visor and mouth plate instead of a face.

"I really can't see what the problem is. The rest of us can manage it," Cy-kill said.

"That's a little unfair, you guys have an advantage," Multiplayer complained as he walked into view. He was dressed up like some kind of mad scientist with a fake prosthetic arm and silver helmet.

"Flying isn't that easy Cy-kill," Fitor snipped, "and I still think this is a bad idea. Bringing in a rookie? Especially after that shit you pulled yesterday is just asking for trouble."

"Oh shut up and grow a fucking pair," the racing car said, crossing its arms across its chest. From the voice, Arcee guessed it was a woman. Or a very good drag queen; it could go either way.

"Fuck you, Crasher," Fitor started, stepping towards her.

"No, look, don't fight!" the other newcomer stated, quickly getting between them. "Just give me one more try, please?"

Her voice was much more feminine than Crasher's and the higher pitch made her sound younger.
"Just get on with it," Crasher snapped while Cy-kill pulled Fitor away from the woman.

The younger woman spread her arms and moved her chest. Had she been human, Arcee would have thought she was taking a deep breath. Jumping into the air, the bot transformed.

Her head folded into her chest and her legs swung outwards at the hips, putting her feet by where her head had been. Her arms lowered and clamped to her side. The end result was an odd, flying saucer like vehicle that promptly plummeted towards the ground.

There was a high pitched whine of an engine and her fall stopped only inches from the ground. Wobbling drunkenly, she rose into the air until she was floating about level with their heads.

"Hah! See, I told you Pathfinder could do it!" Cy-kill crowed.

"I-I did it!" Pathfinder cheered. Seconds later, there was a flash as her afterburners ignited, sending her rocketing forwards. Crasher and Cy-kill dived sideways as she tore through the air, slamming into the storage shed Arcee was crouching behind.

Arcee barely had time to move before the bot crashed, destroying the shed and kicking debris into the air.

"Arcee, are you okay?" Wasp asked, landing next to her.

Shaking her head to clear it, Arcee pushed herself upright only to lock eyes with Crasher.

"... Scrap," she muttered.

"Get her!" Cy-kill shouted, pulling a gun from his hip.

"Get out of here!" she ordered Wasp as she dived behind another shed, energy weapons punching holes in the old concrete. Arming her own gun, she aimed through one of the holes and returned fire.

Her dive for cover had pushed Arcee further into the lot and from the sounds of things, her attackers were already spreading out to cut off her escape.

Upon hearing the sounds of an engine, she turned to see Crasher skid round the far corner in alt-mode, cackling as she charged forward.

Arcee dived to the side at the last moment. Blades extending from her forearm, she swiped them down Crasher's side, leaving a long gash and shredding her rear tire.

"Fucking cum-sucking cunt!" Crasher screamed as she skidded to a stop and transformed. Ignoring the mangled tire on her leg, she charged forwards, swinging wildly.

Dancing under the blow, movement in the corner of her eye reminded Arcee that she had lost track of the others. She jumped to the side, avoiding a shot from Cy-kill that narrowly missed Crasher.

Charging forwards, she flipped over Crasher, putting the foul-mouthed bot between her and Cy-kill. A loud horn sounded and she smirked as Rhinox came charging down the road, attempting to ram Cy-kill as he passed.

Skidding to a stop beside her, he transformed and drew a boxy looking chaingun he'd built himself. Aiming it upwards, he opened fire, bolts of energy forcing Fitor in the sky above them to veer off.

"I don't suppose anyone else is coming?" Arcee asked while their attackers hesitated.
"Protectorate's on the way, I'd suggest surrendering!" He shouted, pulling a second gun from storage.

"Damn it," Cy-Kill growled. "Tonight's a loss, run!"

Folding into his bike mode, Cy-kill accelerated away while Fitor followed from above. Crasher, however, was forced to run.

Behind the Autobots, a wave of Multiplayer clones charged forwards, hoping to buy the others time. Rhinox’s chain guns roared as he mowed them down before the could get close, even the ones who tried coming at them over the roofs.

Smirking, Arcee charged forwards, transforming in order to get ahead of the crippled Crasher. Switching back, she drew her arm blades and ran at Crasher.

Cursing loudly, Crasher tried to fight Arcee off, but the Autobot was just too fast for her. Dancing around her wild blows, Arcee drove a blade deep into Crasher's abdomen. Wires sparked and fluids poured from the wound.

Realising she couldn't escape, Crasher suddenly went still, falling to the ground with a crash.

Puzzled, Arcee edged closer, weapon ready just in case it was a trick.

"Get down!" Rhinox shouted as he landed on her back, a hardlight shield appearing between them and the downed bot just as she exploded in a massive fireball. The heat and fire washed harmlessly over them even as shrapnel bounced off the shield.

After everything went quiet, Rhinox stood up and helped Arcee to her feet. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine, where's Wasp?" Arcee said as she rolled her shoulder.

"I'm here!" the young girl said, flying away from the mass of Multiplayer bodies. "I tagged plenty of clones, but the real one got away."

Looking at the crater that had been Crasher, she let out an angry huff and kicked a small piece of rubble.

"Why does everything keep exploding around me?" she said, just loudly enough for him to hear.

"It's not all bad." Rhinox chuckled. "We got something out of tonight after all."

Leading her back the way they came, she realised Pathfinder was still where she had crashed, buried under the remains of the shed.

"I expect Leet's spitting clusters right about now. Just give me a minute to make sure she's not going to explode and we can haul her in," Rhinox said as he carefully started clearing rubble.

Shaking her head, Arcee had to agree. One dead, one captured and two driven off. Tonight hadn't gone too badly after all.

##

(Taylor)

Sitting in class, I stared at the notebook in front of me, barely listening as the teacher droned on.

Three attacks in as many days, and all of them in or close to areas where the Wards were known to
patrol. To anyone else, it would probably look like they were looking for the Wards, but I knew better.

They're baiting me… or at least, trying to, I thought to myself. Lisa had said Leet had it in for me, that it was personal for him and I believed her.

So far, there had been several threads started on PHO about these new bots, who built them and why. Thanks to Leet's website, the who was quickly becoming apparent but I wasn't in any hurry to discuss the why.

Although, I noticed Leet himself was being surprisingly quiet about the two new creations that my Autobots had dealt with. He probably didn't want to admit to another loss. Rewind, however, had no such hesitation.

Within an hour of the fight he'd posted every scrap of information he could on PHO. Leet's total lack of a reaction worried me. I doubted he was just going to let things go after all this.

I hadn't yet been given a chance to examine the bot Arcee and Rhinox captured. After he had disarmed it, it had been taken directly to the PRT-HQ for examination. Dragon was attempting to negotiate its release to me as robotics was my specialty, but the PRT was dragging its heels.

The ringing of the bell distracted me from my thoughts. Sighing, I packed up my books and left the classroom for lunch. As I yawned, I caught myself rolling my shoulders, a habit I'd picked up from Arcee.

Shaking my head with a quiet laugh, I went off to find Amy. I wanted to see if she was free tonight; I wanted to introduce her to Ratchet. I couldn't help but think they would get along well.

My class had been on the top floor and the closest set of stairs that would take me to the canteen were just past the music rooms. I could already hear someone practicing.

Aside from the 'official' school band, there were a couple of smaller ones who were allowed to use the music rooms when they were free.

I was surprised to see Chris - Kid Win - standing outside, watching the band play. The group inside had a girl with long black hair and bandages on her arms as the lead singer.

"~Do you ever want to catch me?~Right now I'm feeling ignored!~So can you try a little harder?~I'm really getting bored!~"

She had a good voice, but I was guessing there were some anger issues there.

"Everything alright?" I asked Chris as I stopped to listen. He was staring intently at the girl as she sung; I could see his eyes following her movements.

He jumped slightly at my question, only now noticing I was there.

"Y-Yeah!…I was just thinking…” Shaking his head, he turned to look at me. "Oh, hey! I heard about yesterday. Your Autobots did a real number on Leet."

"Yeah, but doesn't stop people saying the attack on the Boardwalk was my fault." More than one person had guessed that Leet's attacks were aimed at me and the feeling was gaining ground on PHO. Most thought it was related to the incident at the mall, with Defensor nearly crippling Uber.

"Well… Don't let it get to you, people will think what they want after all," Chris said with a shrug
and a sympathetic look."

"Don't worry, I won't. Y'know, You and the others should stop by my workshop sometime. Dragon's fitted a games room, and the TV is huge."

"I'd love to but we're all still grounded," he said, rolling his eyes. Translation: the ban on patrols was still in effect so they couldn't be seen in costume outside of PR events. And unlike me, they couldn't just walk into Dragon's workshop out of costume without risking identities.

It was an open secret that people were watching who came and went from the workshop. Only last week, Ravage mauled a paparazzi. Thankfully, it was only the camera and a tire on his van because he'd tried to get pictures over the walls.

"Ouch. Well, I need to find Amy." I smirked as an idea came to mind. "I'll let you get back to watching your girlfriend."

Laughing at his spluttered, blushing, denial, I waved goodbye and headed down the stairs.

In the end, I found Amy sitting outside with Vicky. The weather was finally starting to warm up and today was one of the first few days it was warm enough to use the outside lunch tables.

Sitting down at the empty space, I couldn't help but notice the atmosphere. Vicky looked like she was somewhere between sulking and embarrassed while her friends looked amused. Even Amy looked conflicted, like she was trying to be sympathetic but was trying not to laugh.

"Okay…" I asked. "What happened?"

Vicky said nothing, choosing instead to glare at me.

"Do you know Sabrina Forest?" Tiff asked, visibly forcing herself not to laugh.

"I think so, she's a senior right? Didn't she paint that mural on the boardwalk?" She'd won a contest to paint a wall near the ferry for the Rig. Her design was to paint the likeness of nearly three dozen capes - including Scion - in spray paint. A small charity box was in front of it and all proceeds went to local charities that supported the arts.

"Yeah that's her! Turns out -"

Vicky growled at her friend, her aura seeping out, but Amy tapped her gently on the back of the head in warning.

"Vicky, be nice! Anyway, Sabrina invited Vicky up to the art room to share her latest project, when…" Amy's attempt at keeping a straight face started to waver and I could see her shoulders tremble as she fought not to laugh. "When Vicky got there, s-she found Sabrina wrapped in a sheet."

"And?"

"And nothing, just a sheet," Vicky grumbled.

"Oh?... oh!" I felt my face heat up. For a moment, everyone was silent. I could even hear a motorbike drive down the street nearby.

"Yeah 'oh',"Vicky said, her voice thick with sarcasm. "Then she dropped the sheet and…"

"Yeah, I think I can guess what happened. What did you say?"
"I told her that I was flattered but i'm not... like that. Besides, I'm dating Dean.-"

"At which point," Vicky's friend interrupted, grinning like a loon, "Sabrina happily said 'that's okay, he can join us!'"

With that, Vicky's friends broke down giggling.

I had to admit, it was pretty funny. Especially after she laughed at me for being asked out in the middle of the school. But I did feel a bit bad for Vicky. That kind of thing had to be embarrassing.

Cape groupies sounded harmless, until you were on the receiving end. As my identity was public, my mail (electronic or otherwise) had to be screened and to date, I'd received three marriage proposals, countless letters of thanks from people I'd helped, more than a dozen gifts - all given to charity - and a surprising amount of fanart. Some of which was rather adult - and so, so very wrong - in nature.

For someone like Vicky, I could only imagine how much worse it was.

Before I could say anymore, I realised the motorbike I'd been hearing for awhile now was getting closer and that its engine sounded familiar.

There was a loud crash as the bike smashed its way through the school gates and skidded to a stop in the middle of the courtyard.

Transforming, Cy-kill strode forward with a cocky grin on his face.

For a moment, no one moved, frozen in a tableau of horror. Then Cy-kill lifted his arms and sent sprays of foam towards the nearest students, missing them by only a foot.

One of them screamed, snapping everyone out of the stupor and causing panic.

"Inside! Everyone get inside!" I shouted over the panicked crowd, moving them towards the school.

Vicky and Amy quickly followed my example, grabbing people and shouting to be heard. I could also see Carlos, Dean and Dennis doing the same, trying to herd people away from the danger.

Thankfully, Cy-kill didn't seem interested in chasing anyone. Instead, he was content to wait as the courtyard was cleared.

Overhead, I heard sounds of jets and looked up in time to see Fitor going into a dive. He was heading towards me, so I pushed the last few students ahead of me and ran off at an angle to them.

If he started shooting, it was better if he hit me and not everyone else.

Fitor transformed and landed in front of me, hitting the ground hard enough to shatter the concrete, spraying me in dust and bits of stone.

"Leaving so soon?" he said as he grabbed hold of me. In the corner of my eye, I saw Vicky start towards us, only to hesitate as Fitor pulled me close.

"Ah ah ah, I wouldn't if I was you. We wouldn't anyone getting hurt after all," Cy-kill drawled.

The courtyard was mostly empty by now, with only a few stragglers still trying to get inside, and I could see faces looking out of the windows. The only capes left outside were me, Vicky and Amy.

[Taylor! Help is coming, just hold on!] Rewind projected onto my glasses.
Every time Cy-kill and Fitor showed up, the area would be covered in a weak jamming field. It wasn't much, but it prevented all teleportation and made communications difficult. Any Autobots would have to teleport outside the field and drive in.

I also couldn't count on any of the Wards to help. I had no way of knowing if they would be able to sneak away and change without risking their identities.

Lifting me up, Fitor carried me over to Cy-kill.

I didn't waste my time struggling. Instead, I focused on what my power was telling me about Fitor's body. For one thing, my power didn't consider it alive and there was nothing inside him that looked like cybernetics as my power mapped out his body.

There was, however, a very powerful communications system taking up the majority of his torso. So that's how he's controlling them. I tried not to let my thoughts show. The less Leet knew about me, the better.

"Matrix, there you are! If I didn't know better, I'd think you were avoiding us," Cy-kill said with a smile.

"You're an idiot, you know that, Leet?" I snapped, I wasn't going to humor him by using that silly name. At least, not to his face. "You think the PRT is just going to ignore an attack on a school!"

"I don't see anyone else around, do you? In fact, didn't you notice how we let you get everyone out of the way? We know you care about that sorta thing. But that's beside the point. What do you think? Looks like you're not the only one who can copy someone else's work. I think even Toybox will be interested in this."

I snorted in disbelief. "You think anyone's going to buy your cheap knock offs? You're still a joke, Leet, a two bit hack with a webcam. I wasn't avoiding you. I was ignoring you!" I remembered what Lisa said about Leet's ego and focused on that. I needed to buy time for help to arrive, until then, I just needed him to stay focused on me and possibly make a mistake.

"You're not worth my time. I've been a Tinker for far less time than you have and I'm already way ahead. I fought Lung with nothing more than a stun gun and dropped him in the bay. Twice! I took out the Undersiders and I escaped from Saint! You. Are. Nothing!" I hissed, anger burying any fear I had at the situation.

Cy-kill's face was impassive. I couldn't tell if my words were having an effect so I tried a different angle.

I looked over my shoulder at Fitor and smiled. "Uber, right? How's the hand?"

He said nothing, but the sound of Cy-kill stepping forward was my only warning. I turned my head and felt the world spin.

Someone screamed my name, I think it was Amy.

My glasses flew off as my head snapped to the side. I could taste blood and my head was ringing like a bell.

Fitor let go of me, stepping back in shock. I fell to my knees as my stomach churned and I vomited all over the floor.

Vicky immediately charged forwards and was intercepted by a spray of foam from Fitor that blinded
her. Not slowing down, she slammed into Fitor and the pair of them crashed to the ground out of my sight.

I spat out some blood and a couple of teeth. I thought my jaw was broken and I looked up in time to see Cy-kill loom over me.

I tried to roll sideways but my balance was shot. A kick from Cy-kill clipped my shoulder and sent me sprawling to the ground.

I forced myself to ignore the pain and get to back on my feet, but a spray of foam quickly covered me. It was like being hit with a fire hose, forcing me to stay on my knees. All I could do was screw my eyes shut, keep my mouth closed and hope it stopped before I ran out of air.

All around me, I could hear screaming and shouting.

My lungs felt like they were on fire, and I had no choice but to risk a breath. Swallowing foam, it burned my mouth but I couldn't risk spitting it out. My skin was starting to itch, rapidly becoming a burning sensation that erupted across my whole body.

Suddenly, a pair of warm metal arms wrapped around me and pulled me out of the foam. For a second, I tried to thrash against my attacker before I realised what he was saying.

"Taylor, stop! It's me! It's Ratchet! Keep your eyes shut, we need to get this stuff off you."

I did as Ratchet asked and felt him pick me up, shouting at people to get out the way as he carried me. Judging from the sound, I guessed he was talking me into the school. The sound of gym showers only confirmed it.

"I'm sorry, but this is going to be cold," he said as he moved us both under the spray.

Keeping my face screwed up, I looked up and let the water wash away the chemicals, the burning quickly being replaced with a constant sting, like when my lips chapped from the cold.

"You can open your eyes now. I need to make sure there's been no damage," Ratchet said, pushing my hair back. I could hear him muttering quietly under his breath about idiot tinkers and what he would do if he ever got his hands on Uber and Leet.

Opening them didn't really help; without my glasses, I could barely see anything beyond a blur of colour.

"Th-" I coughed out more gunk and grimaced in pain. Definitely a broken jaw. A blue shape I assumed was Arcee walked into view.

"Panacea's outside. She's offering to help," she said quietly.

"Alright, give us a minute before you send her in," Ratchet said. "The last thing we need is for her to get this stuff on her hands."

Gently, Ratchet helped me wash the remaining foam of my body. My skin still felt weird but I couldn't see more than some odd colours.

Eventually he was satisfied enough that he turned off the shower and called Amy in.

"Taylor?" Amy asked as she walked in.

Leaning back against the wall and taking care not to move my mouth, I shrugged. Even that sent
lances of pain through me.

"Her jaw broke," Ratchet said, his left arm converting into a medi-gun. "As her doctor, I can give permission so go ahead. But just heal the jaw for now, I'm still documenting the rest."

"Umm, okay." Amy took my hand in hers and I felt the familiar sensation of her power as she fixed my jaw.

"Ugh, thanks, Amy. Has anyone got my glasses?"

"Oh! I've got them here... I'm sorry, but they broke when he hit you."

Feeling the twisted frames, I frowned. I didn't have a spare set with me, so I'd have to go without until I got home or went back to the workshop.

"If you want... I could fix your eyes," Amy offered quietly.

"You can do that?" I said, barely keeping the excitement out of my voice. I'd had glasses most of my life and was long used to wearing them. It had also been one of the many things Emma had used against me.

Amy nodded, and I held her hand. "If it's not a problem for you, then go ahead." I felt the world around me suddenly sharpen into focus as she corrected my eyes. Looking at the world without the constant frame of my glasses was going to take some getting used to.

As I climbed to my feet, I considered getting a fake pair so I could keep my augmented display. Rubbing the lingering ache in my jaw, I realised there was something wrong with my skin.

Dashing out of the shower, I brushed past Amy and Ratchet and stared at myself in the mirror and was horrified at what I saw.

My skin had been dyed with an odd mottled effect. Everywhere the foam had touched - including my soaked and ruined clothes - was a mix of greens, browns and yellows. I could also see where it was cracked and flaking in places, chemical burns from whatever was in that foam. I looked like an ent!

The worst part was my hair. Like my skin, it was a mess of colours and running my hand through it, I felt entire clumps come off in my hands. I loved my hair, it was one of the few things about my appearance I liked and now it was ruined.

My eyes pricked as tears started to form and I could feel myself shaking. My mind was whirling and I wasn't sure what to think but anger was quickly winning out. Leet was a dead man!

"It's alright," Amy said, putting a hand on my arm. "Leet's foam did the same to other people. I'll have you fixed in no time."

Ratchet gave her a nod. "Okay, I've got everything I need. Go ahead, I'll send someone in with a change of clothes."

It took Amy nearly five minutes to fix my skin and hair, by which time a spare set of clothes had been brought in from the workshop and my temper had cooled to a low simmer. A PA announcement had already gone off, saying that Arcadia was being closed for the day. I could hear the students filing out.

Ruined clothes aside, I looked great. Clearing the dye from my skin had forced Amy to clear up my
complexion, the small bit of acne I had was now gone and my hair looked healthier than ever.

"Thanks Amy," I said as I pulled her into a hug, trying not to let my clothes touch her.

"Don't worry about it," she said, returning the hug. "Just make Leet sorry." She scrunched her nose up at the smell of my clothes. "You should get changed, I'll wait outside."

Nodding, I grabbed some body wash that had been stuffed in the bag with my clothes and ducked into the shower, taking care not to get my hair wet.

Drying myself off, I pulled out the clothes I'd been given and nearly swore. Jack had sent me the clothes I'd bought when I'd gone shopping with Vicky. I couldn't be seen in this!

As I debated the pros and cons between wearing the more revealing clothes or my old, ruined ones, I suddenly got an idea.

Leet wanted to embarrass me. He couldn't match me as a tinker, so he'd gone after my appearance. Well join the club.

But that was the point. The last time someone attacked my appearance, I turned in on myself. I let them dictate how I saw myself and what I showed to the world. Well, fuck Leet and fuck Emma.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled the clothes on, tied my hair back and walked out of the changing room with as much confidence as I could fake.

Ratchet, Amy and Arcee were waiting for me in the corridor. Amy stared at my new look, quickly closing her mouth. Arcee just raised an eyebrow. From her knowing smirk, I assumed that she was the one who picked the clothes, not Wheeljack.

"Follow me," I said briskly and lead the three of them outside. The police and the PRT were there now and I could see a couple of news crews in the distance, some of them were interviewing the students.

Not wanting my nerve to give out, I focused on my anger and passed Rewind to Ratchet, ordering him to record what I said and post it everywhere.

"Okay, Leet, you wanted my attention? You've got it! I'm giving you three days to turn yourself in. After that, I'm coming after you myself, and you. Won't. Win."

Gesturing at Rewind, I had him stop the recording. I could see the stunned looks I was getting but I ignored them.

I didn't care what I had to do, but Leet was going down.
Standing in my room at the workshop, which really needed a better name, I pulled my body suit on. A holographic screen flashed in front of my vision as a status monitor quickly tested the suit's systems for any issues.

Out of habit, I flexed my hands, feeling fabrics of the suit shift and creak. I'd gotten so used to wearing it that it felt like a second skin.

It had come a long way from my first designs. Originally, the suit was nothing more than a body sock with some minor systems in it that allowed my armour pieces to connect to each other. Since then, I'd added the strength enhancement system. The nerve pickups it now incorporated had originally been part of the strength system. It allowed the suit to safely enhance a person's strength without harming them. I'd later improved them to let my power armour detect the signals from my brain to my muscles, letting it move in synch with me.

On top of that, I was constantly adding little improvements here and there as new ideas came to me.

Once I was satisfied, I quickly tied my hair back so I could fit it under my helmet. As I was doing that, my mind went back to what had happened since my announcement to Leet.

My anger at Uber and Leet had cooled over time and left a calm certainty, but that didn't mean that the last three days had been without their complications.

##

"You threatened a supervillain?!" Dad shouted in a mix of horror and anger. He'd gone a worrying shade of red. I was half afraid he'd have a heart attack or something.

"What else was I supposed to do?!" I shouted back. "He attacked me at school!"

After my public declaration of war, I'd quickly been bundled back into the school. I was left sitting alone in the principal's office for nearly twenty minutes, before he returned with Dad and Miss Militia.

Dad quickly engulfed me in a hug. Apparently, he'd heard about the attack, but no one had told him more than 'I was fine' which only worried him more. Once Miss Militia managed to convince him to sit down, she told him everything. Including my message, which had gone viral and - according to Rewind - was even been picked up by the local news.

"At which point you chose to antagonise him," Miss Militia pointed out, massaging her forehead. Unlike Dad, her reactions were a bit more subdued. I guess she was more used to this sort of thing, especially after dealing with the Wards.

"They could have hurt someone! Have you seen what that foam does? I couldn't risk him going after anyone else. What if he'd sprayed Amy? Who would heal her?"

"I don't care about some random -!" Dad cut himself off; for a moment, his skin took on a greenish tint and looked like he was going to be sick. Miss Militia put a hand on his arm and dad slumped back into his seat.

"I'm sorry, that came out wrong." He sighed. "Taylor, please listen to me. You are my daughter and that's all that matters to me. I just want you to be safe."
"Danny, I understand how you feel, but no one could have seen this coming," Miss Militia said. "While the PRT has never confirmed that the Wards attend Arcadia, they have never denied it either. This open secret has - so far- acted as a deterrent. The PRT has made a point to show that attacks on Wards are not tolerated."

"And where was the PRT when this happened?" Dad asked, visibly reining his anger in.

Miss Militia sighed, and for the first time I realised how dirty she looked. Her uniform was dusty and creased and there were some scratches on her hand and bandages were just visible past the cuff of her costume.

"Trying to keep the ABB and the Empire from setting the city on fire," she said. "The Empire has teams of people out looking for Uber and Leet. Some of them ended up in ABB territory, fights broke out and then Oni Lee got involved. I hate to say it, but we're barely keeping a lid on things."

Before Dad or I could say anything, the principal walked into the office and dropped into his chair.

"Sorry I'm late, but I've had three different phone calls from parents demanding your expulsion."

"They're worried I make the school a target," I said, feeling sick at the thought of being expelled. I know it was silly, but I'd enjoyed school before Emma had ruined it for me. Now that I was at Arcadia, that enjoyment was slowly starting to return.

However, they were right. Leet had come here looking for me, what would happen next time? Maybe it would be best for everyone if I left, if only for a little while to let things calm down. I could come back after I tossed Leet into a cell.

"Is she going to be expelled?" Dad asked, sitting forward in his chair. I could see his neck starting to redden as his temper rose.

The principal scoffed and leaned backwards. "Certainly not! I'm not about to let a bunch of snot nosed crybabies tell me how to run my school! No, you've been a credit to the school and I'm proud to have you here! If they don't like it, they can kiss my a-"

His assistant chose that moment to enter the room and whatever he was about to say died on his lips when she gave him a look. Clearing his throat, he sat back up. "Yes… that being said… We're shutting down the school for the day. It'll take a couple of days to get those gates fixed, but I expect to see you back here tomorrow afternoon like everyone else. So go on, off you go!"

We were quickly - but politely - ushered out of his office by his assistant. With a sigh, Dad shook his head. "Come on, Taylor, let's go home. We still need to talk."

Taking a breath, I braced myself for the oncoming explosion. "Actually, Dad… I need to get back to my workshop…"

"Why?"

"I need to start working! I wasn't kidding, I'm not letting Leet get away with this!"

"But why you?! Why can't you just leave it to Dragon or the Protectorate?"

"Danny's right," Miss Militia said. "Leet's actions have shown him to be a much larger threat. The PRT is already looking for his hideout, and once they have it, the Protectorate will deal with him."

/Strength invites challenge./
"You don't understand," I argued in frustration, "it has to be me. Everything Leet's done was to get at me! He's just going to keep getting worse until I deal with him. But… more than that, this isn't just about Leet. What happens next time someone takes a shot at me? I can't keep hiding behind Dragon or the Protectorate."

Dad tried to argue but I cut him off before he could start. "Dad, please! Something like this was always going to happen. Either here or at home, someone was always going to try something. If I don't deal with it now, by myself, then everyone will assume I can't do anything without Dragon or the Protectorate backing me up!"

I took a deep breath, I wasn't explaining this very well but I needed Dad to understand. I knew he just wanted to keep me safe, but I was a hero now and if I didn't take Leet down, then the next two-bit villain who thought they could take me wouldn't just stop at a broken jaw.

Dad looked helplessly at Miss Militia, trying to come up with an argument. He could tell me not to do it, he could just say no.

But if he did that, what then?

Things between us were better than they had been in a long time, but if he ordered me not to go, could I forgive him? Or worse, would I ignore him, and chase after Leet?

"Taylor, think about this. If you go after Uber and Leet, the PRT won't be able to help you," Miss Militia said, thankfully coming to Dad's aid. "I know you're angry, but please, leave this to the PRT. If you go after them, you could end up making things harder for everyone."

_The last time I 'let someone else deal with it', I nearly died._

I kept the thought to myself but it must have shown on my face.

"Taylor… I mean it, stay out of this one." She glanced towards Dad, who looked just as unhappy. Sighing in frustration, Miss Militia spoke quietly, "I do, however, agree that you should head back to your workshop. I can't actually give you orders but I want you to talk to Dragon, Taylor. Don't do anything without her say so."

We continued to argue in the school corridor for another ten minutes before Dad gave in. I knew that it upset him to know I was putting myself in danger and that he couldn't do anything to help, but I had to do this.

Miss Militia, however, had made it clear. If I got in over my head and called for help, the PRT would still be there. Beyond that, I was on my own.

Not that I would actually be alone, of course.

##

I had just finished zipping up my bodysuit when Wyvern walked into the room. I quickly squashed the impulse to cover myself up. I had my costume on after all.

Wyvern herself had been adjusting well to living again, even if her personality wasn't quite what I had expected.

"Everyone's downstairs," she said with a slightly nervous smile. "Are you ready?"

##
Dad agreed to drop me off at the workshop, because of his size, Ratchet was forced to ride in the back of Dad's truck. At just over six feet tall, he wasn't that much bigger than Dad, but his bulk and kibble meant he'd never fit inside.

Miss Militia had to report back the PRT so it was just the three of us, and the atmosphere inside the truck was tense. I knew Dad was upset, I was making him worry and that made me feel guilty. It probably didn't help that I'd insisted on staying at the workshop for the next few days. I felt bad about it, but right now I needed to concentrate.

Steeljaw and Ravage were waiting by the door for me. Both of them had their heads down and while Ravage was too proud to whine like Steeljaw, I could feel the guilt rolling off their sparks. I stopped briefly to pat them both on the head. It wasn't their fault they weren't at the school, it was mine. For the last couple of days, I'd been sending them back to the workshop while I was in class, as they had been attracting too much attention. They would then meet up with me after school and escort me home.

That would clearly have to change. If they had been there, Leet might have reconsidered his attack. Or he might have destroyed them both, then attacked the school anyway.

Pushing the thought away, I walked inside. In the main working area, I was surprised to find Rhinox standing over several large, open crates.

"The PRT just dropped these off," Rhinox rumbled without looking up from his clipboard. "It's the remains of Leet's bots. Figured you'd want to make a start as soon as you came in. Insight should be down in a minute, she's just making coffee."

I nodded absently. The rest of my attention was focused on the Autobot standing next to him.

"Wyvern?" I said in surprise. I didn't expect her to be up and about already.

"Hmmm?" she said, looking up from her task. She had a crowbar wedged under the lid of the largest crate and was working to pry it loose. Unlike the other Autobots, Wyvern didn't have an alt-mode. Her body was still the basic smooth silver of her protoform with no secondary anatomy.

"Taylor?!" she said in surprise, the crowbar slipping through her fingers and narrowly missing her chin, causing her to squeak in surprise.

"I-I wanted to help!" she said quickly. "If you're planning a full structural analysis then it would take hours to dismantle everything by yourself. I figured the three of us could get it done a lot quicker and Rung gave me the all clear earlier so... and I'm rambling again... Sorry, I'm still finding my feet - stupid expression, if I didn't know where my feet were, I wouldn't be able to stand."

After everything that had happened so far today, seeing Wyvern earnestly ramble away did an incredible job of lifting my spirits.

"Don't worry about it," I said with a smile, "you'll get used to it eventually."

"Yes, but until then, Taylor and I need to talk," Dragon said, a hologram of her human avatar appearing in the room.

And there goes my good mood.

Dragon walked towards the offices, not even glancing at Wyvern - who flinched away from her - as she passed her. Walking into an empty room, she dropped into a chair. In truth, the hologram was floating just above the seat, but it still had the right effect.
Following her cue, I took a seat opposite her.

"First, I want you to understand that I'm not blaming you for the attack on the school. But do you know what sort of situation you caused when you post things like this online?" An audio recording of my threat to Leet played through the speakers, making me wince.

It had been easy at the time to stand there and make the threat, to ride my anger and say the words. But now, my temper had cooled and I was left to deal with the people I cared about worrying about me and it just made me feel selfish and guilty.

"Yeah," I said quietly, "Dad and Miss Militia already spoke to me about it."

Dragon nodded. "Alright, I won't bother repeating them then. Instead, I want you to tell me what happened."

I told Dragon everything. When I was finished, Dragon sat forward in her chair, rubbing her forehead in frustration.

"Taylor, do you know why I didn't leave a copy of myself here to watch over you?" she asked. "It's because I trust you," she said when I didn't answer.

"I've always tried to allow you the freedom to make her own decisions and to learn from them. Do you understand why you shouldn't have taunted Leet like you did?"

"I had to keep his attention on me!" I protested. "What if he'd gone after someone else? At least while he was threatening me, everyone else had time to get away!"

"And what if he'd hit you harder? What if you'd had an allergic reaction to that foam?" Dragon didn't shout. Her voice stayed perfectly level, but there was a haunted look in her eyes.

"I... I didn't think..."

Dragon's form blurred as she switched to a hard light hologram. She couldn't keep this up long; projecting a detailed human form taxed the system too much. After the switch was complete, she reached out towards me and clasped my hand, looking me in the eye.

"You can't help anyone if you're dead. I've seen far too many heroes, too many friends throw their lives away without thinking. I don't want you to become another one."

I nodded, closing my eyes. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking. I just... I had to stop him."

"It's alright. But I want you to tell me why you taunted him and why you made that threat."

"I was trying to distract him," I said quietly, taking a deep breath. "I thought that if I kept him busy then there would be more time for help to arrive, or he'd make a mistake and Vicky could attack him. Then, once I started talking I couldn't stop. He was threatening me and my friends so I tried to hurt him and well..." I rubbed my jaw at the memory.

"Yes," Dragon said, something that could almost pass for amusement in her voice. "I think you learned your lesson there. Please don't do it again. What about the threat? That wasn't just heat of the moment, was it?"

"No... it was..." I sighed again. "Have you seen the report on the foam?" I'd listened to Ratchets grumbled complaints on our way to the workshop. It was nasty stuff; the chemical burns I'd suffered were a side effect of the dye sinking deep into my tissue. Without Amy's help, it would have taken
months, if not years before my skin returned to normal. My hair may never have regrown.

Dragon paused for a moment, then nodded. I assumed she had just downloaded the report from Ratchet.

"I think, no matter what, Leet planned to spray me with it. Even without me running my mouth, he was going to mutilate me!" Slowly, my anger started to return, and with it the conviction I'd held when I made the threat.

"Leet wanted to embarrass me. He couldn't match me as a tinker, so he'd gone after my appearance. The last person to do that was Emma. That's when I realised Leet was just another bully, and I'm through quietly taking it from people like him!"

Dragon said nothing, choosing instead to look calmly up at me. I hadn't even noticed I'd stood up, or that I was shouting. Blushing, I dropped back into my seat.

"Is that the only reason?" she asked calmly.

"No. I mean, that's part of it. The rest was... reputation, I suppose. I've seen the threads on PHO, everyone thinks of me as the 'robot tinker' and 'Dragon's apprentice' but that's it. If I'm going to be a hero, I need to be more than that. People need to know that I'm not to be messed with. If I let Leet go, if I don't deal with him myself, then I'll never be anything more than your apprentice, just sitting around waiting for the next loon to take a shot at me."

For a while, Dragon sat there quietly, just watching me. Eventually, she shook her head and let out an aggravated sigh.

"Alright, Taylor, I don't like it, but I can see your point. Which Is why we're going to do this my way. This copy will remain here to help, but you will not do anything without my say so. When you confront Leet, which will only happen when I'm satisfied you have a working plan, I will be nearby in one of my suits. The moment I think things are out of hand, I will put a stop to it. Understand?"

I'd never seen Dragon like this before. Her voice and eyes were hard and brooked no argument. I'd spent so much time with Dragon that I saw her more as a friend, a fellow tinker and at times, something of a sister. At this moment, I realised I was dealing with Dragon the hero. The experienced cape and second in command of the Guild, who threw herself at S-class threats and survived.

"Alright, that's fair," I said. I'd been working under Dragon's oversight for long enough that she'd give me a fair chance at beating Leet.

Just like that, the tension vanished from her face and Dragon smiled. "Good. Now tell me, why three days?"

I leaned forward, grinning. The plan was simple enough. I had two protoforms ready and waiting for sparks, and the Matrix was charged enough to wake them both. Three days should be long enough for their personalities to emerge and stabilise.

My original plan was to spend the rest of the time tracking Leet down and making upgrades to my gear. But now that I had access to Leet's knockoffs, I planned to pull them apart. Leet's stuff always had flaws, flaws that I could find and exploit.

I wasn't just going to beat Leet. I was going to humiliate him.
After that, I didn't move outside of my workshop.

The video of my threat to Leet had quickly gone viral, even being picked up by a couple of news stations. They'd also shown videos of me getting attacked which helped build some sympathy.

Most of the comments were what I expected, such as: 'How can villains attack a school like this?' 'Think of the children.'

Some criticised me for threatening Leet and a couple even outright blamed me. For the most part, I put them out of my mind.

One thing I didn't expect was a reply from Leet. A video was posted online less than an hour after mine had, with Cy-kill officially challenging me. A PM was also sent to my PHO account with a time, date and location for the fight.

It was an old, out of town shopping mall that had shut down years ago. It was perfect. Now, I wouldn't have to worry about any innocent people getting caught in the crossfire.

Between me, Rhinox, Wyvern, Dragon and Wheeljack, it didn't take long to get Leet's creations unboxed and laid out on the floor.

There wasn't a great deal we could learn from Crasher as her destruction had been too thorough. Pathfinder, however, was a gold mine of information. The crash had shorted out the controller for her self destruct and remote control system - which explained why she didn't explode like Crasher - and she was covered in minor dents and scratches, but everything else was intact.

My original guess had been correct: the drones were remote puppets, probably using a neural interface of some sort. At that point, I ended up running on a bit of a tangent, designing such a system.

While Jack worked on actually building it, I turned my attention back to Pathfinder. Its eventual completion allowed us to try taking control of her which helped explain just why she had crashed.

For me, controlling Pathfinder was difficult, but doable with a bit of practice. For Lisa, it was a very different matter. Getting Pathfinder to stand, walk and even pick things up was easy enough, but when she tried to use Pathfinders alt-mode - tethered and boxed in with force fields, of course - she had quickly lost control.

Pathfinder was extremely unstable. It wasn't anything you couldn't learn to handle, but it definitely needed practice. Or possibly VI assistance.

After that, I turned my focus on finding faults in her design.

As a Leet creation, I'd expected more flaws. Sure, I could see where the power unit's output was a little too high and microfractures - probably from transformation stress - were already starting to show, but most of it could be held at bay with simple, daily maintenance.

But there were no 'what the hell was he thinking?' moments.

One bonus was the power cell I found built into Pathfinder. It was clearly old: the case was covered in scratches and mounting points showed clear signs of repeated use, but, the unit itself was actually
stable. Recharging it would be simple and I doubted even a direct hit from a Null-Ray would cause it to fail.

"It's an early model," Lisa had said when I showed it to her. "It was probably one of the first things he built and he's been re-using it ever since."

For the most part, Lisa stayed out of the way while I was working. When I'd asked her why, she told me it was because she was trying to find where Uber and Leet had hidden themselves.

"Besides," she'd said, pointing towards my Matrix, "that thing around your neck gives me a headache."

I felt bad about that, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I needed to build up its charge and the only way to do that was close contact. I could have hidden it by wearing my armour, but that made tinkering uncomfortable after a while.

After she saw me spark Wyvern, Lisa had been out cold for more than a day and when she woke up, she had no real memory of what she'd seen.

"All I know is, I can't use my power on yours," she said, looking grumpy as she sipped at her coffee. "You're fine, you're an open book. But that… thing around your neck and whatever you did to Wyvern?" She shrugged. "Instant headache. I can tell you that your thing is much more than a battery. Something about your power makes it more than that… more… like an echo of the future."

Her voice had gone soft, almost dream-like and her eyes were focused on nothing. Then, with a shudder, she snapped back to normal.

"Gah! See? When I use my power on it, I just get gibberish!"

In the end, I left Lisa alone while I focused on what I was originally doing. For now, I'd just have to make sure she wasn't in the room when I sparked a bot.

One thing that bothered me was that there was something… off about Pathfinder and it wasn't until Lisa agreed to take a look that we realised what it was.

Pathfinder hadn't been built by Leet. At least, not by himself anyway.

From what Lisa said, Coil was in contact with Uber and Leet and had Squealer, Chariot and Trainwreck on his payroll. The four of them likely collaborated on the construction of Leet's bots.

Given what I knew about Squealer, I suspected she had been the one piloting Crasher. Did that mean Leet had more bots waiting in the wings? From a technical standpoint, I wasn't too worried. The Autobots had Leet's creations beat in just about every conceivable category.

But at the same time, I didn't want to let myself get overconfident. Complacency was what got me in this mess, after all.

Between bringing my two newest bots online, the only other thing of note to happen, was the arrival of the Wards on the second day.

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"Excuse me, Miss Hebert?" Romie chirped. "You have visitors waiting for you on the main floor."

"Who is it?" I wasn't exactly dressed for company at the moment. Not wanting to get any of my
good clothes dirty, I was currently wearing slacks and a sport bras, with my hair was pulled back in a low pony tail. The only humans in the workshop were me and Lisa. I'd never really had a problem changing in front of my Autobots and with Lisa holed up in her room with another headache, I hadn't bothered to really get dressed.

"It's the Wards, ma'am. They are being accompanied by Panacea and Glory Girl."

Damn. I couldn't just send them away: with the exception of Amy, I'd barely spoken to any of them since the attack. I wasn't trying to be mean or anything, I'd just been busy.

"Okay, can you tell them I'll be there in a minute?" If I went upstairs, I could get back to my room without being seen, provided that Vicky didn't decide to just come and get me.

"Windblade is currently on route with appropriate clothing for you, ma'am," the VI said. I sighed in relief. Trying to get back to my room without being seen was possible, but not something I really wanted to attempt.

It only took Windblade a minute or two to reach me, a clean t-shirt hanging from her hands. It was only after I pulled it on that I realised it had my insignia printed on the front.

I wonder where they got this from?" I thought to myself before shrugging the question off. It was probably some merchandise that never got put into production or something. I certainly hadn't seen any around after all.

Now that I was covered up, I quickly made my way to the main floor.

Romie had said the Wards were here, but I hadn't expected them all to be in costume. I'd assumed they had found a way to sneak in without being seen by the cameramen outside.

Even Amy was in the new costume I'd made her. The only one not in costume was Gallant, who was standing next to Vicky.

"Hey guys, what's up?" I said as I came out on a walkway above them.

As I made my way to the stairs, the Wards shuffled awkwardly, none of them waiting to be the first to speak, until Aegis pulled his helmet off and stepped forward.

"Taylor… Look, about what happen -"

"Don't," I said, much harsher than I meant to. From the way Vista and Kid Win flinched, I realised what was going on here. "Sorry, that came out wrong. If you're going to apologise for not helping, then don't. I don't blame any of you. There was no way any of us could have seen the attack coming and it would have been nearly impossible for you to get changed without giving yourselves away."

"See," Vicky snorted, "I told ya she wasn't mad."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I'm extremely pissed," I said, grinning as I walked down the stairs, "but not with you guys. Leet however, may never get on my good side again. How did everyone get here anyway, I thought Miss Coyle was stopping you from going out in costume?"

My weak attempt at a joke did the trick and room visibly relaxed with the Wards pulling their masks off. Vista even warped the space between us so she could give me a quick hug. I tried not to tense up at the sudden contact, but thankfully, she didn't seem to notice.

"Borrowed a page from your book," Carlos said. "Kid Win teleported our gear off the rig and into
Victoria's place. After that, we just crammed ourselves into a borrowed van with Dean driving."

"With Dennis humming spy tunes the entire time," Missy groaned.

"Oh come on, it was fitting!" he protested, but the only response he got was glares from the others.

I chuckled at the familiar bickering. "Not that I mind the company, "but don't tell me you went to all this trouble just to apologise?"

"Nah," Vicky said, "we want to help you kick Leet's ass!"

What? I blinked in confusion while Amy shook her head in exasperation at her sister.

"She's right," Carlos said. "We know you're not really a Ward, but you are our friend. We're not going to let you do this alone."

"You… do remember your banned from fighting, right? The Youth Guard, hell, the director's probably going to flip if you get seen!"

"Fuck the Youth Guard," Missy said. The other Wards nodded in agreement.

"Besides," Dennis said, "what are they going to do, ground us?"

I… honestly hadn't planned for anything like this. I mean, I'd almost expected Vicky to show up, but not everyone else. But maybe I was too used to trying to do everything myself.

/We are stronger together./

First with Emma, then with being a cape. It was a bad habit that I needed to break.

Besides, the extra help would be just what I needed. Smiling to myself, I felt the half-formed plan in my mind solidify. I knew exactly what to do.

"Okay, but just to be clear, you all want to help?" I watched everyone carefully as they agreed, my attention lingering on Amy. She was typically a non-combatant, but if she wanted to be here, I wasn't going to stop her.

Getting a determined nod from her, I outlined my plan.

##

Now it was time. Walking into the main floor, I was greeted by my Autobots, my two newest ones standing alongside them.

The Wards were here as well, along with Vicky and Amy. They had all left a costume here and snuck in earlier today to change.

The plan was for me and some of my Autobots to go out first. Then, when everything was ready, the Wards would follow. They would be backed up by the remaining Autobots.

"Everyone ready?" I asked, climbing into my armour and picking my helmet up.

Sealing my helmet, I couldn't stop myself from smirking as a stray thought floated up.

"Wards, New Wave, Autobots, roll out!"
With my armour in bike mode, I sped through the darkening city, my Autobots in formation behind me.

Arcee was just behind me, followed by Rhinox and Ratchet. In the sky above us, Cyclonus circled around, scanning for trouble.

Cyclonus was the second of my two newest Autobots, his personality - thoughtful and taciturn - only emerging last night. He was also my first real combat-capable flyer, with his alt-mode being a purple, reverse-winged jet of my own design.

The other Autobot, Soundwave, was sticking with the Wards. They had a different target tonight, and his abilities would be an invaluable asset. Laserbeak, Ravage and the other small bots were with him as further support.

Soundwave was possibly the quietest person I'd ever met. He wasn't totally anti-social: he spent most of his free time with Ravage and Laserbeak, he only spoke when spoken to, choosing instead to silently watch the world around him.

His alt-mode was loosely based on a blue SUV, with as much communications equipment as I could fit mounted inside.

Not too far away was one of Dragon's old combat suits, using a stealth system she had integrated into the suit years ago to keep herself hidden. She'd split a copy of her self into its systems in order to keep an eye on me.

"You do realise you're walking into a trap, right?" Insight - Lisa - murmured in my ear.

"It's not a trap when you know it's coming," I replied. "Besides, I have a plan." Rattrap had been there since last night, carefully watching Uber and Leet prepare. Just to be safe, he'd also put in a few surprises of his own. "Is everyone else ready?"

"Yeah, yeah, they left just after you did. We're the only ones here now," Lisa answered, sitting back in her chair with a smile.

Her 'data center' was finished. High speed internet, monitored access to almost anything via Teletraan, communications, interactive holograms, and more. She had it all. Sure, her power worked better in person, but this was where she preferred to be. Between the cameras everyone was wearing and Teletraan's resources, it was almost as good as being in the thick of the action.

Next to her, Wyvern reclined in her own chair, her eyes shuttered. Is focused on controlling Pathfinder her power supplied.

Taylor hadn't had time to finish a VI to assist with flying the drone, so Wyvern was using it to give the Wards and New Wave a little extra backup.

"Soundwave's already got the signal, it shouldn't take long to trace it. You going to be okay?" Lisa
asked as she glanced between status update messages.

*We'll be fine. I won't underestimate Leet a second time,* Taylor replied, her voice calmer that Lisa was expecting. *Isn't worried. Trusts her team. Trusts you… mostly.*

Lisa clamped down on her power. While it was nice to know Taylor wouldn't stab her in the back, the girl was a little touchy about Lisa using her power to fish for personal information. Their first meeting after she joined Dragon - the Lung incident didn't count - hadn't really gone well. Okay, Lisa should have realised Taylor was touchy about her sexuality, and looking back on it, her joke had been a bit tasteless, but the look on her face had almost been worth it.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she pushed her fringe - it was going to take years to grow her hair out again - back and noticed a potential problem with the Wards team.

She flicked on her radio. "Aegis, there's a PRT patrol in your area, go left then take the next right."

She tuned his acknowledgement out as Wheeljack walked into the room.

"Settling in alright?" he asked, head fins flashing nervously. *Worried about the others, even if he knows they'll be fine. Trying not to show it. "I know some people have a little trouble adapting to our tech,"* he added, unaware of her thoughts.

Smiling at him, Lisa held both her hands towards her screen. *"Oh, I don't know." With a deft flick of her wrists, multiple holographic screens slid into life. "I think I can manage."*

Chuckling, Wheeljack climbed into a chair and pulled up his own interface.

##

We'd already left the city behind when I saw the mall in the distance.

It was bigger than the ones in the city, which was probably why it shut down. As the city's economy struggled and a suddenly jobless middle class fled the suburbs for someplace where they could pay their bills, the outer areas were among the first to suffer; many of the shops and small businesses started closing down or relocating towards the still populated urban centers.

As the number of shoppers fell, operating costs for the remaining businesses - rent, utilities and so on - rose as their landlord desperately sought to stay afloat, pushing even more shops out of business. Eventually, the mall went under and was sold at a loss. It changed hands several times before being bought out by a development company that planned to rejuvenate the whole thing.

They got as far as stripping most of the interior before the company was revealed to be a front for an organised crime syndicate and was shut down by federal investigators.

Now the building was left rotting in ruins: too expensive to demolish, but too damaged to use.

The building itself was a large rectangular box that stood three stories tall. Some attempts had been made to pretty it up by adding turrets on the corners, but the crumbling masonry gave it a foreboding look. At one point, there had been display windows along the ground floor, but they had been boarded up a long time ago.

As soon as we reached the mall, I transformed my bike into armour and signaled Ratchet to hold back. For now, only four of us would be going in. I still thought Leet was a pathetic tinker and a bully, but his attack on the school showed why I shouldn't underestimate him.
We found the main doors at the front of the building had been cleared and left open for us. Inside the entryway, spotlights had been strung up along the second floor balcony, giving us plenty of light and making us easy targets.

*Hey, boss,* Rattrap said as we walked through the doors, *watch your skid plates. These guys brought friends.*

"Alright, anything we need to worry about?" I asked, glancing at the empty storefronts around us. Most of them had been boarded up long ago. The original metal security shutters had been stripped out and recycled by the attempted re-build. Many of the boards had been pulled down recently, and if the circular burn marks on the floor were anything to go by, they had been used as firewood in barrels.

Between that and the trash scattered about, I was willing to bet this place had been full of squatters until Uber and Leet got here. I wasn't that surprised: the walls were solid enough to keep out the wind and rain, and it was far enough away from anything important that the police probably only did the occasional patrol.

I could also see bullet holes in the walls. I really hoped Uber and Leet hadn't done anything stupid.

"Rattrap, do we need to worry about civilians?" I asked, my voice quiet as I looked at a pile of cardboard I assumed had been someone's bed.

*No boss, place had been taken over by some new gang when Dumb and Dumber got here.*

I felt myself relax a bit. It was bad enough people had been forced to live here, but I didn't want to make matters worse by getting them caught in the middle of a firefight.

Further in, Uber and Leet - or to be more exact - Cy-kill and Fitor, were waiting for us on the remains of an ornamental display that might have been a fountain. They were roughly in the middle of the building, flanked on either side by a pair of non-functional escalators.

Leet had clearly been busy, since there were now three new drones joining him and Fitor.

Crasher had been rebuilt and was standing silently to Cy-kill's right. Halfway up one of the escalators was a white robot with a cane and what appeared to be a top hat. The silver grill on his front and the rough shape of some of the body panels looked almost like a luxury car.

To the left of the group was a large blue robot with an oversized cannon grafted to one arm and two smaller ones mounted on his back. Judging from the tracks on the backs of his legs, I guessed he turned into some sort of tank.

Lastly was Fitor, standing on Cy-kill's left. He'd added a sword to his back since I'd seen him last.

On my HUD, I couldn't see signs of anyone else in the building, and I found myself wondering where Multiplayer was hiding. So far, he'd shown up almost everywhere Uber and Leet were making trouble.

"Rewind," I muttered, "you got control of Leet's cameras yet?"

[Done. Want me to shut them down?]

"No, not yet."

Unable to hear us, Cy-kill spread his arms widely and smiled. "Matrix! I was beginning to think
you'd never come! I got your message and I have to admit, I never thought you'd have the balls to call me out. Not after you stole my tech! Not cool, by the way."

"Yeah, did nobody ever tell you the rules? You want to use someone else's tech, you gotta pay for it," Crasher interjected. Her voice sounded like it did in Arcee's recordings, but something about it was off.

"Typical heroes," the white bot said, leaning forward on his cane. "Say one thing, do another."

"Yeah, bunch of hypocrites."

"Seriously, what's the point?"

"You guys don't do anything!"

"You just stand around looking pretty!"

As the newer bots continued to hurl insults, my Autobots stood silently behind me, sending me the occasional questioning look as they waited for my order. I could feel the odd bit of amusement in their sparks at some of the more childish ones.

Cyclonus and Rhinox were fairly stoic, but Arcee just crossed her arms, giving Cy-kill and the others a dismissive look.

Personally, I was having a sudden feeling of deja vu. It was almost like when Emma and her friends had stood around insulting me, pretending not to notice me standing right next to them. I guess bullies really were all the same.

Throughout it all, Fitor was strangely quiet, shooting Cy-kill looks that wavered between anger and worry.

Outwardly, we did nothing while I muttered orders, the subvocal mic ensuring that Cy-kill wouldn't overhear.

"Cyclonus, I'll need you to keep Fitor busy," I muttered. Assuming that Uber was still controlling him, he was probably the biggest threat outside of that possible tank. "Insight, who are these guys?"

*Fans,* she said, speaking quickly. *Leet sometimes recruits people to play extras in his movies.*

Realising he wasn't going to get a reaction from us, Cy-kill waved for silence.

"Well," he said with a cocky grin, "anything to say? None of that honor and duty crap you heroes are always preaching about?"

I'd had enough of this, it was time to kick things off.

Reaching over my shoulder, I pulled the Ion Blaster my storage pocket. "Preach this!" I snapped as I pulled the trigger.

The blue bolt streaked through the air, slamming into the white bot's chest. A fireball engulfed him as he exploded in a shower of metal. The tank ducked out of reflex and Crasher swore loudly.

My mask hid my own surprise at the explosion. The blaster had been set to low intensity, so I hadn't expected the fireball. I must have hit his self destruct charge.

The stunned silence was broken as my rifle emitted a loud pop, smoke starting to waft up from deep
inside.

"Damn it!" This time I made sure to speak loud enough to be heard as I quickly dropped the rifle back into storage.

Cy-kill's surprise quickly shifted to anger. "Get them!" he shouted, galvanizing his people into action.

On the balconies above, bits of wood and plaster fell away to reveal mounted turrets that swiveled to follow our movements, spraying us with small caliber bullets that made our shields flicker without doing any actual damage.

I wasn't sure if Leet was hoping to overwhelm our shields or to drain their energy, but I wasn't going to wait to find out.

"Scatter!" I shouted, sprinting for the nearest store front and ducking behind a support pillar, the thick concrete shielding me. "Stick to the plan and wait for my signal!" I ordered, calling up my hard-light shield.

*Matrix, what's going on!* Vicky called over the radio.

"It's nothing, we're fine!" I shouted back.

Before I could say more, Cy-kill sprinted around the column, a large circular axe in hand. Ducking under his wild swing, I created a hard-light sword from my forearm and transformed my shield into a buckler.

Again, I had that strange whisper - just beyond my hearing - telling me what to do, how to move, when to duck and when to strike. Leet's movements were clumsy, but not as uncoordinated as I'd expected. He clearly had experience, maybe even some training, but it wasn't going to be enough.

I knew that if I wanted to, I could end this fight right now. But that wasn't the plan. Just beating Leet's drones wouldn't be enough, not if I was going to end this once and for all.

Parrying another blow, I allowed him to think he was dominating the fight, forcing myself to block when to duck and when to strike. Leet's movements were clumsy, but not as uncoordinated as I'd expected. He clearly had experience, maybe even some training, but it wasn't going to be enough.

I knew that if I wanted to, I could end this fight right now. But that wasn't the plan. Just beating Leet's drones wouldn't be enough, not if I was going to end this once and for all.

Parrying another blow, I allowed him to think he was dominating the fight, forcing myself to block when to duck and when to strike. Gritting my teeth, I let his axe bite into the thicker armour on my forearms.

The plan wasn't to win - not yet anyway. All we had to do was keep them from noticing the real attack.

##

The building was too cramped for Cyclonus to fly into, but when Fitor jumped up to the second floor, Cyclonus quickly followed him.

Matrix assumed Fitor was being piloted by Uber, a parahuman who could quickly master skills, and Cyclonus was determined to keep him occupied.

As soon as he hit the ground, he moved forward. His clawed hand speared towards Fitor's head, only for his opponent to duck, pull the sword from his back, and swing it at the outstretched limb.

Cyclonus skipped backwards, Fitor's sword scraping across his forearm. He reached into his dimensional pocket, pulling out the sword Taylor had made for him. It felt cold and lifeless in his hands, like he'd expected it to be more than it was. But despite that, the sword itself was strong, perfectly balanced, and razor sharp.
Lifting his weapon, he gave Fitor a salute of respect that was quickly returned. Then both fighters moved. They danced around each other, their swords clashing as they fought for dominance, each looking for any opening they could exploit.

Stepping back, Cyclonus forced Fitor to overextend a strike. Seizing the chance, he darted forward, sword flashing as the flow of the battle changed and he briefly took control of the fight, only to lose it moments later when Fitor feinted and slipped under his guard with a maneuver that slashed a narrow gash in his side.

Cyclonus forced himself to ignore the injury. It wasn't deep enough to hit anything important and he couldn't afford the distraction.

##

Arcee ignored the hail of gunfire and sprinted forward, intent on intercepting Crasher.

Before she could get close, the other woman transformed and fled deeper in the mall, cackling as she did.

Arcee transformed and followed her into the derelict walls were filled with holes and missing doorways and Crasher quickly sped into the maze of service corridors and storage rooms. Content to smash any debris aside, Crasher cackled as she plowed through walls and rusty piping.

Away from the spotlights Leet had set up, both racers were pitched into darkness, the only lights coming their headlights. Corners and obstacles appeared suddenly in the darkness, and both racers were forced to weave frantically through them.

At one point, Crasher went up a ramp made from a collapsed section of the ceiling, taking them onto the upper floors. Throughout it all, Arcee never lost sight of her, having an easier time navigating the 'course'.

However, the building didn't give Crasher the space she needed to really get up to speed and every time she hit an obstacle, it only slowed her down further. Arcee quickly closed the distance, transformed and fired.

The shot clipped Crasher, causing her to overcorrect and lose control. Sliding sideways, the remains of a pipe shredded one of her tyres as she crashed into the wall and transformed. Cursing like a sailor, she turned to face her pursuer and stamped her foot, creating a shockwave that surprised Arcee and knocked her off her feet.

Rolling sideways, she flipped herself up and dodged the next blast as it shattered the wall behind her. Cackling again, Crasher continued to send blast after blast at Arcee, keeping her from getting too close.

##

As the two women sped off, Rhinox ignored the gunfire and stepped between the blue tank and Matrix.

The bullets, while annoying, didn't have the mass to break through his armour, and they would likely run out of ammunition long before they drained his fuel tank.

"You're not gonna let me past, are you?" the tank asked with a resigned sigh.

"Nope," Rhinox said, cracking his knuckles.
With a shrug, the blue bot charged. Rhinox spread his legs, lowered his center of gravity, and braced for the impact. The two came together with a crash that echoed throughout the building.

Pushing the tank back, Rhinox hit him with a right cross that would have taken anyone else's head off. Smirking, the tank ignored the blow and retaliated with one strong enough to make Rhinox's vision blur briefly and leaving a sizable dent.

Slowly circling round each other, the two continued to trade blows.

##

In the middle of Brockton Bay, Soundwave turned his head to the sky and listened. Around him, the electromagnetic spectrum was filled with light and sound. Telephones, TV, radio, he could see it all.

Anyone else would probably go mad if they tried to understand it. Even he knew better than to try. Instead, he focused on one signal. It was cleverly hidden in lesser used bands, but the sheer amount of data being sent made it impossible to hide completely.

"Windblade: adjust course, twenty eight degrees north," he intoned. Windblade, Waspinator and Laserbeak were each carrying devices he had constructed to help triangulate the signal's point of origin.

The Wards around him stood nervously, impatiently waiting for directions, but he wouldn't be rushed.

He could slowly feel himself closing in on their quarry.

"Target: located."

##

My arm shook as Cy-kill's axe came down on my buckler. Not giving him another chance, I hooked the buckler under the edge of his axe and swung my sword at his side.

Letting go of his weapon and twisting to avoid the strike, Cy-kill kicked out at me, the blow catching me in the abdomen and making me skid backwards. His axe fell to the floor, but he quickly scooped it up before I could fully regain my balance.

I'd managed to stay on my feet, but the blow had knocked the wind out of me. Despite my shield, my armour had picked up more than a few dents and scratches. Most of them were intentional, I was letting Cy-kill score just enough hits to think he was winning.

"Attacking a school, Leet? Even for you, that was low," I said, trying to buy more time.

"You're pretty mouthy for someone who's losing!" he shouted, diving towards me in an enraged lunge.

Switching back to a riot shield, I ignored his barbs and instead charged forwards, slamming into him bodily and throwing him backwards. He crashed to the floor and before he could get up again, I fired my Null-Ray.

The low-powered blast caught him just as he rolled over, sending him spinning. Getting his hands under himself, Cy-kill pushed himself up.

"That's a good look for you!" I shouted. "On your knees!" So sue me, I was never very good at
thinking up insults on the fly.

Cy-kill roared like an animal and launched himself at me, catching me around the waist and tackling me to the floor.

Getting my legs under him in a move I'd learned sparring with Carlos, I threw him off me. He hit the far wall and slid to the floor. Catching my breath, I climbed to my feet just as he managed to stand up. Unfortunately, the landing had apparently knocked some sense into him as he didn't bother charging me again. Instead, he pulled a metal tube off his back and tapped a button on the side.

A warning flashed on my screen as the cylinder began to emit a familiar energy signature.

"Rewind, when that thing explodes, turn off the shield," I muttered. I wasn't stupid; after Chariot had shut my shield down, I'd spent hours working out what he'd done and how to counter it. Leet apparently thought I would fall for the same trick twice.

[Target: located. Moving into position.] Soundwave's message appeared on my visor and I smirked.

"You realise I can do this all day right? Unlike you, I'm not going to get tired and I don't feel pain," Cy-kill bragged. "Let's see how good you are without my tech!" he bellowed, throwing the tube towards me.

I brought my arms up to protect myself from the explosion and, as the energy it gave off washed over me, my shield flared brightly and then vanished. Seeing my sword and shield vanish, Leet charged again.

I tried to catch him, but Cy-kill had more mass than me and forced me backwards into the wall. Any time now, Soundwave! Turning my head, I tried not to react as Cy-kill drove a fist into my stomach and I dropped to my knees. Part of it was me playing up the injury, the rest was me gasping for air.

While I tried to catch my breath, Cy-kill pulled out a pair of U shaped devices. Grabbing my arms, he wrapped both of them around my wrists. Energy arced between the devices, holding them together like a pair of handcuffs as he forced me to kneel.

"So now what?" I asked with feigned calm, letting my power map out the 'cuffs' he'd placed on me as I tried to figure out how I could get them off. I didn't know how my power worked through my clothes or armour, but I was glad that it did.

"I'm not gonna kill you, if that's what you mean. I'm not that stupid. What I want is for you to admit that I'm the better tinker! That you stole my work! And you'll do it on camera so the whole world will know."

I snorted in amusement as one of his camera drones floated into view. "You really have lost it. You know that, right? What are you going to do if I don't?"

"I'll have my friend pull apart your Autobots and sell them piecemeal to Toybox."

The bruises, anger, anxiety and even slight amusement I'd been feeling all night vanished, everything falling away and leaving only cold hard certainty.

"If you touch my friends, I will kill you!" I hissed, and Cy-kill stepped back at the intensity of my voice.

"Well! That struck a nerve! Care to repeat that for the camera. No? Shame. Still, if you don't want anything to happen to them, make the statement and all this can end."
As the little drone floated closer, I briefly considered giving him what he wanted. Sure my reputation would be ruined, but he'd hopefully let the matter rest. It's a shame that I wasn't that kind of person.

After what he'd done to me, after threatening my friends, I wasn't going to give him anything.

[All units in position.] Finally!

I retracted my mask and looked directly at Cy-kill.

"I've got a better idea." Lifting my arms, I fired both Null-Rays point blank into his chest, the force of the dual blasts sending him through the wall behind him and crashing to the floor in the middle of the mall.

Standing up, I slammed my wrists against the wall. On the second blow, Cy-kill's cuffs shorted out and fell to the floor. Closing my mask, I activated my radio.

"Autobots, weapons free! Take them down!"

I stepped out of the shop in time to see the small explosive charges Rattrap had placed inside the auto-turrets detonate with a series of loud pops, shutting them down.

##

At the noise of Cy-kill crashing through the wall, Cyclonus risked a sideways glance at the fallen robot before focusing again on his opponent.

So far, neither of them had been able to do much more than scratch each other.

Seeing his fallen friend, Fitor cursed and lowered his sword slightly out of position. Cyclonus darted forward, but Fitor managed to defend himself with relative ease, locking their swords together.

"Sorry, but I don't have time for this!" Fitor grunted as he tried overpowering the Autobot.

*Autobots, weapons free! Take them down!*

"Pity, neither do I." Letting his arms go slack, Cyclonus stepped backwards, which caused Fitor to fall forward, just as Cyclonus lowered his head and drove one of his horns into Fitor's eye. He was rewarded with the sound of shattering glass and crushed electronics. Pushing the blinded Fitor back, he lifted his sword and brought it down in a vertical strike.

The sword cleaved through Fitor's head before stopping deep in his chest. Fitor jerked and twitched briefly wires and servos shorted and sparked fitfully before shutting down entirely. Pulling his sword out, Cyclonus jumped over the rail and landed just short of Cy-kill, who was still struggling to stand.

##

*Autobots, weapons free! Take them down!*

"Finally!" Arcee muttered from behind the remains of a concrete wall. Crasher had been throwing that shockwave attack around carelessly, and it was only by luck that she hadn't hit anything structurally important.

Arcee dove out of cover and charged Crasher, who laughed and fired off yet another shockwave.

This time, Arcee jumped over the blast, her back scraping on the ceiling as she turned the dive into a roll. In one smooth movement, Arcee turned her roll into another jump, dragging her forearm blade
across Crasher's chest.

The foul mouthed bot stumbled backwards, clutching at the open wound in surprise. Before she could recover, Arcee switched to her blaster and fired four times in quick succession. Each hit slammed into Crasher's chest and her look of surprise briefly became one of horror as smoke poured out of her mouth.

Falling backwards, she crashed to the floor even as her body continued to smoke.

Not willing to risk getting close, Arcee turned and raced back to help the others.

##

Rhinox had managed to gradually lead Tank away from the others when Cy-kill crashed through a wall, causing them both to pause in their pugilistic exchange.

Giving Rhinox a quick look, Tank turned his back and ran to help his leader.

*Autobots, weapons free! Take them down!* 

Smirking, Rhinox drew his gatling gun, dialed the power up, and fired. Tank barely had time to register the whine of the motors before the first shot slammed into him, immediately joined by countless more as Rhinox continued to fire, each burst shaking the tank's large frame and shredding his systems.

After twenty seconds of sustained fire - nearly 4,200 kinetic energy rounds - Rhinox stopped shooting as the tank's broken remains fell to the floor.

Chuckling to himself, Rhinox stepped over the fallen body and strode up to Cy-kill. Using his foot, he flipped the bot over and then used his weight to keep the bot from moving.

"I'd stay down if I were you," he rumbled, ignoring Cy-kill's cursing.

##

As my Autobots surrounded Cy-kill, I drew my Ion Blaster. The smoke and sounds of failure it had emitted were faked, intended to lure Leet into a false sense of security.

"You bitch!" Cy-kill shouted from his position on the floor, where Rhinox was effortlessly keeping him pinned. "You think this changes anything? I'll just build more. It's easy!"

Rolling my eyes, I aimed at his head, dialing the power down as low as it would go, and fired.

Cy-kill's head vanished as the shot punched clean through and left a sizable hole in the ground.

"Okay guys," I said, tapping my radio. "It's up to you now."

##

Leet pulled his helmet off as the signal died, sitting up from the reclining chair he'd converted into a control unit for Cy-kill and the other drones.

He'd gotten the original idea from some book or another years ago, but had never wanted to risk building it. Then that bitch had started running around using his tech and he was determined to show her up.
He wasn't stupid though; even if his power had been surprisingly cooperative lately, he didn't dare try building an actual AI after his early efforts in tinkertech programming had begun getting glitchy years ago. There was too much risk of it getting out of control, and then the PRT would probably kill or cage him.

Hell, they were probably going to do that anyway. Attacking her at school, what the hell had he been thinking?! That she was ignoring him and that her attitude pissed him off; a traitorous part of his mind whispered.

He pushed the thought down, since this wasn't the time for self-recriminations.

Eventually he'd remembered his remote control system. The mechanics of it had worried him at first, as he would only be able to build one. Then he'd realised that if he tweaked the design a bit, he could send and receive multiple signals from one system.

After that, and with a little help from Crasher and Chariot, he'd built the five drone bodies, all of which were now scrap.

The next problem had been the space requirements. Thankfully, Brockton Bay was filled with old or abandoned buildings, and it had been easy to commandeer one. Their 'mysterious' backer had even provided them with a tinkertech generator that could power the entire place.

And once again, everything was falling apart.

"That little bitch! I had her! How hell did she do that!" he shouted, throwing the helmet across the room, narrowly missing Multiplayer.

"Leet, shut up! We've got bigger problems!" Uber shouted in return. The two fans they had recruited for this stunt were standing nervously at Uber's side, glancing at something on one of the screens he'd installed.

Despite himself, Leet pulled his gloves off and walked over to the screen, only to freeze when he saw what was on it.

It was a live feed from their security system, which was mostly mundane, store-bought cameras, showing a large blue and silver Autobot standing just outside the warehouse.

"Fuck! How did they find us?" he hissed at Uber.

"I don't know. You're the Tinker, could they have traced the signal?"

"No! I built that thing myself, they would need a working receiver to even know… about… Pathfinder!," he realised with horror. "The self-destruct must have failed! With her reciver they might have been able to track the signal!"

"It doesn't matter," the girl at his side hissed, "look!"

As the security console cycled through the cameras, Leet realised they were surrounded.

Gathered by the front door was the entire Wards team, Glory Girl and Panacea, backed up by Defensor and the blue bot. The back exit was blocked by Warpath.

Running a hand through his hair, Leet desperately tried to think of a way out.

"Guys!" Multiplayer called. "The cameras are still running!"
Turning to the live feed, Leet found himself looking at a close up of Matrix's unmasked face.

"Hello, Leet," she said. "This is probably against the 'rules', but considering you attacked me at school, I don't think that matters." Three sets of eyes turned to glare at him and Leet tried not to cringe under their combined glares.

"In case you haven't realised, it's over. Your website has been dismantled and I've taken control of your cameras. However, I'm going to give you one last chance. Surrender now and I promise you won't be hurt."

"Fuck you!" Leet snapped.

"If that's how you feel," she said with a shrug. "We have you outnumbered and outgunned, after all."

"What! No! Nonononono no! How can you hear me?!" he yelled, even as the others looked on in horror.

From somewhere in the building, something growled. It was deep and menacing, with an electronic flanging that Leet had heard before.

"That thing is in the building?!" Uber hissed as Matrix smirked.

"I've got an idea," Uber said as quietly as he could, "Multi, flood the room with clones. We'll make a break for it in the confusion."

"What about us?!" the girl hissed, waving at herself and her friend.

"What about you?" Leet said, honestly surprised, just before Uber clipped him in the back of the head.

"There's a closet over there, you can hide and wait for the fighting to stop," Uber suggested.

For a moment, the boy - Damian, Leet remembered - looked like he was going to argue before giving up with a sigh, following the girl through the door.

"What about the rest of us?" Multiplayer said, looking around nervously.

Sharing a look with his friend, Leet gave Multiplayer a nod. "We fight our way out."

##

Amy nervously fiddled with the handle of her stun baton. This wasn't the first time she'd been near the front lines - she'd been in the medical station of Endbringer battles after all - but this was the first time she intended to fight someone.

Watching Taylor get attacked hadn't been the worst day of her life, but it was close. Watching them pull a half drowned and bleeding Taylor out of that foam had dragged up memories of Vicky bleeding out under her.

Pushing down that horrible memory, she tried to focus on something else but her mind was running in too many directions at once.

She wasn't quite sure what she was feeling. Her emotions were a mix of anger at Uber and Leet, guilt at not trying to stop them when they attacked Taylor and for being here now without Carol knowing. Not to mention the fear of someone getting hurt, and if she was honest, maybe even a little excitement.
*Everyone, get ready,* Taylor's voice came over the radio, and Amy took a calming breath, tightening her grip on the weapon. *It looks like they’re going to try fighting their way out. Waspinator will try tagging Multiplayer, but it'll take time for the sedatives to kick in.*

Amy moved closer to Vicky, who gave her a bright reassuring smile. All around them, the Wards shifted as they prepared for a fight.

Vista had already warped the area around them into a maze of twisted and compressed space that would make a physicist cry.

The door to the warehouse burst open as copy after copy of Multiplayer charged out, only to run straight into Vicky, Aegis and Defensor. The three brutes made a near immovable wall, stalling the clones' initial charge. They tried going around, only to be intercepted by the Wards.

One charged mindlessly towards her, a lump of wood clenched in his hand.

Sidestepping the attack, Amy thrust her baton forward. On impact, it made a loud zap/popping noise and the clone crumpled bonelessly to the ground. She briefly stared at her weapon in horror, only for the look to be replaced with a nasty smile and a sense of growing satisfaction.

Around her, the Wards were disabling any clones that made it past the brutes. Knowing they were only clones and would vanish after a short time, no one bothered being gentle.

Energy bolts rained down on them from Kid Win as he strafed the front of the building. Gallant was using his emotion blasts more for their impact that the feelings of exhaustion and fear he was causing.

Pathfinder was standing close to Aegis, forearm mounted blasters flashing as Wyvern used the drone to take down the clones.

Charging forward, Amy lifted her arm to block a blow from another clone, trusting the shield and suit Taylor had built would protect her, and slammed her baton into his side. Another three clones fell before she realised their numbers were starting to drop.

Moving close to Vicky, Amy switched her weapon to gun mode, aimed at the doorway and fired. Nearly a dozen clones staggered to a stop, clutching their heads as the directed sound waves caused them intense pain.

At the same time, Clockblocker tagged one of the clones in the doorway, locking him in place and blocking the door entirely.

Taking a chance, Vicky charged forward as Amy only just released the trigger in time to avoid hitting her sister. Not bothering with the time-locked clone, Vicky punched through the wall, making a hole large enough for the others to follow.

Vista was the last through the hole, throwing a containment foam grenade on the pile of clones as she passed.

By the time Amy caught up with the others, the fight was over.

Multiplayer was out cold on the floor with Steeljaw watching over him, Uber was pinned down by her sister, and Leet was on the floor with his back to the wall, glaring daggers at Pathfinder. A snarling Ravage however, kept him from saying anything.

Pathfinder and Vista had a nearby door open and were zip-tying a young couple's hands.
"Targets secured," Soundwave stated tonelessly, making Amy jump. She hadn't even noticed his approach.

*Well done, everyone!* Taylor said over the radio, a small image of her smiling face appearing on Amy's visor.

Letting out a relieved breath, Amy found a nearby crate and sat down.

It had worked. Uber and Leet were in custody, Leet's robots were destroyed, and no one had gotten anything worse than a couple of bruises. One of the nearby clones groaned and she realised Uber was holding his arm at an odd angle. *Okay, none of us got worse than a bruise,* she corrected herself.

"How you holding up?" Vicky said, floating over to her. From the way Taylor perked up, Amy assumed she was still listening in.

*Do you want some privacy?* Taylor offered.

"No, it's fine." It wasn't like she didn't tell Taylor nearly everything these days. Amy thought about her sister's question for a minute before answering. "I'm not sure… I mean, I'm shaking, I've got an adrenaline headache and I *know* I'm going to hurt in the morning, and yet…"

"You feel great?" Vicky suggested.

"Yeah… is this how you feel after a fight?"

Vicky grinned. "*Yup!"

"Sometimes, when no one gets hurt, yeah," Taylor said with a nod.

_Huh…_

Amy was still thinking about it when Aegis cursed, getting everyone's attention.

"Guys, I think we forgot something important… who's going to call this in?"

From the sudden looks of guilt in the room, Amy realised it was going to be a long night.

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Chapter End Notes

AN: Well thats the end of that arc.

For Taylor new bots, I went back and forth on the issue for ages trying to decide who she should spark. I always planned for Taylor to end up with 5 human sized bots.

Rhinox, Arcee and Ratchet were decided immediately, but i wasn't sure about the last two. In the end, as you can see, I picked Soundwave and Cyclonus.

Soundwave, because I prefered him over Blaster and while I always intended to bring soundwave in, it was just a matter of when.

Cyclonus was a difficult one, I wanted Taylor to have a flyer and I always like Cyclonus's more positive traits (Loyalty and a strong sense of honor.) Then IDW came along and while I liked him, his attitude had me in two minds.
Then MTME #47 came out
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, BikerBitch
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 chronologically.

Topic: Panacea's new clothes
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America

SenorEel (Original Poster)
Did you know really spicy food can trigger arrhythmia?
No? Me neither.

So while sitting in the hospital, convinced I was going to die, this cape walks in.

At first, I didn't know who it was, then she started healing people and I realised, HOLY SHIT! That's Panacea?

When did she score an upgrade?

(i'm fine btw, turns out it was a false alarm.)

(Showing page 1 of 15)

► Sergeant Duck (EMT)
This afternoon, I think.

I didn't get much chance to speak to her, but apparently her family paid for it.

► kel
Damn that's a nice costume wonder who she got to make it?

#Pants-on-Head Where did you find food spicy enough to give you a hatal fart attack?

► IceCaddy (Wiki Warrior)
Huh It's more figure hugging than her last one. Panacea's pretty good looking. Think she's single?

I am surprised by the visor though, I thought new wave didn't wear masks?

► Sergeant Duck (EMT)
That's just bad lighting in the picture, in person it's almost completely transparent so it doesn't hide her identity.
When you look closely, you can see words and stuff reflecting on it so I think it's tinker-tech.

► SkyHigh
Wow! Now Panacea looks like a real super heroine, not just a backbencher who just stays in the safe zone to patch people up (No offence intended, just saying the old robe wasn't all that impressive. Was that old thing regular cloth or did it have kevlar in it in case of stuff like a junkie busting into the ER gun blazing while she was helping out?) Guess after she one-shotted Multiplayer and other stuff like getting sucker-punched by Lightshow at that PR event, her family figured she could use a costume upgrade, and is that some sorta weapon attached to her back? Lest the lesson be forgotten, don't mess with the Medic.

► CooportativeMole
#IceCaddy Not only is Panacea underage, but speculating on the love life of one of the best healers in the world makes me despair for humanity

Personally I am glad that Panacea has proper protection considering the recent insanity by Leet, but I don't think that encouraging the placement of a healer in harm's way by calling what she has previously done being a 'backbencher' shows any understanding of our cities heroes. We should hope that Panacea is kept out of any future fighting and continues to heal those in need for free - you have to wonder where New Wave got armor that expensive looking.

► IceCaddy (Wiki Warrior)
#CooportativeMole
Aw don't be like that. I know she's not interested, but a man can dream right?
Not like I'd have a chance with Glory Girl.

[Post edited for content]
*User has received an infraction for this post.*

► Brilliger (Moderator: Protectorate Main)
Panacea and Glory Girl are both underage, please do not post inappropriate comments.

► Dollhouse (Verified Cape)
I have to admit, it's a good design. Clearly Tinker made, but immediately recognisable as a healers uniform.

Can I ask who designed it?

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 13, 14, 15

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► Dawgsmiles (Veteran Member)
#CooportativeMole
It's not unheard of for paramedics, the roving ambulance drivers to carrying tasers to zap the ever living fuck out of muggers while on duty if they come across them.

Which is basically what Panacea will be doing, walking around and zapping muggers in the defense of others.

► Space Zombie
Actually, is it me, or has New Wave been more active lately?

I Keep seeing GG and the others flying about in costume more.
Matrix (Verified Cape) (Autobot Commander)
#DollHouse
I did most of the design work with some help from Dragon. I'm really happy with how it came out.

Alot of the details were specified by New Wave.

Dollhouse (Verified Cape)
#Matrix
Really? huh, next time your on patrol, you should come by my shop.

GloryGirl (Verified Cape)
The gear is Tinker-tech, Matrix built it all for her. It's got all kinds of gadgets built in and looks great

We decided Panacea needed a more protective costume, something that's more fitting for a hero.

The weapon was Matrix's idea, it's a stun baton with one hell of a kick

Space Zombie
Lady Photon will be making a statement eventually, but yeah, New Wave is trying to make a
difference again. We're not recruiting or anything, but we are going to patrol more in an effort to help people.

Answer Key
So Matrix is behind the new armor and weapons, that is pretty awesome. I hope that with Panacea's
new gear she can smash some villains in addition to her healing.

Ekul
I've got one of those limbs, it's almost like having my own arm back! (pic)

there's a thread here talking about them.

Nod
Damn, that costume is cool AF.

Sergeant Duck
Yeah, I got badly burned the other month, it was bad enough that they considered putting me on
Panacea's waiting list. The hospital started using this new cream on it and now I barely have a scar.
Tinkers are such bullshit.

Edit: just to be clear, I don't mean to sound ungrateful, I could never thank whoever made that stuff
(dragon?) enough. It's just mind bending the things they can build.

ProbablyPathos
#GloryGirl
Doesn't tinker gear take expensive maintenance, how is New Wave going to afford spending the
money both to pay Matrix and to keep Panacea's new equipment working? Wouldn't it be better if
you are trying to put more of an effort into patrolling and fighting villains to spend the money on
someone who actually patrols?
Also what do you mean by 'helping people again'? It sounds nice and all, but the next step up from
regular patrols and having Panacea heal for free sounds like attempting to go on the offensive against
some of the gangs to me, which is going to just result in collateral damage and nothing to show for it.

GloryGirl (Verified Cape)
#ProbablyPathos
No, it's cool. I don't know all the details, but the costs are all covered. Besides, Panacea will be
joining New Wave on patrols from now on.

I can't really say what we have planned, but expect to see a lot more of us

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4 ... 13, 14, 15

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▶ Catof9tales
Good to see the new wave doing more patrols now
Also Panacea doing patrols now that can be nothing but good

▶ Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Is it really such a good idea to have Panacea on the front lines? What if something happens to her?

▶ TheWinsomeWasp (Unverified Cape)
Wow, that costume looks cool as hell, very badass.

Actually, does anyone know where to get a costume or how much they cost? I really need to get something professional.

I wanna be Verified, but not while my costume looks like crap *cries*

▶ WagTheDog
She's already been on the 'front lines' see here, here and here. Y'know Brockton Bay really is a shit hole when even the healers need a gun.

Besides, did you miss it when the ballon breasted bimbo tried to smash Panacea's face in?

▶ Wheeljack (Autobot)
Actually, almost everything in Panacea's costume is based on pre-existing tech that requires very little maintenance.

Edit: Sorry, had to edit out details.

End of Page. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, ... 13, 14, 15

Topic: Battle of the Boardwalk!
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America
SenorEel (Original Poster)
I don't know how many of you have seen the news, but earlier this afternoon, the Boardwalk came under attack by a pair of transforming robots.

No word yet on who is responsible or what the PRT plans to do in response.

(Showing page 1 of 30)

▶ LightCat
Rogue transforming robots? Looks like Matrix has lost control of her AI's.

Welp, time to gtfo of Brockton Bay, enjoy your quarantine!

▶ Arty5033
OH GOD, IT'S THE ROBOT APOCALYPSE! SAVE US, ARMSMASTER!
Lolitup
Oh come on, that's has to be fake, no one would really be stupid enough to pull a stunt right outside the Protectorate base.

kel
Replied On Jan 1st 2011:
Just got a pic of those bots

Link 1

Ethier matrix has decided to downgrade -because damn they look tacky- or we have a new bot tinker in town.

Creationist (Verified Cape)
Something from Toybox maybe? Does anyone have any more details? are they fully independent or are they using a control system of some form?

Iblis
Damn, that's fucked up.

What are they spraying on the crowds, it looks like containment foam?

Tumbles
Okay, for a slightly more coherent recap.
2 robots (pics here) appeared on the boardwalk, made a statement here, then started spraying foam on everyone.

When the hero's arrived, the robots were joined by people wearing tinker-tech head gear. It looks like they were being mind controlled.

SkyHigh (Cape Groupie)
If those're Toybox products, the line's probably about to get discontinued as this is the WORST ad campaign ever.

Rattrap (Autobot)
Replied On Jan 1st 2011:
They're two-bit, glitch ridden piles of scrap who'll be laughing out the otherside of their skid plates when we get done with them!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 28, 29, 30

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Slam-O
Replied On Jan 1st 2011:
#Rattrap
Damn you seem salty hey you willing/allowed to tell us who the new bot tinker is rattrap? Someone new or a tinker already in are lovely little slice of heaven.

Rattrap (Autobot)
We don't know who it is yet. But when we do, we're gonna make them sorry.

No one goes around trying to drag our names through the muck!
Bruce Loa
#Iblis
It's like a home-brewed containment foam. The crap goes rock solid when it sets.

My Uncle owns a shop on the boardwalk, that foam crap glued the door shut, trapping people inside!

Where the hell were the Protectorate? Normally we see the Wards hanging around, but no one's seen them in ages, WTF?

L33t (Verified Cape) (Banned)
The Robot is called Cy-Kill, you can find out more (including exclusive video) on our website

KidWin (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Just so everyone knows, the crowd of mind controlled people were actually Multiplayer and the tinker-tech was fake. Just a bunch of junk glued to a helmet.

PiGuy3 (Banned)
Their yours?
You copying off matrix now as well as games?

SkyHigh (Cape Groupie)
Umm, Leet, what game is that supposed to be? Cuz I'm totally drawing a blank and you & Uber's "thing" has always been reenacting various video games. Or are you breaking pattern cuz the game thing just hasn't been working for ya, as evidenced by your long string of defeats, not to mention that whole ESRB violation with trapping Vista in a zombie-horror game?

XxVoid_CowboyxX
#Skyhigh
Did you see that vid? Vista was fine, she's a cape after all. Besides, what kid hasn't played a zombie game before?

Does anyone know where they're going to be next? I'd love to see them in person.

L33t (Verified Cape) (Banned)
#PiGuy3
Why not? Bitch has been copying off me.

Slam-O
Leet you must have started with the world's cruelest handicap if you want to have a dick fighting contest with a women

*user has received an infraction for this post*

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4 ... 28, 29, 30

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780Halberd
Leet's new robots look good, he probably is trying to step up his game with two of the best tinkers in the world in town with him now. Uber and Leet are keeping up their showmanship, I love their streams, even if they have decreased in frequency.

#SkyHigh Vista is a hero, she probably has seen worse stuff before, and the whole ratings system is stupid anyways
I know right? The age ratings are all set by crotchety old men and worrying nannies. I had to ask my dad to buy Vampire Trail for me last week.

 Isn't that the game with the really bad sex scenes? You that desperate for some vampire pr0n?

 Hey, is it true Geo looks like Glory Girl?

 Screw you man, it's got a great story.
And yeah, now you mention it, she does. Bigger boobs though.

 Off subject guys. Just a reminder, this is a SFW board.

 Finally got online!
I was there when Uber and Leet attacked. I got covered in that foam of theirs, (the shit stinks btw).

 It took the PRT nearly 2 hours to dissolve it and it ruined my phone!

 Friendly bit of advice? I'd start sleeping with both eyes open if I was you. The Empire's coming for you after that shit you pulled last night.

*User has been banned for this post.* - You have been warned before, PHO will not tolerate racism. Enjoy your ban

 A reminder to all, racism will not be tolerated. Keep things civil, or go home.

 And the wannabe gang members are now coming out to play online. Why don't you go try to work up the courage to beat up a black person instead of trying to claim some sort of moral high ground?

*User has recived an infraction for this post* - Don't antagonize them. IamTheLaw

 I was at the boardwalk, what the fuck are the Protectorate doing? It took them ages to reach us and no ones seen the Wards in ages.

 Protectorates stretched thin these days I think.

 As for the Wards, there's a few discussions about it, here is the latest one.

End of Page. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 ... 28, 29, 30
**Topic: Anarchy at Arcadia!**

**In: Boards ▶ News ▶ Events ▶ America**

**ProbablyPathos** (Original Poster)

Holy fuck! For those that dont know, the robots known as Cy-kill and Fitor just attacked Arcadia school!

News is still coming in so I don't know how many people were hurt in this latest attack.

Edit:
Pics here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here
Videos, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here
... Fuck it, sorry there's too many to keep linking

(Showing page 1 of 19)

**► SkyHigh** (Cape Groupie)

WTF? Have Uber & Leet lost what remains of their minds? The WARDS go to school at Arcadia! The dynamic dunderheads are pretty much BEGGING the Protectorate to land on them with both feet and throw away the key!

**► 780Halberd**

Holy Fuck, I was there! They came through the gate and started shooting at people! I'm still shaking.

Glory Girl tried to fight them off and Matrix was badly hurt. They carried her off into the school!

I managed to get some of it on video

**► kel**

Bloody hell! The PRT and every gang is now going to be out for their heads after this.

**► P3dat0r93** (The Guy in the Know)

Here, Video of the attack is starting to leak.

**► Deimos**

#P3dat0r93

Starting to leak? There's footage of it all over facespace! what the fuck where they thinking! the PRT going to go librarian poo!

**► SkyHigh** (Cape Groupie)

Geez, 2 tinkertech Rock'em Sock'em Robots against an unarmored girl? It's not like she's got any powers other than her tinker mojo. That's pretty much beating the hell out of an ordinary girl there, and the way she was rushed inside still covered in the foam makes me think that getting drenched in the stuff may not be too good for a person's health.

**► Basemaster24**

I got doused with the goram foam it burned me and buds like hell and almost blinded several others and to top it all off the goram stuff tie dyed my fuck cloth which I now have to burn. Also thank you scion for Panacea best hero ever she cured us right there and then.

#L33t When the PRT and protectorate find you I hope you get the fucking Horns

**► Miss Mercury** (Protectorate Employee)

This is not an official statement, but as a PRT employee I suggest that anyone who has had contact with that foam do the following.
1. Wash affected area immediately.
2. Seek medical advice.

Anyone with information on the location of Uber and Leet should also contact the PRT.

We would also like to remind people not to take matters into their own hands, leave it to the Protectorate.

**Bruce Lao**
Yeah, cause the PRT has done such a great job so far *rolls eyes*

---

**RWD** (Autobot) (Archivist)
Here is a video statement from Matrix.

In case it wasn't clear. L33t? We were coming for you!

**FirstAid** (Autobot)
#SkyHigh I've been told I can't post the full chemical makeup or a detailed description of the effects.

However, I can tell you that the foam was extremely caustic, causing severe chemical burns and skin bleaching and Matrix was very nearly drowned in it.

**JustAGuy** (Verified Sane Human)
Not cool L33t. Not cool at all. Are you trying to get a kill order.

**kel**
Damn matrix does not play around when you piss her off.

#FirstAid damn imagine what would happen if you accidentally ingested the stuff that would not be pretty.

Also who's the new bot? Looks like another medic bot.

**FirstAid** (Autobot)
#Kel
That's Ratchet, he's taking over as the Autobot chief medical officer.

**Rattrap** (Autobot)
#L33t,
[post edited due to graphical content and excessive profanity.]

*User had received an infraction for this post*

**CooportativeMole**
justaguy do you even know how serious a kill order is? I sometimes wish that this website didn't have the fastest cape news updates because half it are gamers and another quarter are kill happy lunatics. Kill orders are for crazies like the Slaughterhouse 9 and Lullaby. We do not need bounty hunters and vigilantes crawling out of the woodwork and the E88 taking a brief moment of legitimacy to do some legalized murder.

We just need to wait for Dragon and the Protectorate to hunt Leet down and put him in prison where
he belongs. Matrix's robot making threats on the internet is not helping.

► Brilliger (Moderator: Protectorate Main)
#Rattrap
Good god, where did you learn half those words?

► CooportativeMole
#Brilliger The Autobots have a 24/7 Internet connection in their heads, right? Well, there's your answer

► Nondeceptive
#CooportativeMole
I'm not sure Matrix making threats is helping much either, but damn she looked pissed.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4 ... 17, 18, 19

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► Arty5033
Okay, we get it, lots of you were there and it was bad, you don't need to keep posting pictures

► Lolitup
Damn, and I thought winslow was a shithole, at least we don't get capes suddenly attacking the school!

► Saskatchew
No, we just have to deal with bangers shanking each other in the corridors which is {sarcasm} oh so much better {/sarcasm}

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Hey, if the Wards go to Arcadia, why didn't they help? The only capes we see in the video are Matrix and Glory Girl.

► WagTheDog
XxVoid_CowboyxX
And what were they supposed to do? If they tried to help, they would have outed themselves immediately.

► Nondeceptive
Huh, must be nice to be friends with a cape, knowing they'll screw you over just to hide their face.

Where the hell was the PRT or the Protectorate when this happened?

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Is it just me, or does Matrix actually look hotter after she got foamed?

*user has received an infraction for this post - Matrix is underage.*

► WagTheDog
#Nondeceptive
Ouch, bitter much? Remember, we don't actually know which Wards, if any go to Arcadia, there was probably only so much they could do.

#XxVoid_CowboyxX Dude! Seriously? She just got beat to hell and foamed and all you care about
it how hot she looks?
… that being said, Matrix is kinda buff. Looks like she works out.

► Catof9tales
#XxVoid_CowboyxX is that all you think about? Especially after what's happened.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Oh come on! At school, all she wore was jumpers and lose fitting clothes. I wish I'd know she looked like that before she left.

*user has received an infraction for this post*

End of Page. 4, 5, 6, 7 ... 17, 18, 19

(Showing page 4 of 4)

► Windblade (Autobot) (Moderator)
#XxVoid_CowboyxX
Would it have changed anything?

btw, You've already been warned about staying on topic, and not discussing a capes private life enjoy your 24hr ban.

► Antigone
Is it me, or do the mods have it in for XxVoid_CowboyxX? (dude, get a shorter name)

Actually, when did Autobots start getting made into mods?

► Cy-kill (Banned)
Greetings all!
I'm here to respond to all the baseless accusations. We have not lost our minds, and no one would have gotten hurt if that theif matrix had just kept her mouth shut!

In reponse to her laughable threats, I graciously accept the challenge. I will meet you on the field of battle in three days.

As you are the one who issued the challenge, I get to pick the where it will take place. I will send you the details later.

*user has received an infraction for this post*

► Tin_Mother (Moderator)
Replied On Jan 1st 2011:
That is enough!
Threatening other users will not be tolerated.

#Cy-kill, L33T you have already been banned, creating another account changes nothing.

If people can't be civil, I will lock this thread.

#Antigone Since I decided I could do with more help keeping you lot in line

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4
Hey guys, this might seem like an odd question, but has anyone seen the Wards lately?

Uber and Leet attacked the boardwalk earlier today, an area known to be patrolled by the Wards, and yet they weren't there.

RandomRandomness
You're right, I live in a nicer area, the parts of the city where you can still go out at night.

Normally I see the Wards near my house but it's been well over a week. Last night, there were some bangers tagging the walls nearby and going out after dark is getting risky.

kel
Same here I live near a ward patrol route and I haven't seen them in a while as well.
Have they been pulled of patrols for some reason?

XxVoid_CowboyxX
Well Shadow Stalker vanished a few months ago now, maybe it's related?

Catof9tales
I heard a rumour that she'd been sent to a containment zone.

Chaosfaith
Buddy of mine swears he's seen stalker hanging about.
He works for BBPD, apparently a couple of E88 thugs told him they got jumped by her last week.

Bruce Lao
Maybe they just have time off or something? It's not like they actually do anything but look good for the cameras.

Frandom (Cape Groupie)
Really? I've seen Matrix flying about and one of her Autobots was at the park the other day (pic)

PiGuy3 (Banned)
#Bruce Lao. Not true remember when ABB and E88 decided to duke it out? The wards where there helping deal with that shit storm.

They also from what I heard help deal the deathblow to the old merchants.

They're more use than some teams I'd care to name anyway. 'Cough' Concert 'cough'

XxVoid_CowboyxX
Don't forget what happened at the bank, the Wards caught the Undersiders and stopped Uber and Leet at the same time!

Oh come on, Concert weren't that bad. Lightshow was hot!
Only if you like tinker inflated bimbos.

She recently admitted to it, check the thread here for the details.

Back to the topic, has something happened to the Wards?

What about the PRT, you guys know anything?

They could have been taken off patrols for some conduct reason maybe? Something they did as a group or a build up of small thing?

Could it be something to do with that Left4dead video that Uber and Leet put up?

I don't know... I mean, Vista was swearing like a trouper but given what was happening could you blame her?

Would that really be enough to pull an entire team?

Nah no way they would pull a ward for swearing in that situation anyone would.

BTW, watch your wallets if you go down to the boardwalk or the mall. Since no one's seen the Wards in awhile, the number of pickpockets and shoplifters has apparently gone up.

Better question, why would the pull the wards at all?
There's a gang war going on out there, I can hear the gunshots almost every night. Don't they need all the help they can get?

Bureaucratic stupidity?
Youth Guard doing something retarded?
Training?
Sensitivity training?
Alien Abduction?
Taken by the Lizard overlord?
Illuminati Brainwashing?
Invasion of the pod people?
Trapped in an alternate dimension fighting there evil counterpart?
There trying to save Vista who got trapped in wonderland?

Take your pick from the above and more for why the wards not out patrolling.

Fire_eater 'Wonderland'? Dude, not funny!

Fire_eater
Oh crap! Sorry I forgot about that. I meant the book, not that... yeah... sorry.

► **SkyHigh** (Cape Groupie)
It's A Simurgh Plot!

► **Slam-O**
Replied On Jan 1st 2011:
Were through the looking glass here people (tinfoil hat time.)

Edit: Has anyone seen them post recently?

► **ClockBlocker** (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
*monotone*
We are fine.
EverYthing is fine.
The wOrld is in perfect harmony.
We woUld like to remind you all that noTHing is wrong
It is our duty to GAURD you all.

**End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4 ... 18, 19, 20**

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► **Bagrat** (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
WTF?

Did Clock get his account hacked?

► **SkyHigh** (Cape Groupie)
Master/Stranger alert!

► **Lo A Quest**
Replied On Jan 1st 2011:
Now that everyone's finished panicking, Look closely at what he posted.

► **BadSamurai**
Youth Guard?... aw fuck, what have they done now?

► **Robby**
Uber and Leet just attacked Arcadia, publicly assaulting Matrix and the Wards were nowhere in sight!

WTF is going on?

► **Deadman**
I love how all of your first response is to yell about the youth guard. How dare they want to stop turning teenagers into child soldiers and sending them out to fight against lethal enemies. Yes the bay obviously needs the wards to fight against the gangs and other evil doers, but by forcing the wards to stop being put in dangerous situations maybe that will make the prt send in adult reinforcements.

I'm not saying the YG is correct, but I can also see their point of view. Their purpose is to try and protect the underage wards, and to enforce the laws that are meant to keep the wards from fighting lethal threats and as often as they do in BB.
IF they just sat by and allowed it to happen they would set a precedent for everywhere else that its ok for the wards to always be in danger and fighting.

► P3dat0r93 (Original Poster) (The Guy in the Know)
Holy shit! Guys, it looks like the Wards are back and in big way!

They just took down Uber and L33t, hard.

More details here.

End of Page. 4, 5, 6, 7 ... 18, 19, 20

Topic: Challenge of the L33t-bots
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America
RWD (Original Poster) (Autobot) (Archivist)
I'm sure you're all aware of the recent animosity between Uber + Leet and Matrix recently.

In response to Leets unprovoked attack on Arcadia Matrix agreed to meet Leet at a location of his choice to settle matters once and forall.

The fighting ended earlier tonight, with Matrix victorious. (of course )

While the fight was going on, Uber, L33t and Multiplayer were captured by the Wards, assisted by New Wave's Glory Girl and Panacea.

Uber and L33t are now in custody along with 2 henchmen and all the equipment they used.

That equipment also included the recordings L33t was making of the fight.

Matrix has decided to release this footage to the public, unedited beyond what was necessary to protect identities.

You can download it here, warning for language and violence.

Just for fun, here is a group shot of everyone involved in tonights action.

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► JustAGuy (Verified Sane Human)
Now that's funny I can feel the burn from here, and L33t certainly had it coming after attacking Matrix in school.

That said, Uber and L33t are lucky that Matrix caught up to them before the E88 did. I've seen the Nazis patrolling the streeys and they looked pissed. I can't imagine them showing that much restraint.

► kel
LOL great video.
Good on you guys taking him down after what they did.
Also dig the new bots matrix what are their names?
#justaguy amen to that.

► Slam-O
Wonder if the energy cannon she used on the white one could blow chunks out of an endbringers.

*user has received an infraction for this post*
CooportativeMole
Well that video was fairly disturbing, both Leet and Matrix's robots looked like they were using lethal weapons, and it especially looked like Matrix's life was in danger at points. I have to question why Matrix was acting without Dragon or the Protectorate, this video feels like it opens up more questions than it answers.
Slam-O
The Endbringers are not related to this topic, think before you bring them up just because a tinker has powerful guns, it is crass and begins to trivialize the disasters they cause.

PiGuy3 (Banned)
So Matrix hit the bay's tweedle dum and tweedle dee on ground of his choosing and kicked his ass so hard he reached escape velocity? Right on.
Hey having watched the video is it just me Matrix fighting style looks awesome but seemed odd I can't put my finger on what was odd about it though.

Fightmaster
#PiGuy She's holding back. If you watch, you can see it when she occasionally hesitates. She could have ended that fight right at the start, instead, she lead Leet around by the nose and he was too stupid to see it.
If I didn't know better, I'd say she was an experienced fighter. Someone who's been fighting for years.

Devil_Dog18
#Fightmaster your right she is acting as if she has been fighting for years rather than just a few months.
Also there is something I picked up on after watching through the Vid a few times the way she planned this out, the way she lead Leet and Uber around and sprung her trap also the way she carried herself throughout makes me think of veterans who've been in hard combat.

Frandom (Cape Groupie)
Think she's got some combat-thinker power maybe?

DevilsAdvocate (Wiki Warrior)
Or, and this is the really clever bit, she's just really good at faking it?

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
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Devil_Dog18
#DevilsAdvocate You can't fake that kind of thing. It takes training and experience to get that kind of skill.

Noveltry
[Comment edit due to content]
*User has received an infraction for this post - Matrix is underage, please do not post inappropriate or sexual jokes.*

SkyHigh (Cape Groupie)
#Devil_dog18 Maybe she programmed a load of combat moves into her armor with an AI running
the show with broad-strokes orders on what to hit and where to move provided by Matrix through her control system? Rumor has it that’s how Armsmaster kicks so much villain behind: automatic combat suit. Tinkers be bullshit, yo.

#Noveltry. Dude, grow up.

► kel
So are thinkers as well.

Still, I can't imagine the PRT just letting the Wards do this. Think they'll get into trouble?

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Does this mean the Wards are going to start patrolling again?

#Matrix. You rock!

► BikerBitch
Kid Wins armour looks different in that photo? guess tinker-boy's been busy playing with his junk *wink*

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Frowning, Rune tapped her nails on the desk. So Uber and leet have been taken out? She thought to herself.

She wasn't sure how to feel about that. On the one hand, watching Matrix play Leet like cheap violin had been funny. On the other, she'd been hoping to deal with the bastard herself.

She fiddled with the bandages on one of her arms, the cotton was starting to fray and would need replacing soon. After Othala had healed her, she'd been put in a ring with Hookwolf, it was her punishment for losing to Leet. Thankfully, the bastard had gone easy on her, no powers, just a grown man beating the shit out of her for an hour and calling it 'training'.

Othala had freaked about that, but then been banned from healing her.

Rolling her neck with a grunt, Rune looked again at the picture of the Wards, or more specifically, Kid Win. Smirking to herself, she tabbed to the private message system. Maybe he'd earned a little reward.

From: BikerBitch
To: Kid Win
Hey Tinker boy, I know you helped deal with Uber and Leet. Meet me later to talk about it? (No tricks, I promise).

Autobot encrypted messaging system excerpts:

*Glory Girl has joined the channel*
Glory Girl: you guys have your own messaging system? Very cool!
Glory Girl: You seen the thread on your new threads Amy? Looks like it's a hit, I told you years ago you should have gone with something cooler.
Matrix: Thread on threads? *Groan* That was bad and you should feel bad.
Panacea: Oh god. Taylor, you know a mod right? How much to have that thread deleted?
Glory Girl: Oh no, if we have to have threads devoted to our looks, so do you
Matrix: Jack? I know you're there. If you reply to that thread, the details on Amy's costume are sealed, okay?
Wheeljack: erm… sure!...
Waspinator: Too late.
Wheeljack: Quiet you!

~

Wheeljack: Hey guys, I think I've got a new formula for Energon, any free to help me test it?
Wheeljack: Guys? anyone?... Fine, ill do it myself!
Perceptor: Code Wheeljack! I repeat, code wheeljack! Medical to the lab immediately!
FirstAid: OMW!
Ratchet: What's that glitch ridden idiot done now?
Firstaid: False alarm, he's fine. It melted the beaker before he could test it.

~

Panacea: Taylor, I just found Ravage hiding in the bushes outside my house.
Matrix: ... Okay, I honestly have no idea how he got there. Guys?
Soundwave: Apologies, long range reconncacence test. Did not expect him to go so far. Ravage: return to base.
Rattrap: you bet him he couldn't do it without getting seen, didn't you?
Soundwave:... No...
Matrix: How did you spot him anyway Amy?
Panacea: Vicky was trying to sneak back in and nearly landed on him.
Director Piggot listened with one ear as Armsmaster gave her a report of last night's fiasco.

Matrix going off solo to take on Uber and Leet was one thing. She didn't like it, but the girl wasn't a Ward. Anything she did outside of Ward patrols was Dragon's responsibility. When the complaints, lawyers and protests filed in, she could dump them all on on her.

But by dragging the Wards along, it became her problem, and she was already planning how she was going to make her displeasure with them known.

Aside from the paperwork she was causing, Matrix was quickly becoming a potential problem.

Matrix and her 'Autobots' were now one of the largest 'teams' in the city, with more firepower than a typical riot squad. It was one thing when they were barely four feet tall, but her last five robots were human-sized and she couldn't order the girl to stop building more.

Hell, two days ago she overheard a trooper referring to the area around Dragon's workshop as 'Autobot City.'

Piggot pushed her anger - and the memories - down. Matrix wasn't Nilbog and so far she had played ball. She'd followed the restrictions laid down by the PRT, and Dragon made sure any and all of her constructions were properly registered.

As heroes, the Autobots were useful, but Piggot dreaded to think what would happen if they were given cause to turn on them.

"All the paperwork has been passed on to the prosecutor's office," Armsmaster said, finishing his report and dragging Piggot out of her thoughts. "As this is Uber and Leet's third strike, the review board will decide if the Birdcage is a suitable punishment."

The Birdcage. The deepest, darkest hole the PRT had. Personally, Piggot didn't think Leet would last a week. As a prison operated by its own inmates, he'd either end up dead, or enslaved to one of the factions in exchange for protection. Uber would probably last longer. He was clearly the more street smart of the pair.

"What's your opinion?" she asked Armsmaster. She didn't personally like the man, a feeling she knew was mutual, but he was experienced and was more perceptive than people gave him credit for.

"Honestly? I doubt either of them will end up in the Birdcage. Life in maximum security is more likely. When I told Leet about the possibility of being caged, he immediately started offering information and designs in exchange for leniency."

She knew he'd probably get it. Tinkers were just too useful, even bad ones like Leet. He would likely be allowed to design - but not build - items for the PRT, who would judge and assemble it if deemed useful. Maybe they could have them reviewed by Matrix?

Still, as long as precautions were taken, it wouldn't be hard to keep him locked up. Putting the pair in separate prisons would be good for a start.
"I'll contact the prosecutor's office tomorrow," she said with a nod. "Any news on Multiplayer?"

"I'm afraid not. We suspect he hid amongst his clones when the Wards attacked and played possum. The clone they arrested vanished shortly after its arrest. Velocity and Dauntless are looking for him, but I suspect Multiplayer has either left the city, or is laying low and planning to mount a rescue."

She nodded in agreement. If Multiplayer was still in the city, they would know when he attempted to liberate his accomplices. Until then, it was unlikely they would find him. The so-called 'unwritten rules' ensured that.

One more bit of 'cape culture' she could do without. If it was up to her, she'd have every villain unmasked the moment they were arrested. Of course, she was smart enough to know exactly why that was a bad idea. If she pushed too hard, the villains would push back, and it would be innocent people who paid the price.

"If there is nothing else?" Armsmaster asked impatiently.

"Actually, there is. I've just gotten word that we will be receiving reinforcements. A few capes have agreed to transfer to Brockton Bay."

Even with most of his face hidden, she could see the wheels turning in Armsmaster's head. More capes meant Brockton Bay now had one of the largest Protectorate teams in the country.

"I see," he said, his voice carefully level. "Can I ask who?"

She would forever deny smirking in amusement at his pained expression when she told him the names.

"I… didn't think they could spare her?"

"Since the Teeth have gone quiet, we suspect they're moving to another city. Until they show up again, she is willing to relocate."

"I see. I'll make the necessary arrangements," he said, before quickly leaving the office.

Piggot knew it was cruel, but a little pain and humiliation were good things for Armsmaster to experience once in awhile. That aside, Mouse Protector was a popular cape with enough experience that Piggot was willing to put up with her bombastic personality.

##

Barely an hour after Armsmaster had all but fled her office, Dragon walked in. Before she could exchange greetings with the Tinker, Samantha Coyle barged her way inside the office.

"Miss Coyle," Piggot said with forced politeness, "I wasn't expecting to see you today." She lied. She'd been expecting the woman since the Wards went rogue.

Watching the woman, Dragon chose not to comment and simply moved to the side and positioned herself opposite Piggots desk. Piggot was so used to Dragon changing armours that she barely noticed the latest one. It was green, shorter than normal and had more bulk to the limbs.

"Oh really? Considering that you have refused to take my last five calls, what did you expect I'd do?"

"Miss Coyle, while I understand your frustration, I have been busy," Piggot said, just wanting to be
"Busy? You allowed a Ward to be attacked at school, and 'I'm busy' is your excuse?!!"

"I think you're being a little unfair," Dragon argued. "This is the first time since the Wards were established in Brockton Bay that someone was stupid enough to attack the Wards in their civilian ID's."

"I don't care if it's the first time," Coyle said, glaring at the cape. "It should never have happened in the first place! The PRT is supposed to keep the Wards safe. Yet the only protections at Arcadia are apparently a device that blocks cell phones and a pair of locked gates! You didn't even have a patrol in the area! From what I understand, they were all on the other side of the city! I will be making your lack of forethought clear to my supervisors."

Piggot leaned forward in her chair, wishing for the days when she could have just punched the woman. "Aside from not being able to spare the manpower, a constant PRT or Protectorate presence at the school would only further disrupt the Wards lives. Not to mention that a hero being visible at the school would only invite an attack!"

"Oh please! Ask anyone on the street where the Wards are and they will say 'Arcadia'," Coyle shot back, rolling her eyes. "Your inability to protect the school is only half the problem, Director. What about the fact they somehow managed to sneak out and arrest a pair of villains!"

Piggot glared at the woman and held on to the last fraying remains of her patience. She had dealt with worse people in the past, but something about the woman's attitude grated. She was arrogant and entitled to the point that Piggot suspected she'd never truly worked for anything in her life.

"I don't know how the Wards managed that little stunt, but I assure you, I fully intend to find out."

"So you admit, you can't protect the Wards anymore than you can control them?" Coyle said with a hint of triumph in her voice.

"And when was the last time you tried telling a teenager not to do something?" Dragon said quickly before Piggot could respond.

"I wouldn't be so calm if I were you," Coyle sneered. "I know full well what part you played in this debacle and the Youth Guard will be looking into how you encouraged this situation!"

While Coyle was focused on Dragon, Piggot frowned. Coyle was surprisingly well informed. Before she could say anything, an e-mail arrived from Dragon.

Dragon crossed her arms. "What would you have me do? I'm not sure if you are aware, but one of the major reasons for forming the Wards was to stop them running off alone at night, trying to be heroes. The thinking was, if we can't stop them, we should at least guide them."

Ignored by the two women, Piggot subtly opened the message and started skimming through it. The information was mostly pictures and a few notes, all centred around Miss Coyle.

"Well, I-

"Have you ever heard the saying, 'never give an order you know won't be obeyed?'" Dragon said, when Coyle tried to speak. "When Matrix made it clear to me that she was going after Uber and Leet, I had two choices: I could order her not to go, or I could try to help. The former would have done nothing but undermine my authority, damage any trust we have and cause needless resentment."
Piggot smirked slightly as the quote reminded her of the 'rules' her old sergeant had drilled into her squad.

Never lie to the troops.
Never tell a man to do anything you're not willing to do yourself.
Never give an order you know won't be obeyed.

"So yes, when the Wards showed up, determined to help her, I allowed it and did everything I could to minimise the risk. I had a remote suit watching over Matrix, who was backed up by five Autobots. The Wards were also assisted by several Autobots and I made sure a PRT patrol was closeby."

"So you let them put themselves in harm's way?! I think it's my duty to tell you that the Youth Guard will be looking into your employment of Matrix. I find it hard to trust your oversight when you're not even in the same country as the girl you are supposed to be mentoring!"

"You're right," Dragon said simply. There was a hiss of releasing seals and parts of her helmet shifted, giving her more room to move as she reached up and removed her helmet.

Her dark hair was short, and her skin was just dark enough to make guessing her ethnicity impossible. She also had cybernetics near the corners of her eyes and a visible scar on her forehead. There was also something off about her eyes but the details were too small for Piggot to make out what it was.

The woman fixed Samantha Coyle with a glare more suited to her draconic namesake. "My name is Teresa Richter, and I'll be living in Brockton Bay from now on."

Surprised by the sudden unmasking, Coyle struggled to regain her mental footing. "T-this changes nothing! You still encouraged the Ward-"

"Oh give it a rest," Piggot snapped, having finished reading through the e-mail. "Let's be honest, you're not here out of concern for the Wards, you're here because of Concert."

Coyle gave her a look so perfectly blank it was almost painful. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Did you think we wouldn't notice? Samantha Coyle, only daughter of Gerald Coyle, the current CEO of NKT-Galactic who founded and sponsored Concert. The same Concert who publicly humiliated themselves when they attacked a local hero."

Piggot's smirk turned downright nasty. "I'm interested to know why you left a well-paid director's position at NKT-Galactic at the same time as your brother's arrest. Or how you managed to secure a position inside the Youth Guard so quickly. And while we're at it, how did you know the details of Dragons involvement last night?"

"The timing of my retirement was a complete coincidence," Coyle said. "And I'm not obliged to tell you where I get my information."

"Really? Well, putting that aside for later..." Piggot rotated her screen so that Dragon and Coyle could see the picture on it. "Can you explain this?"

The image in question was a picture of a nude Samantha Coyle straddling a Gesellschaft cape.

"How dare -? Coyle hissed, going pale at the image.

"No, how dare you!" Piggot growled back, "You think you can just walk into my city and tell me
how to do my job? I'm fighting in a ring where my opponents are bigger, stronger, smarter, faster and better equipped than I am, and I am tired of dealing with people like you. I have more than enough here to see you arrested. I'd suggest you get out of my office."

The two women glared at each other, each waiting for the other to flinch.

Coyle broke first, struggling to regain the confidence she'd had when she came in. "You wouldn't dare, my family would bury you!"

Raising an eyebrow, Director Piggot tapped the send button on her screen. "I believe Charles still works at the Youth Guard main office, doesn't he? I expect you'll be hearing from him soon."

"Y-You can't do this!"

"I already have. I don't think you fully understand the situation here. Brockton Bay is not a healthy, happy city like New York. We don't have the luxury of numbers and there's no cavalry charging to our rescue."

"Despite what you think," Piggot continued, "I don't like using children. But having them visible helps make public areas safer and frees up the Protectorate to deal with the gangs. In the time since you removed the Wards from duty, petty crimes such as shoplifting and pickpocketing has increased. There have been no less than two fights on the Boardwalk between Empire and ABB members, who are now walking around openly wearing their gang colours."

To say nothing of the complaints she was receiving from the various shop owners as their businesses suffered.

"With that said, I suggest that you leave my office. Now."

Still glaring, Coyle spun on a heel and stalked out of the room.

Piggot had only been slightly exaggerating: there wasn't enough here to arrest Coyle, but there was more than enough to overturn the court order.

Letting out a frustrated huff, she turned her attention to the still maskless Dragon. "I assume this information you gave me came from Tattletale."

"She's choosing to go by Insight now, but yes, it did," Dragon corrected. Looking at the faceplate of the helmet she was still holding, Dragon frowned. "Despite how I look, I'm not fully healed. This armour is more like a mobile life support machine than anything else, so I expect to still spend most of my time in my workshop."

Piggot nodded. She required constant use of a dialysis machine herself, so she could understand what it was like living with permanent medical issues. "You mentioned relocating here earlier. Will it be permanent?"

"Yes. I plan to live in Brockton Bay full time."

"It's good to finally meet you in person, but we need to discuss what happened last night. Matrix has already told Miss Militia that she will accept any punishment we give the Wards."

It was certainly a touching display of solidarity, and Piggot could almost respect it. But it didn't change what they did and it certainly wasn't going to lessen their punishment.

Smiling slightly, Dragon shook her head fondly. "Yes, she told me that as well."
"Good, I've got a meeting with the other directors in fifteen minutes. I'll deal with the Wards afterwards."

Taking the hint, Dragon slipped her helmet on and sealed it with a hiss. "Very well, we can speak more later."

As the tinker left the office, Piggot realised she'd left the image of Coyle on her screen. Tilting her head, she stared briefly at the image before shaking her head and closing it.

"The things some people will do," she muttered quietly to herself in disgust.

##

(two days after the arrest of Uber and Leet)

Show me how to lie~ You're getting better all the time~ And turning all against the one~Is an art that's hard to teach

Sitting on the edge of a rooftop in the eastern part of the city, Rune hummed quietly to herself.

Getting away from her Empire sponsored nanny had been easy enough. She'd just walked out of the door and told the woman to fuck off when she asked her where she was going. She'd probably catch hell for it later, but it was hardly the first time she'd gone off on her own, so they wouldn't look too closely.

The only real problem was trying not to be recognised.

That's why she had switched her usual hooded-robe like costume for something she'd thrown together out of some motorbike leathers she'd picked up. Her lower body was covered by padded leather pants and boots with gold trim on the shins. She also had a matching jacket with parts of it picked out in yellow.

A repurposed halloween mask covered her face and cheeks, leaving her mouth exposed.

Of course, it had all looked fine when she'd picked it up. But now that she was wearing it, it turned out to be tighter - and more figure-hugging - than she'd intended. Still, it covered everything and she doubted the boy scout would dare touch her without permission.

Costume aside, a small part of her mind kept whispering this was a bad idea.

Flirting with a Ward was one thing, actually meeting up with one like this was probably bordering treason. Kaiser wasn't likely to accept 'teenage rebellion' as an excuse.

On the other hand, she was wearing a different costume in a city with plenty of vigilantes and she was outside Empire territory, so as long as she didn't get spotted using her powers the chances of anyone recognising her was slim.

She was just about to start singing a different song when she heard the faint hum of Kid Win's hoverboard.

Smirking, she stood up and moved into the shadows, hoping to have a bit a fun and surprise him. Her plan fell apart almost immediately when Kid Win landed on the roof and looked straight at her. *Fucking Tinkers*

"R-Rune?" he called out nervously.
Rolling her eyes, she stepped out into the light. "Oh relax, tinker-boy, I'm not going to hurt you."

She couldn't see his eyes, but from the way he gulped, she guessed her costume had been a good choice.

"You like?" she said with a salacious grin. "I felt like wearing something different."

"I-It looks good," he said, clearing his throat. He visibly tried to pull himself together. "You said you wanted to see me?"

"No, I said I wanted to reward you," she said, sashaying closer.

"For what?" Kid Win backed up slightly, and she was willing to bet he was trying not to stare.

"For kicking Leet's ass, of course." She continued to move, pushing Kid Win back until he hit a wall. From the nearly panicked look he gave her, she mentally sighed and decided to tone things down a bit.

"Look, you need to relax. I'm not going to hurt you, or try to recruit you and I'm certainly not going to take my clothes off, okay?" She shouldn't have been surprised by the way he was acting. Hanging out with Nazis didn't exactly leave her with a good reputation and she might have been coming on a little strong.

But surely the boy scout was used to it? She'd heard plenty of the girls at school talking about the Wards and what they'd like to do with them. She couldn't have been the first girl to flirt with him... Damn, she was, wasn't she?

She stepped back and mentally assessed the situation. He hadn't run off or tried to shoot her yet, so she was fairly sure she hadn't freaked him out too badly.

Walking over to the roof's edge, she gave him a smile and sat down, dangling her feet over the edge. While she waited for him to calm down and convince himself it wasn't a trap, she started humming to herself. It took a minute or two, but Kid Win did eventually join her.

"I don't know if you heard, but Leet fucked me up pretty badly a few days ago and I was happy to see him taken down."

"Yeah, I did hear about that. Are you okay?"

She chuckled at the question, surprised at the genuine concern in his voice. "Yeah, I'm fine. Othala fixed me up in no time."

As they lapsed into a more relaxed silence, Kid Win took another deep breath. "Y'know, you've got a nice voice. You ever think about doing it for a living?"

"Points for effort, boy scout, but your delivery could have been smoother," she said, laughing when his visible face flushed in embarrassment. "Singing... eh, it's a hobby. I doubt I'd be allowed to make it big."

Not unless she wanted to be Kaiser's little propaganda singer, anyway.

Shaking the thought aside, she shifted sideways and leaned against the tinker.

This was... nice. She wasn't naive, she had boyfriends before, but this was the first time she'd tried spending time with someone as 'Sabrina the Teenage Nazi' and not be judged. Still, it was getting
late and she wasn't sure when she'd get a better chance.

Turning her head, she waited until Kid Win turned to look at her. The moment he was in place, she darted forwards, pulling him into a kiss.

Kid Win tensed for a moment before quickly relaxing and following her lead. Nearly thirty minutes passed before Rune pulled away. They had spent the time alternating between some light kissing and some cuddling. Rune's only complaint was that tinker armour wasn't nice to snuggle up against.

She was reluctant to just get up and leave, but she couldn't just unmask to him. Instead, she settled for arranging another meet up and more conversations on PHO.

If Kaiser ever found out, he'd probably kill her, but at the moment, she couldn't care less.

_Totally worth it!_ she told herself as she ran across the rooftops, using her powers to glide between the gaps.

Chapter End Notes

An: Thanks to all the people I pestered getting this bloody chapter written. The argument between Piggot and Coyle fight me at every step.

Yeah, in case you can't tell, human Dragon is just her canon body with Adam jensen styled cybernetics.
Huffing, Madison shifted her weight slightly and considered giving up for the fifth time tonight. She was sitting on a low wall that ringed a rooftop, overlooking what she assumed was an ABB safehouse. Problem was, it was nearly midnight, and the safehouse was too well guarded for her to take on solo. She was cold, too, and it looked like it was going to rain soon.

After the Wards and Tay-Matrix took down Uber and Leet, the gangs had settled into an uneasy truce. It wouldn't last of course, but for the last few nights, things had been quiet.

Wanting to stretch her legs, Wasp jumped off the wall and land on the roof. The gangs had been upping their security everywhere lately, making it harder for her to do anything significant on her own.

That didn't make her useless, however. One of the good things about her power was that most people didn't notice her until she landed on them. Not only did it make sneak attacks a cinch, it made listening in on gang members trivial.

She then fed what she learned back to the Arcee, who she presumed, passed it onto the PRT.

From what she had learned, the gangs were getting worried. The smarter ones had noticed that the balance of capes in the city was shifting. Between New Wave, the Protectorate, the Wards, the few indie heroes that were still active and now the Autobots, the heroes were starting to outnumber the villains.

Dragon had also provided the PRT with wearable shields. She'd been watching when a squad of PRT troops had crushed nearly a dozen ex-Merchants and their newest cape, a multi-armed brute.

Sophia had gone on and on about how toothless the PRT and most heroes were, but from where Madison had been sitting, it didn't look that way to her.

Of course, as one banger put it, "the gangs would soon retaliate, putting the heroes in their place and reminding them why they didn't push their luck."

He'd said that right before she'd shot him in the ass with a stinger.

Personally, Madison wasn't sure if things would last or not. For now, she'd just focus on doing what she could.

The sound of screeching tires interrupted her thoughts. Looking over the wall towards the safehouse, she saw two cars skid to a stop.

Both vehicles were matte-black, angular and vicious in appearance with massive tires, armour plating and nasty looking bull-bars bolted to them. One of the cars even had a gun mounted to the roof.

On the hood of both cars, someone had painted the silhouette of two rifles in white, making a V shape. In between the guns was the silhouette of old fashioned scales.

The cars had barely stopped moving when the doors flew open and half a dozen people jumped out. They were all wearing black body armour and masks, making them look more like a commando unit
or something, and all of them were huge. Madison pulled a cheap digital camera out of the pouch she kept on the small of her back and started taking pictures. She didn't want to try her luck against a heavily armed squad, but she wasn't willing to leave without doing something.

There was a crash as the attackers kicked their way through the door, two of them staying behind without a word while the others charged in.

The sound of gunfire split the air as the people inside opened fire and Madison ducked out of reflex. She'd been shot at enough times that it was almost instinctual.

Confident she wasn't the target, she looked over the wall. The unseen firefight sounded brutal; the 'Commandos', as she'd dubbed them, had been carrying automatic weapons and she knew from experience most bangers had small semi-autos at best. Occasionally, she'd come across a lieutenant or someone who was carrying a bit more firepower, but they were thankfully few.

The gunfire was starting to die down and whatever was going on was probably drawing to a close. Madison flew down to the safe house, staying out of the light and relying on her small size and dark costume to keep her from being seen.

She found a window on the upper floor and slipped through the small opening, quietly moving through the house while taking the occasional picture. The room had probably been a bedroom once: an old, faded, bed was still against one wall and there was a chest of drawers nearby.

The safehouse was a war zone. Nearly a dozen men in ABB colours lay dead on the floor and the walls were covered in blood. Fighting down the nausea, she switched her camera to video mode and started recording.

She could hear the sounds of movement in the house, and she realised only at the last moment that someone was heading towards her. She flew into the corner of the room, gripping a crack in the wall that was too small for her to hide inside and aiming her camera towards the door. Her wings did make a small amount of noise when they flapped and she didn't want to risk being found.

A pair of commandos came into the room, their guns held loosely at their sides. This close, Madison could see the same gun and scale insignia as the cars printed on their shoulders.

"I'll search the room, you deal with the bodies," one of the commandos said in a distinctly female voice.

The black masks and body armour had made it hard to tell, but now that Madison knew what to look for, she could see the commando had a slight sway to her hips and her body armour was shaped just differently enough to account for breasts. The fact the woman was over six feet tall and had arms that were thicker than Madison's thigh only made it harder to tell her gender.

"Yeah, yeah," the other commando as he started to drag the bodies out of the room. Mentally, Madison dubbed him Bob. Meanwhile, the woman started rummaging through the drawers and cabinets in the room.

"Hey!" someone called out further inside the house. "We got what we need! Get the bodies down stairs and get out!"

"You better give me a hand," Bob said to his partner, who gave an exaggerated sigh before grabbing one of the bodies by the arms and dragging it down the corridor.

Doing her best to remain unseen, Madison followed along behind them. She made sure to stay up high as most people never looked up and she tried to stay in the shadows when it was possible. She
also tried to keep the camera filming the entire time.

In what had once been a living room, the rest of the commandos were waiting and the pair she had followed dumped the corpses on a pile of dead bodies. All of them were in ABB colours.

One of the commandos had a can of red spray paint and was just finishing off a slightly messy Empire Eighty Eight tag on the wall. Anyone who entered the room would see the bodies with the tag looming over them.

"Alright," one of the commandos said. He sounded like the guy who had been shouting earlier so Madison assumed he was the leader. "We've got three minutes before PD get the call, let's get out of -"

One of the bodies coughed, spitting blood over the leader's feet.

"Huh, we got a live one!" Bob laughed.

"So?" his partner said, sounding bored. "You know the order, no witnesses." Around them, the other commandos nodded.

The man drew his pistol and aimed it at the injured man's head.

As they spoke, Madison gripped her camera tighter and forced herself not to shout. She was a hero, she couldn't let them execute him, but she didn't stand a chance against all of them. The sound of the pistol clocking made the decision for her.

Charging forwards, she thoughtlessly dropped her camera and slammed into the commando's wrist with the force of a bullet. He howled in pain as his wrist broke with a loud crack.

Spinning around, Madison fired off stingers as fast as she could, but the spikes lacked the power to punch through their body armour.

Immediately, the air was filled with bullets as the commandos opened fire. Ducking and weaving around, Madison was buffeted by the bullets that came way too close. It said something about her life that she'd gotten used to this sort of thing and she let the force of the bullets throw her around, making her harder for them to hit her and retaining enough control to avoid getting hurt.

In the middle of it all, Madison saw the team leader aim at the still living ABB man and shoot.

"NO!" she screamed as the man's head all but exploded.

Seeing red, she charged the leader, shifting back to her full height and using her momentum to punch him in the jaw. There was a crunch as they collided and her sudden shift in size knocked them to the floor.

Still sitting on the man's chest, she lashed out, hitting him again and again.

Blood showered the wall in front of her as her side exploded in pain. Clutching at the bullet wound, she shrank out of reflex and flew skywards. Shrinking as much as she could, she banked just as she reached the ceiling, making a brief detour to grab her still shrunken camera from where she'd dropped it before she powered towards the open door.

More gunshots rang out and bullets blew past, knocking her off course as they cut unnervingly close to her. Doubling back over the safehouse, she skimmed the ground for nearly a block before rising above the rooftops.
Her abdomen was a ball of red hot pain and her arm was slick with blood as she tried to staunch the bleeding. She couldn't go to a hospital as she didn't know if the commandos would think to look there, and she couldn't go home either.

Oh god, Mom's gonna freak! A distracted part of her mind thought.

Pushing the thought aside, she pulled her phone out and struggled to dial, her hand shaking violently.

*Wasp?* Arcee said without preamble, *is something wrong?*

"Arcee! I need help. I-I've been shot!" Madison said quickly, dodging a pylon she hadn't seen coming and clenching her teeth from the pain the movement caused.

*What? Scrap! Okay, where are you? We need to get you to a hospital-*

"No! No hospital!"

*Wasp, if you've been shot, you need-*

"I know! But I can't go to a hospital! Please! I'm on my way to your base…." Madison shook her head as her vision blurred. She wasn't going to make it, she was too far away and bleeding too badly. It was taking everything she had just to keep her wings moving.

Just as she was starting to waver in the air, there was a blue flash above her and a dark shape dropped from the sky, covering her in its shadow.

In the state she was in, Madison wasn't able to see what it was until the shape was on top of her and its claws closed around her gently.

Squawking, Laserbeak pulled her close as small thrusters powered them towards the Autobot's base.

Madison's last sight before blacking out was a worried Ratchet looming over her, telling her to make herself bigger. Her world expanded before it became nothing but pain, then darkness.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I had this finished yesterday, but I dropped it on my beta kinda late so they weren't able to get it checked over before today. There was actually going to be another scene here, but after struggling to write it all week I realised it was nothing but padding and I didn't need it. As such, I decided to just kick off the next story arc.
If I still needed sleep, I'd probably be annoyed at Wheeljack for calling me at two in the morning. Apparently, there was an emergency and I needed to come to the workshop immediately. I knew Dad wasn't happy when I woke him up to tell him I was leaving. I think the only thing that calmed him down was my promise that there wouldn't be any danger or fighting involved.

And now, here I was, standing in the hallway while Ratchet and First Aid worked on Madison fucking Clements. I forced down the flash of anger and the very strong desire to simply kick the girl out of the building, gunshot wound or no.

"Ratchet said she's lost a lot of blood, but he thinks she'll make a full recovery," Wyvern said, shifting her weight from one leg to another. She'd been waiting for me outside Ratchet's 'operating room', probably to keep me from charging in once I found out who was being treated.

The operating room had been a pair of empty rooms that Ratchet claimed as his own. He'd knocked the adjoining wall out and then gone to work with Rhinox and Wheeljack fitting any medical tech they could into the room.

Lights built into the ceiling bathed the room in radiation that was harmless to people, but would kill most bacteria. A machine in the corner was feeding Madison a mix of synthetic blood, nutrients and anything else Ratchet felt she needed while he operated on her.

Despite the multitude of sensors, a window had been fitted so anyone passing in the corridor could quickly look in on a patient without having to enter the room. Ratchet wanted it there just in case there was a problem the sensors didn't pick up or a system failure.

Right now, Ratchet and the collection of tools available to him in that room were probably second only to Amy when it came to emergency treatment.

A third room next door had been turned into a small office/consultation room.

With nothing else to do or say, I turned and made my way down to the kitchen, with Wyvern following me.

"I know it's probably not what you want to hear, but Arcee likes her and she's been trying really hard to be a hero and, well, we know you don't like her, but we couldn't just let her die and... I'm just going to stop talking now..." Wyvern rambled, gradually petering off when I didn't say anything.

With a sigh, I stopped and turned back to her. With her big optics, hurt expression and hunched shoulders, she looked like a kicked puppy.

"Wyvern, I'm not... angry with you. It's just... I hated her, okay? Or at least, I thought I did. She helped make my life hell, even if it was just in small, petty ways. And then she turns up on my doorstep, dressed up like a hero and bleeding to death... I'm just... I don't know what I'm feeling at the moment. So i'm sorry if I'm a bit short, okay?"

"It's alright, I understand," Wyvern said, her mood bouncing back quickly as she smiled. "If it helps, I put together a file for Wasp. It's got everything we know and anything the PRT had on file for her. Maybe reading through it will help?"
Wyvern handed me a tablet computer and I reluctantly started skimming through the data. Within a few lines, I'd slowed down and was reading every line carefully.

"I was thinking...Maybe we should do something about her costume. It's not very protective, after all."

"Hmm? Yeah, sure, go ahead," I said without looking up, waving her off as she went to do whatever she said.

The file had more detail than I was expecting. Video and images of 'The Wasp' fighting, predictions on how small she could shrink and how fast she could fly. There was even a chemical breakdown of the venom she used.

The PRT files had tentatively classed her as a tinker for the venom, assuming she made it herself. But Arcee had seen Madison fire small, barbed stingers out of her forearms, so it was more likely her body produced the venom naturally. The venom itself was fairly interesting. It was a very mild neurotoxin that caused localised paralysis and, in large amounts, could even knock someone out.

The PRT did warn that it could trigger an allergic reaction, similar to a bee or wasp sting. An annotation from Wyvern pointed out that Madison had an epipen in her belongings, so I assumed she knew about that, and was trying to avoid killing someone.

The rest of the report stated known sightings and had records of the people she arrested. Mostly, she stuck to arresting unpowered criminals, stopping muggings, drug deals and so on. There were also a couple of notes about her calling the police and passing on information to them.

Over all, she was a model independent hero. She kept the level of force to a minimum, never took anything from suspects and had no clear ties to any gang.

There was one question I kept coming back too. *When* did she trigger?

Was she already a cape when she joined Sophia and Emma? Did she use her powers to help steal my belongings or fill my locker with... stuff.

Shuddering, I pushed those memories down and continued walking towards the kitchen while I re-read some of the data.

According to the file, Wasp's first appearance wasn't that long ago. In fact, the date was familiar but I couldn't place it. Arcee's first report about Wasp had included a photo that was also in the file. Her costume was clearly homemade, being little more than jeans and a hoodie. Subsequent pictures showed the costume being refined over time, presumably as she settled into her 'persona'.

First the switch to black clothes, then the addition of yellow stripes, followed by the motorcycle helmet.

Those were all signs of a fresh trigger and I came to a stop as the date finally clicked. Her first sighting was within days of me seeing her at the park. She was doing community service and I blew up at her.

My insides twisted painfully and I felt like I was going to be sick. Was this my fault? Did she trigger just because I was mean to her? I wasn't sure what I'd do if that was the case.

But no, that couldn't be right. Just getting told off wouldn't be enough to cause a trigger. Would it?

My thoughts were still chasing each other in circles as I walked into the kitchen. *Is this my fault? Did*
"I cause this?"

"The answer is yes, by the way."

The voice made me jump, but irritation overruled my surprise.

"Gee, thanks. That's just what I wanted to hear," I snapped, glaring at Lisa. She was sitting at the table, holding a cup of what smelled like coffee.

"Oh please, we both know you'd prefer me telling you the truth instead of just trying to make you feel better. Now why don't you sit down and tell me what happened."

I opened my mouth to argue, only to close it again when I realised she was right. Sitting down opposite her, I handed Lisa the tablet. "Wasp is up in medical, being treated for a gunshot wound. The problem is, I know her..."

I repeated everything to Lisa, only going off-topic once or twice to moan about the situation. Meanwhile, Lisa was eyeing the tablet, rubbing her forehead as she squinted at the text.

"For what it's worth, you didn't cause her to trigger. She already had powers when you met her that day. I think you just inspired her to be a hero... I think she's got a bit of a martyr complex, but you might want to get a second opinion on that."

She pushed the tablet away, rubbing her eyes.

It was only then I realised just how tired she looked. Her skin was pale and there were bags under her eyes. A glance at the wall-mounted clock showed it was after three in the morning.

"Lisa, are you alright? Why are you even awake anyway?"

Lisa gave me a rueful smile. "Couldn't sleep. I got a headache that won't go away and Ratchet won't give me any more sleeping tablets."

"Again? You've been getting a lot of headaches lately. And why do you need sleeping pills?"

She rolled her eyes. "I've got a madman who wants me locked up in his personal dungeon or dead. Kinda makes it hard to sleep."

"If you're that worried, you should tell Dragon. I'm sure she'd move you somewhere else."

Lisa shook her head, chuckling quietly. "I didn't actually chose to stay in Brockton Bay. When I agreed to work for Dragon, I thought she'd move to Canada or something. I mean, sure, it would have been cold, but it would have been away from Coil. Instead, she chose to keep me here. Want to know why?"

I didn't say anything. I got the impression this had been building for a while, so I chose instead to let her vent. Plus, I wasn't actually sure what to say.

"I'm still here because this is where she wants me to be. In a base, surrounded by people so I can't just get up and vanish. I know your Autobots are reporting everything I do to Dragon, I don't need to be a thinker to figure that one out. My own personal cage, complete with robot guards!"

Slumping down in her chair, Lisa cradled her head. After a few minutes of awkward silence, she mumbled an apology. I moved seats so I was sitting next to her and, with only a slight hesitation on my part, put my arm around her shoulders. I tried not to flinch when she leaned against me.
"Look," I said, "why don't you start from the top? Why are you overusing your power? I know Dragon doesn't work you that hard. And for the record, the Autobots aren't spying on you. Trust me, they keep an eye on you because they like you and genuinely care what happens to you."

Keeping her eyes closed, Lisa laughed weakly. "Yeah… I know. Sorry, I'm just a bit stressed. I wasn't kidding about the madman bit, though. Coil's insane in a really bad way. I didn't work for him, I belonged to him. When he hired me, he gave me a choice between a bullet to the head or working for him. That's how he sees the world: if you have no use to him, you're dead. If he can't get me back, he'll settle for killing me."

"Is that what you've been working on?"

"Yeah… when I made that deal with Dragon, I thought I'd be okay. But being stuck in here is starting to drive me crazy. I can't even go outside the compound without risking getting shot!" opening her eyes and pulling away from me, Lisa sat forward, clutching her drink tightly in her hands. "So yeah, when I'm not busy or I can't sleep, I start trying to find him but there's too many variables. Do you know how many tall, skinny, older men there are in this city?!"

"My dad for one," I said without thinking. There was a moment of silence as we both processed that image, then Lisa broke down giggling.

"Oh god! That's an image I didn't want!" I groaned as Lisa continued to laugh.

##

Eventually, Lisa had got bored with teasing me and went to bed in an attempt to sleep.

With her gone, I'd focused on my reading, stopping only a couple of times to make more tea or quickly scribble down an idea. I was so focused on what I was doing that I had completely lost track of time when Wyvern walked into the kitchen,

The surprising part was that Wyvern was being followed by a very nervous looking Madison. Her skin was still very pale and she had one hand pressed against the wound on her side. Someone had lent her some of my old clothes to wear and as I was a good deal taller than Madison, she was practically swimming in them.

"I'm surprised to see you up," I said honestly, if a bit cooly. "Does Ratchet know you're here? If he doesn't, I really hope you're not trying to sneak out. He'll chase you all the way home if he has to."

"N-no, he knows I'm here," Madison said, looking at the ground in front of her. "I… I'm sorry for coming here like this, but I didn't know where else to go… I couldn't risk the hospital, they might have followed me."

Madison swayed a bit and Wyvern put a hand out to keep the girl standing.

*Oh for god's sake…* "Sit down before you pass out," I snapped.

Madison flinched, but she allowed Wyvern to guide her towards a chair while I forced myself to calm down. I wasn't Emma, I wasn't a bitch and I wasn't going to act like one.

"Why don't you tell me what happened? Does it have anything to do with the shooting last night?" I said, at least trying to sound calmer.

"You know about that?" Madison said, finally looking me in the face.
"Yeah, the news broke about twenty minutes ago. Nearly a dozen people dead with Empire tags on the walls. Arcee-"

"What! No, that's not what happened!" Madison slammed her hands on the table and jumped to her feet. Well, she tried to. What actually happened was that she slammed her hands down and got halfway up before hissing in pain and collapsing back into her chair while Wyvern kept her from falling to the floor.

"Ratchet! We need a hand in here!" I called out as I moved towards Madison's side, knowing the intercom would alert him.

"It's alright, I'm fine!" Madison hissed, even as Ratchet came running into the room.

I went back to my seat while Ratchet gave her a scan, muttering about pulling her wounds.

"She'll be alright. Her wound is already closed," he said, "but it's going to be sensitive for a while, so she needs to take things easy." He gave me a slightly disapproving look.

"Hey! I didn't do anything!"

"She's right, it was my fault. I shouldn't have jumped up like that."

Now giving us both disapproving looks, Ratchet walked over to the sink so he could keep an eye on us both.

"Sorry," Madison mumbled before taking a deep breath. "Yes, I was there. It wasn't the Empire. It was some guys in black, they were looking for something… hang on, do you have my stuff? I managed to get pictures."

Wyvern placed a plastic bag on the table and Madison quickly started digging through it. When she pulled out a camera, it was a little disconcerting to see blood splattered across it. Madison tapped the buttons a few times before letting out a huff.

"Fuck, the batteries are dead. I just need to get some new ones and-"

I held up a hand to stop her rambling. Was Madison always like this, or did I just make her really nervous?

"Can I see the camera?"

With a nod, she passed it across the table. I tried to ignore the dried blood as I turned it over and popped a small flap open on the bottom and pulled out the memory card.

"I've got an adapter in the main room that can read this," I said. I eyed Madison's still pale form. "Ratchet, don't we have a wheelchair or something?"

##

In the end, it turned out we didn't, so Wheeljack quickly made one out of one of the kitchen chairs and some spare wheels. It was hardly hospital standard, but having Ratchet wheel Madison into the main workshop meant I didn't have to feel guilty about watching her limp along.

As we moved through the workshop, Wyvern begged off to do something elsewhere in the building. Leaving me with Ratchet and Madison while I loaded up the pictures on the large screen. When I saw the first image, I nearly became sick at the sight.
"Sorry, I should have warned you," Madison said quietly.

"No, it's alright, I've seen worse." The sad part was I was telling the truth. What happened to those Merchants and Browbeat came to mind. "And stop apologising for everything."

Okay, so maybe I was still being a little hard on her.

Watching as the 'commandos' - Madison's name for them - tried to execute a survivor, I turned to Madison when the footage cut out.

"Is that how you go shot?"

"Y-yeah… I couldn't just stand by and do nothing… not a second time."

Dropping my head, I sighed again. She was making it very hard for me to stay angry with her.

"Teletraan, send a copy of everything to Dragon and Miss Militia." I flicked back to the image of the cars, "and start an image search for that emblem. See if you can find a match."

"Confirmed," Teletraan said cheerfully. He still sounded a bit stilted, but his speech program was coming along well.

"Ratchet? Can you give me and Madison some time alone?" I didn't want to deal with this, but her constant flinching and refusal to look at me was getting on my nerves.

Reluctantly, Ratchet left the room, giving us a both a final warning complete - that Madison wasn't to strain herself - and a stern look, leaving us to stare quietly at each other.

"I'm s-"

"Stop. Just stop apologising, okay." It wasn't a question, and she continued to stare at the floor.

"What happened between us… Look, I'm nowhere near ready to forgive you, and if I'm honest, I don't think I ever will be. You helped make my life hell and laughed the entire time. And yet… Insight tells me I inspired you to become a hero?"

"... Yeah."

"Why?"

"H-have you ever woken up one day and realised you don't like who you are?"

"Practically everyday for over a year." The way she flinched made me feel like crap and I reminded myself, again, that I wasn't Emma. I wanted to be better than her. "Sorry, that was-"

"No, it's fine. You were right that day in the park… We tortured you because it was fun, because Emma had some twisted fixation on you. After the court case… my parents pretty much put me under house arrest. I spent a lot of time thinking about what I'd done and who I was… I know I can't make things right, but every day I wake up and try to make things better for other people."

The words felt like a punch to a gut. When I'd said it, I'd been angry and I hadn't expected her to take them to heart like that.

Taking my glasses off, I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to collect my thoughts. "If you wanted to help, why didn't you join the Wards?"

She was finally looking at me now, there were tear tracks on her face but I chose to ignore them.
"I-I couldn't join the Wards," she said, her voice wavering slightly. "When you join the Wards, everyone assumes you're a hero and what you did before doesn't matter. That's how it was for Sophia and I didn't want that. If people were going to call me a hero, I wanted to earn it. Maybe, later, I could join, but for now…"

//She chases perfection/

In that moment, I realised what she was talking about. She planned to join when she felt she'd done enough good. The problem was, that in her mind, nothing would ever be good enough, so she would just try harder. I wasn't a thinker or a precog, but I could only see one outcome to that mentality.

And If I was her inspiration, would that make her death my fault? Either way, I didn't want to find out.

"... Look. I can't forgive you for the things you've done. Because honestly, I don't think that's what you want." I think Rung's been rubbing off on me, I thought. "But you're trying, and that's more than anyone can ask. I think… I truly think you should consider joining the Wards, but I'll understand if you choose not to. Just, try not to get shot again. I don't like you, but that doesn't mean I want to see you dead."

"O-Okay, I'll think about it… and… thanks." Some of the tension in Madison's body eased and I could see her shoulders relaxing.

It was at that point that Wyvern walked into the room with a large box.

"Oh good, you're still here! I just managed to finish putting everything together!" she said as she carried the box over and placed it next to me.

Puzzled, Madison looked at me but I could only shrug. I wasn't sure what was in there, either.

"Wyvern, what is it?"

"Y'know," she said pointedly, "I asked you about it earlier. Remember?"

Thinking back, I did remember her asking me something when I was reading Wasp's file, but I hadn't really been paying attention. Something about a cost...ume... oh, oh!

If she'd distracted me on purpose, then Wyvern was more devious than I gave her credit for. Though from her look of honest confusion and the feelings coming from her spark, I doubted it had been intentional.

"Here, this is yours," I said as I pushed the box towards Madison.

Still looking unsure, Madison carefully opened the box and gasped at what she saw.

"Taylor, is this?" She bit her lip, indecision clear on her face. "I can't accept this, it must have cost a fortune!"

"Like I said, you're trying to be a better person. The least I can do is help." Okay, I was lying and this was all Wyvern's idea, but Madison didn't need to know that.

"O-oh, okay, if you're sure. Is there somewhere I can change?" Despite what she said, I could see the excitement in her eyes.

"Teletraan! Can you give her some privacy?" The computer created a holographic screen around
Madison that hid her from sight. It took her a minute or two to get everything in the right place, but when she called out again, I dropped the screen.

I had to admit, Wyvern had a good eye for design.

Madison's new costume was a black bodysuit with yellow V-shaped stripes down the front. The palms of her hands and soles of her feet were also coloured yellow. Wyvern had also built her a new helmet that was the same yellow as the highlights on her suit and had a pair of large, black eyes. On each side was a raised green disk with antennae on them that helped play up the 'wasp' theme.

While Madison had been getting dressed, I'd quickly skimmed over the specs Wyvern had given me. The suit was based on one of my earlier designs and had a forcefield and battery unit installed. The helmet had a communications system and some extra vision modes such as night or thermal vision.

Overall, Wyvern had managed to keep the cost low and had only included extra features that required little to no maintenance and were already in stock.

"How do I look?" Madison asked, turning excitedly on the spot.

"Very professional," I said, her excitement was infectious and I found myself smiling.

I was halfway through explaining the comm features when a timer on Teletraan beeped, reminding me that I had to be at a PRT event in a few hours.

"Wait," Madison said nervously, "what time is it?"

"It's a little after seven, why?"

"Fuck! Oh fuck! My parents are going to freak!" In her panic, she turned a little too quickly and grunted in pain as she pulled her still tender side.

"I'm okay!" she hissed, "but I've really got to go! Is it okay if I call you later?"

I nearly said no on reflex, but I stopped myself before I could. Lisa had said Madison had a slight martyr complex, so it would probably be a good idea to keep an eye on her.

"Yeah, sure. You should till tomorrow though, I'm going to be busy for most of the day."

"Oh right, that thing at the boardwalk, maybe I'll see you there. Thanks again, I mean it!"

Shrinking down to only six inches high, Madison took off like a rocket towards the door.

As she left, I thumbed the intercom on Teletraan. "Waspinator, Windblade, can you make sure Madison gets home safely?"

"Yezzz!"

Now I just needed to tidy up, go for a jog and have a shower. The PRT event wasn't until ten, anyway.

I'd originally planned to take Arcee with me, but when I heard about the shooting, I'd sent her, Cyclonus and Soundwave to patrol the Empire/ABB borders in an attempt to forestall any fighting.

From the latest reports, they had been joined by some of the Protectorate and the plan seemed to be
working.

With any luck, we could keep the city from exploding for another day.

Chapter End Notes

AN: honestly, there was going to be more to this chapter, but things with Madison ended up taking up more than I'd intended and I felt like this was a good place to stop for now.
Once Madison was gone, I quickly changed into some loose fitting clothes and went for my morning run in an effort to distract myself. I was barely halfway through before I was mentally ranting about the situation and how fucked up it all was.

While I'd never hated Madison as much as I did the other two, I still disliked her. But when I looked at everything she'd done - and wanted to keep doing - as the Wasp, I was less sure about how I felt. *But then, maybe that's the point,* I told myself. That part of my life was over. Things were better at home and I had friends I knew I could trust. *And some of them I didn't even build.* Maybe… maybe it was time to let old hatred go and focus on living my life.

While what they did was a big deal to me, it didn't matter to Brockton Bay as a whole. The city needed another hero more than I needed…

I'd nearly stumbled at the thought. Wasn't that how this mess started? Sophia went unpunished because the PRT needed all the heroes it could get and one miserable girl wasn't important.

Resuming my jog, I forced the thought away. This wasn't the same situation, and Sophia was punished for her crimes. I'd looked at her file; she was supposed to have been watched at all times and any provable violation of her parole would have seen her sent straight to juvie.

It was the PRT caseworker and principal that chose to look the other way.

Besides, Madison wasn't Sophia. From what I knew, Sophia never regretted the things she'd done, to me or anyone else. Madison couldn't even look at me earlier without trying to apologise. At first, it had been satisfying, in a cruel way, then it became just sad and annoying.

After our meeting in the park, I'd accessed Madison's file. It was probably a violation of some law or another, but I'd been too curious to care. Madison had pleaded guilty, telling the police everything and making no attempt to avoid punishment.

So why did I still feel unsatisfied? Was it because I wanted revenge? Is that what I really wanted?

The thoughts had chased themselves endlessly around my head and I'd ended up extending my jog as I wrestled with my thoughts.

I'd never really cared about getting even with the trio. Sure, when they had been bullying me, it was nice to think about from time to time. But all I'd really wanted was to be left alone. And now, I barely thought about any of them.

I still had the odd flash of regret when I thought about Emma, and I'd probably never get over my fear of small spaces, but most of my days were spent working either at school or at my workshop, and the rest was spent hanging out with Amy and Vicky.

Winslow, the trio, that was my old life. I was a different person now and maybe that was the problem. Madison was part of what I wanted to forget, and now here she was, a cape trying to be a hero.
Shaking my head, I put the thoughts to one side and focused on my jog. I wasn't getting anywhere like this. I'd have to try talking to Rung later.
Finally getting back to the workshop, I glanced at the time, only to realised I was running late. Even if I flew, I was barely going to have the time to shower, dress and eat!

##

*Taylor, where are you?* Miss Militia's voice came through my helmet's speakers and I sped up slightly. *It's not like you to be late, and the event's about to start. Everyone else is already here.*

"Sorry, I got held up. There was a problem at the workshop," I explained, it was mostly the truth. "I'll meet you there in a couple of minutes."

Below me, the city was a blur as a soared through the air.

The PR event was part of the Wards' punishment for going after Uber and Leet with me, and while I wasn't a Ward, I'd agreed to the same punishment. In a show of solidarity, Vicky and Amy had also agreed to it.

Then, later today, we had all had to attend a PRT photoshoot. The PRT needed new shots for posters and other merchandise. We were all growing teens, after all, so the stock photos were out of date. Colours aside, Kid Win and I were constantly making changes to our costumes, and there hadn't really been a chance to update everyone else's photos since I donated the improved costumes to the Wards. I'd tried to keep them as close as possible to their originals, but there were some noticeable differences.

Actually, now I thought about it, Vicky was the only one still in her original costume, I'd upgraded everyone else's. I should ask Vicky if she wanted me to build her something, maybe a hard light emitter for a weapon or something she could use at range.

Typically, independent heroes weren't required to attend PRT photoshoots, as the PRT couldn't use our likeness for advertising or merchandise. But after a quick consultation with Carol Dallon, it was agreed that the PRT could freely take and use any images of us that were taken today.

Not that the PRT would admit publicly admit to this. Officially, the images would be part of a limited edition photoshoot that was designed to foster closer relations between the PRT and independent heroes.

I was quickly learning that cynicism made dealing with marketing much, much easier.

Ahead of me, the boardwalk was coming into view and I adjusted my flight path. From the air, it was easy to see the large white tent that had been erected near the PRT ferry dock and the half a dozen PRT officers guarding it.

Not too far from the tent was a small clear area where the PRT would be putting up some tables. Wheeljack, Perceptor and Rhinox would be teleporting in later and setting up a small stall for the Autobots so they could interact with people.

The more people interacted with the Autobots, the more they would trust them and the less I'd have to worry about when they did solo work.

[Why not give people a bit of a show?] Rewind suggested, his message flashing on my HUD.

I smirked. [Good idea.] I went into a shallow dive, leveling out when I was just high enough to avoid any power lines. At this height, the sound of my passage was much more noticeable and many of the people below looked up to watch me pass.
I slowed down and waved as some of the younger kids pointed excitedly at me. I could see a number of people quickly putting up posters, signs and even banners outside shops.

This whole advent had been put together in a bit of a rush; I suspected that most of the shops hadn’t even heard about it until today and were quickly bracing themselves for the crowds a large gathering of capes tended to bring.

I also spotted a car park near the PRT tent. It wasn't close enough to attract the attention of the guards, but the windows were heavily tinted. Not that a little bit of film could block my suit's sensors.

As I landed, I cycled vision modes and got a clear look at the pair sitting inside. There was nothing all that special about either of them, but the cameras they were pointing towards the tent were another matter.

So, cape groupies, paparazzi or idiots trying to unmask a cape?

The so-called 'unwritten rules' didn’t really apply to normal people and there were entire websites devoted to unmasking capes - I'd appeared on a few of them after my identity had been leaked. Some even went so far as to offer bounties for any photos of an unmasked cape, though few people ever avoided capture long enough to claim them.

The annoying part was that the websites mostly went after heroes. It wasn't that surprising, a hero was less likely to kill a lucky - or stupid depending how you looked at it - cameraman who got a shot of them without a mask.

Still, I couldn't just walk up to them and demand to know what they were doing. Not that I needed to. One of the PRT guards was standing by the entrance to the tent, so I stopped as I passed him.

"Can you see the silver car to my left?" I said quietly, while acting like I was showing him ID. "There's a couple of guys in there with cameras." I made sure not to look in the direction of the car as I spoke.

The guard let out a quiet groan before giving me a nod and walking off. I was able to overhear him calling the situation in as I carefully ducked into the tent.

Unlike a typical tent, this one had an airlock of sorts. Stepping into the tent put you inside a small room, less than a meter long, with another door at the end. The idea behind it was to close the first door, call out a warning and then enter the tent proper.

It was also designed to stop someone from walking in on a cape who was unmasked, and to stop us from walking in on each other while we were getting changed.

"Is everyone decent?" I called out, stopping in front of the door.

"No, Gallant's having trouble with his corset!" Clockblocker said, quickly followed by a quiet 'oof' as someone - probably Vista - thumped him and several people laughed.

Chuckling quietly, I walked into the tent as I heard a car speed off. Probably that paparazzi, I told myself.

Inside, the Wards plus Vicky and Amy were already gathered. Amy's new, more protective, costume certainly made her look more at home with the other capes than her old robes ever did.

On the far side of the tent, Miss Militia nudged Assault, who put his phone away and lazily straightened up.
"Okay," she said, "now that you're all here, this is the plan for the day!"

As she spoke, I positioned myself next to Amy as Vicky was sticking close to Gallant.

[You okay? It's not like you to be late.] Her message flashed on my screen making me smile. The collar of her costume contained a subvocal mic that was paired to a voice-to-text system, letting us talk quietly without anyone overhearing us.

[Yeah, I'll tell you about it later.] I promised.

##

Finding time to talk turned out to be harder than I'd expected.

We were all split into smaller groups. Most of us would patrol the Boardwalk, making a show of stopping and talking to people, while the rest waited back by the staging area in the middle of the Boardwalk, making sure to interact with the people who were gathered there.

Right now, Aegis and Gallant were at the northern end while Glory Girl and Kid Win were to the south.

Panacea had been called over to a nearby first aid tent because a cyclist had collided with some people. Ratchet had gone along to make sure she didn't get roped into spending the rest of the day healing people.

Personally, I was at the staging area with Clockblocker and Vista.

The Autobots I'd been able to spare had come along to help out. Most of them were my smaller bots like Waspinator and Windblade, but the Protectobots were also here. Right now, they were scattered around talking to people or posing for pictures. meanwhile, Wheeljack and Rhinox had set up a table and were showing children harmless, but fun experiments. The most popular one by far involved diet Coke and mentos.

"Are you sure it's okay for him to do that?" Vista asked as Wheeljack sent another spray of foam skywards.

"It's alright," I said with a shrug. "It's better than his original idea was."

"Oh?"

Clockblocker mock pouted. "I still say it would have been great."

"He wanted to drop two dozen mentos into a fifty gallon drum filled with soda" I told Vista.

"Would that be dangerous?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said slowly, "but I'm not willing to find out. Besides, we'd have to clean up afterwards."

Both Wards shuddered.

"What you talking about?" Amy asked around the lollipop she in her mouth. She'd returned just in time to catch the end of the conversation.

"We're planning our grand takeover of the city," Clockblocker said quickly, "with the Autobots at our side, we would be INVINCIBLE!"
I shook my head as he broke into the cheesiest evil laugh he could.

"Ignore him, he's been like this ever since he heard Mouse Protector was coming to the city," Vista said to a confused Panacea with a sigh that quickly morphed into a smile as several children ran over and asked for autographs.

"Hey, are you Panacea?" a young boy asked Amy

"Yes I am, can I help you?" Amy said. I could hear the forced politeness in her voice and the smile on her face didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Can I get a picture?! Your new costume is so cool! I saw you shoot that guy! It was so badass the way you just -"

"Colin! What did I say about language?" an older woman scolded as she walked over to the boy, who cringed.

"Sorry, Mom."

"I'm sorry about my son, he gets a bit over excited," she told Amy, who was blushing and struggling to find words.

"N-no, it's fine," Amy said, quickly gathering her bearings. Drawing her weapon, she set it to gun mode and stood next to the starstruck boy so his mother could snap a picture.

After they left, I gently nudged Amy with my hip. "Should I be jealous?" Amy glared at me, but there was no real heat to it. Behind her, Clock and Vista were giggling about something.

"At least he didn't try to ask me out," Amy shot back.

"Ugh, that was one time!" I protested as Amy laughed.

"Incoming!" Wheeljack shouted. I ducked on reflex, grabbing Amy and pulling her down with me as a bottle of soda rocketed overhead and collided with a wall.

Standing up, I looked at where the bottle had crashed, then back at Wheeljack, who was surrounded by laughing children.

"Oops?" he offered, his fins flashing pink with embarrassment.

"Excuse me," I said to Amy, advancing on the little bot. The children, realising what was happening, quickly ran and hid behind Rhinox who chuckled quietly at them. He gave me a warning look, but his mouth kept twitching into a smile.

Grabbing Wheeljack by one of the small wing like protrusions on his back, I marched him towards the PRT tent.

"Jack? A word if you please?"

##

(Ratchet and Amy inside the first aid tent.)

Ratchet busied himself cleaning the the cyclist's wounds while Panacea was busy treating one of the people he'd hit.

The cyclist hissed in pain as Ratchet carefully pulled another small stone from the man's leg.
"Hey man," he whined between noises of pain, "when's Panacea gonna heal me? I'm bleeding out here!"

"It's a small graze," Ratchet muttered in response, giving the cyclist a dark look. "You'll be fine in a week. Besides, she's busy treating the child you hit."

"Aww, come on man! I've got a race in two days! How do you expect me to win like this?!"

[Just to be clear.] Ratchet sent to Panacea's visor, [I don't want you treating this guy. Maybe a few days discomfort will teach him a lesson.]

Amy didn't say anything, but she bobbed her head in what Ratchet assumed was agreement. Some people might not like it, but Ratchet was a strong believer in letting people learn from their own stupidity. He would never withhold serious treatment, but if a headache and a slight limp for a few days would teach the cyclist to wear his helmet and be more careful, then so be it.

"What I don't understand," Ratchet said quietly, but still loud enough to be heard by the cyclist, "is how you managed to ride into the back of a bus that wasn't moving."

"I-I wasn't paying attention, that's all. I was watching the capes," the man said a little too quickly. Ratchet could see his neck turning red. He didn't even need his sensors to know the cyclist was lying.

"Besides, I didn't hit the bus, I managed to swerve in time!"

"Yes, and right into a child and her mother..." Ratchet ground out. "Right, you're all done. Take it easy for a few days and take some aspirin for the headache. If it persists for more than a few days, see your doctor."

"But what about my race, I can't ride with my leg like this! Panacea's right there, can't she fix it? And what about my bike?!"

Ratchet dearly wanted to throw the man out on his ass, but that would probably violate his oaths as a healer. Not to mention that it was unprofessional. Instead, he leaned in close to the cyclist and gave the man his friendliest smile.

"Of course, you're right, how silly of me. I wouldn't worry about the race if I were you. Want to know why?" He pointed to where Amy was working and hoped the man wouldn't notice the girl's shaking shoulders. "Because right now, that child's mother is out back, talking to the police in the hopes of pressing charges."

The cyclist paled, glancing over to Panacea before quickly jumping to his feet and fleeing the tent as fast as he could limp.

The flap had barely swung closed when Amy finally lost it, giggling and snorting as she fell to her knees.

"I-I can't believe you just did that!" she said between giggles. Panacea's amusement also had the benefit of cheering up the child she was treating.

"Why not, it's the truth. Anyway, we swore to do no harm. There's nothing in there about messing with people's heads," Ratchet said with a smirk. Besides, it wasn't like the cyclist would get far, the woman and the police were actually waiting in front of the tent, not behind it. from what Ratchet could hear what the police outside, the cyclist had crashed because he was too busy looking at a
"That's true," Panacea said with a grin. "Remind me to tell you some stories some time."

Still smirking, Ratchet pulled a pair of lollipops from a compartment. He handed one to the kid who lit up at the sight of it and offered the other one to Panacea. She gave him an unimpressed look while trying not to smile. Taking it from him, she quickly unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth.

"You head on back, I'm going to stick around here for a little while," Ratchet said, ushering her out of the tent before one of the workers could rope her into sticking around. The girl's stress levels were still far too high for his liking and she showed some odd brainwave fluctuations.

He'd have to keep an eye on her and maybe consult with Rung about it. Making a mental note about the situation, Ratchet started to tidy up.

These children were going to make him old before his time.

##

After my little discussion with Wheeljack about experiments in public and safety requirements, the other two groups had come back and we'd decided to swap jobs.

Currently, Glory Girl, Panacea and I were at the northern end of the Boardwalk. As the three of us had public identities, we were taking the chance to grab a quick lunch. I'd told them about Madison, taking care of course, not to say either of her names out loud.

"And you just gave her a costume?!!" Amy said in surprise.

"I wasn't sure what else to do!" I said, holding my hands up in surrender. "Wyvern had already made it and it's not like I was going to wear the damn thing. Besides... she's trying to change for the better. Shouldn't that be rewarded?"

Vicky didn't say anything as she was looking out over the bay and Amy frowned into her drink.

"Anyway," I said quietly as I thought back to this morning, "you haven't spoken to her. She's obsessed with doing the right thing... Honestly, I'm worried she'll get herself killed and it'll be my fault as I'm the one who inspired her."

"That's crap, you're not responsible for what she does," Amy said, rolling her eyes and taking a quick sip of her coffee. "Besides, if you're that worried, why didn't you push the Wards harder?"

I opened my mouth, but fell silent almost immediately when I realised I didn't have a response to that. I could have, should have pushed the Wards harder. But given how she felt about me, would she even want to join them?

"Still... a full costume? That's a lot of money, isn't it?"

"No, not really." I shrugged. Honestly, the cost was the last thing I was worried about.

"All the parts were 'off the shelf', so to speak. And her bodysuit was just that, a suit. There was no strength enhancement or anything built in, so the cost was fairly low. Wyvern will be paying for the costume, anyway."

"The Autobots have money?" Vicky said suddenly. She'd been quiet most of the way here and was currently staring out over the bay.
"Sure. Dragon set up an expense account for them. Whenever one of them invents something, a portion of the profits are deposited into the account, along with a small salary. All the Autobots have access to it and can spend the money however they wish."

Amy snorted. "We really need a raise on our allowance, right, Vicky... Vicky?"

I nudged Vicky with my foot, making the older girl jump. "You okay, Vicky? You've been a bit quiet."

"Huh? Yeah, sorry! I'm fine, what were we talking about?" she said quickly. Her smile was clearly forced.

"This is about Gallant and Aegis, isn't it?" I offered while Amy frowned.

Amy frowned. "What, did something happen to them?"

"Yeah, they're planning to elope," I said before I could stop myself. Clockblocker was a bad influence on me.

Vicky glared at me, one hand on the table, the other pointing at me in warning. She opened her her mouth to say something and then... broke down laughing. Amy and I joined her soon after. I was sure we were getting some odd looks from people passing by, but Vicky at least looked happier so, yay win?

"I'm so going to tell him you said that," Vicky said between giggles as we finally started to calm down.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't stop myself!"

"Who do you think would wear the dress?" Amy asked so innocently that it had to be faked, setting the three of us off again.

"That's enough, you two," Vicky said, trying to sound serious. "You're going to start weird rumors." The effect was only slightly ruined by her lips constantly twitching into a smile. "Seriously though, yes, it's about Gallant. I take it you know what's happening?"

Nodding, I sat back in my chair. "Yeah, they told the Wards almost the same day."

"Well I don't, no one tells me anything. What's happening?" Amy asked, sitting forward in her chair.

"Aegis is standing down as Wards team leader," I said quietly, glancing around to make sure no one was trying to listen in. Thankfully, the people around us were giving us space to enjoy our lunch.

"So Gallant's taking over? Isn't that a good thing?"

"No, he's not," Vicky said bitterly, "Miss Piggy won't let him."

Amy looked at me and I sighed. "Two new Wards are joining. They're transfers from New York, I think. One of them will be taking over as team leader, at least until Gallant and Aegis have graduated to the Protectorate. It's their punishment for going after Uber and Leet. As the team leader, Aegis is responsible for anything the team did, but as he's graduating soon, Gallant is being punished too."

"But we won!" Amy protested, "Uber and Leet were arrested, no one got hurt and his robots were destroyed!"

"And what would have happened if their had been an emergency?" I said while Vicky snorted.
"I was there, I would have fixed any injuries." Amy said.

"What if the emergency was elsewhere in the city?" I explained. "As team leader, it's Aegis's responsibility to know where the Wards are and what they're doing. What would happen if there had been an emergency and the PRT called the Wards in, only to find they weren't where they were supposed to be? That sort of thing could get people killed. By having the entire team go missing while under his command, Aegis showed a lack of leadership skills and lost his position."

I shrugged. "Well, that's how Aegis and Gallant explained it to me. Personally, I just think the Director is making an example of them since she can't publicly punish us."

Amy sank lower in her chair, guilt clear on her face while Vicky just glared out over the bay.

"It's not all bad, though. Miss Militia said she'd keep the details out of their records. As far as anyone knows, the new Wards are transferring in and taking over to free up Aegis and Gallant so they can start spending more time with the Protectorate."

"It still feels unfair," Amy said, turning her cup in her hands.

"I know, but we all knew there would be consequences when we decided to go after Leet." Despite what I said, I still felt guilty about their punishment. Both of them had been quick to tell me it wasn't my fault and that they were fine with it. That didn't make me feel better.

"It's still unfair," Vicky said, crushing her empty soda can into a small metal ball and launching it over the bay. I wasn't wearing my helmet so I quickly lost sight of the projectile. Hopefully it landed in the water.

"Vicky!" Amy hissed. "What if that had hit someone?!"

Vicky had the decency to look abashed. "Sorry?"

With a sigh, I stood up. "Come on, we should get back to our patrol."

##

"Okay, all of you, stand up straight, chests out!" the photographer called as we posed for the N'th photo of the night.

"Not that far out, Glory Girl!" Clockblocker muttered, getting a mix of groans and threats from the Wards and making the photographer curse as we broke formation.

Thankfully for him, Gallant managed to catch Vicky before she could reach him.

"I'm gonna -"

"Vicky, stop!"

"Alright, that's enough!" Miss Militia shouted before things could get any further out of hand.

After the PR event, we'd left the PRT to clear up the Boardwalk and returned to the PRT headquarters for our photoshoot.

The photographer the PRT had hired knew he'd probably never get another chance to photo Glory Girl and Panacea with the Wards and had milked it for everything he could. He'd taken hundreds of shots of all of us in different poses and groupings.
We'd been at it for hours now and tempers were starting to fray. Especially when I'd outright refused to take my helmet off for a photo. He'd insisted that it wouldn't matter as my identity was known, but Miss Militia shut him down quickly.

My identity might have been public but I did my best to distance my life as a cape from my normal life. That meant no official merchandise of me outside of costume.

"I think that's enough for today," Miss Militia said, ignoring the protests of the photographer. "All of you can grab your stuff and leave, you've all done well today. Glory Girl, Panacea? Thank you again for agreeing to this. Tell your mom the PRT will ensure she receives a copy of all photos taken before they are released to the public. Matrix, can you wait around for a minute? There's a couple of extra forms I need you to sign."

As everyone started to leave, I moved to the side of the room with a sigh. I'd been in my armour for most of the day and I desperately wanted a shower.

Most of the bots who'd come to the event had also followed me to the PRT-HQ and even posed for photos. The PRT wanted me to sign an agreement that let them use the pictures of them they had taken.

Thankfully, the paperwork was only minor stuff and I was able to get it done quickly. As I flew over the city, I considered how the day had gone. Madison aside, things had been fairly quiet. There had been a couple of scuffles between the gangs but nothing the police or a couple of Protectorate heros couldn't handle solo.

Honestly, it was surprisi -

*All units, ABB are fighting Empire on the junction of 45th street, capes are on the scene!*  
The alert surprised me and I quickly came to a stop, hovering in place while I waited for more information. Off in the distance, something exploded and a Ward panic alarm went off.

*All units, Oni Lee has been spotted and is attacking Vista and Clockblocker, I repeat-*  
I was already halfway to the fight, the ground below me was a blur as I rocketed across the city.

"All available Autobots, converge on my location! Insight! You there?"

Looking at the status list for my Autobots, I cursed mentally. Most of them were scattered across the city or in a PRT van heading for my workshop. I was going to get there long before backup could arrive.

_No choice_, I told myself. Oni Lee was a killer, one of the capes who outright ignored the the unwritten rules. He wouldn't think twice about killing a Ward.

This was not going to be an easy fight.

Chapter End Notes

AN: sorry for the delay, but between stressful week at work, my birthday and moving, I
just couldn't find the energy to work on the chapter last week.

Fun fact, That cyclist? Very, very loosely based on a real story. A friend of mine was drafting behind a bus (which btw, are big and red in the uk) when he saw movement off to the side. He turned to see what it was, and looked back in time to see the bus had stopped.

He plowed into the back of it, scaring the crap out of the people on the back seat
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The street below me was a warzone.

The ABB were holding one side of the road, using cars and other objects to protect themselves from oncoming gunfire. Behind them was a large convenience store full of people.

The other side of the road was swarming with the Empire's people. Like the ABB, they were using cars and buildings as cover while they took the occasional pot shot. The Empire had less people, but they were making up for it with cape support.

A ring of debris orbited Rune as she rode on top a car, trading blows with Kid Win. The pair were caught up in their own little duel, with Rune launching rocks, bits of metal and anything else she had at him.

For his part, Kid Win blasted everything that came near him. He expertly dodged anything that got too close as he sped through the air on his board. Despite that, he still found time to shoot at the gang members below.

In the middle of the street, Armsmaster was ‘fighting’ Oni Lee and Alabaster in a three way duel that was going nowhere. His halberd was a blur as it scythed through the air, forcing the Empire cape back. He couldn't match Armsmaster's speed or skill, but any damage he sustained vanished when his body blurred and reset itself. He probably hoped to wear Armsmaster down in a battle of attrition.

Meanwhile, Oni Lee was all over the place, his clones appearing and vanishing randomly as he attacked the Empire. He would pop up next to Alabaster or Armsmaster, knife in hand, only to be cut down before he could do more than scratch either of them.

I went to look Clockblocker and Vista, trusting Armsmaster to handle the capes, and found them hiding behind a car. They were on the ABB’s side of the road and judging from the bullet holes on the floor nearby, Vista was keeping them safe. Even with their shields, it was too risky for either of them to try moving and the sheer number of people running around was keeping Vista from fully using her power.

Spotting a small alley near the store, I teleported Warpath into it and directed him towards the storefront. He burst out of the alley in tank mode with cannons blazing, covering the distance in seconds. He transformed and slammed a metal rod into the ground, creating a hard light wall in front of the store’s entrance.

Diving down, I slammed into an Oni Lee clone as he appeared next to the Wards, skidding to a stop after he burst into a cloud of ash. Bullets pinged off my armour even as I pulled a rod from subspace and drove it into the ground. A hard light wall sprung up, cutting us off from the fighting on one side.

"What the hell happened?!!" I shouted over the noise of the battle.

"Don't ask me!" Clockblocker shouted back, keeping one hand pressed against the car. I assumed he was using his power on it as cars typically weren't bulletproof.

"Since when do they need an excuse?" Vista shouted, flexing her hands. A nearby wall stretched
outwards and a running man in ABB colours slammed into it. "We managed to get most of the people inside the convenience store before it got too crazy, the rest ran down the alleyways!"

Vista was right. Neither side need much excuse to start fighting, but it was unusual for them to stick around once capes started turning up.

Another Oni Lee appeared in front of us, a grenade in his hand. On reflex, I brought my arm up and formed a shield wall. I felt Clockblocker grab the back of my armour and when I blinked, Oni Lee was gone, leaving only a hole in the ground.

"Sorry!" Clockblocker shouted. "Thirty seconds!"

He had frozen me, turning myself and my shield into an unbreakable wall until his power wore off.

"No problem, but we can't stay here! Insight, any suggestions?"

*I don't know,* she said. *You're the only one with a camera and the ones on the street have been destroyed!*

I reached into subspace and pulled out a cylinder. Throwing it over the car, it burst open, releasing a dozen insecticons that flew off in different directions. Their cameras would give Insight a better view of the fight. I also pulled out a PEP stun gun and handed it to Vista.

"Non-lethal shotgun," I said before handing a disk with a handle to Clockblocker. "Single use hard light shield, press this button to turn it on. Lasts five minutes."

*Okay, head south! There's a van that will give you more cover,* Insight said.

I looked at Clockblocker, who nodded, turning on the shield just as I did the same. We formed a V-shape with our shields, walking backwards towards the van Lisa had seen.

A pair of ABB thugs saw us, and while their friends tried to cover them, they charged at us. Vista raised her weapon and pulled the trigger. There was a low thudding noise and both men were thrown backwards. They stayed down.

We were barely five feet from the car when Oni Lee appeared, gun in hand. A shot from my Null-Ray turned him to ash, only for him to reappear to our left. This time, he was destroyed by Vista. I didn't know what he was hoping to achieve: between my armour and all our shields, he couldn't really hurt us. It felt more like he was herding us away from the store.

In the middle of the street, Armsmaster continued to fight. His armour was scuffed and scratched, but he was holding up pretty well.

I didn't have much time to watch as our brightly glowing shields were making us a giant target. After what felt like an age, we reached the van and quickly took cover behind it.

"This is insane!" Clockblocker gasped between breaths and freezing the van.

"Yeah!" I agreed.

*Keep your heads down,* Insight said. *PRT is only a few minutes away.*

I shut down my shield and leaned around the edge of the van so I had a clear shot. I saw a large, topless man in a gas mask emerge from an alley on the Empire's side of the road. His exposed and extremely fat abdomen was covered in tattoos and bullets were bouncing off it. He had a shotgun in
one hand and a hooked chain in the other.

With a shout, he threw the hook across the street, impaling an ABB man. He pulled the screaming man off his feet and into range of his weapon. I flinched as the cape executed the man.

"Fuck! Insight, who is that?"

Pulling the hook free of the body, he launched it at Armsmaster.

Armsmaster turned at the last moment, managing to deflect the hook. Driving his weapon into the ground, he pinned the chain even as he continued to fight against Alabaster and Oni Lee.

The Empire cape dropped his shotgun and grabbed the chain in both hands, getting ready to pull it back.

"Stay here!" I ordered as I ran out from behind the van and flew into the air. I charged forwards, my shield snapping into place just as I slammed into the cape, carrying him backwards until we hit a wall. Pressing both Null-Rays against his skin, I set them to rapid fire and let him have it.

He roared briefly, jerking as the volley of shots made him twitch and thrash before he went still. I jumped backwards as he began to slump forwards, giving him room fall and he hit the ground with a crash. As I turned away from him, Insight spoke.

*Taylor! That's Hogger! He's a Gesellschaft cape, brute with regeneration!*  

I spun on the spot, firing at him as he started to get up.

"Warpath, containment!" I shouted, propelling myself away from the brute.

"Fire in *blam* the hole!" he called back and a containment foam grenade arced overhead, exploding into a shower of foam that quickly began to set.

I launched into the air, avoiding another one of Oni Lee's clones. So far, he'd limited himself to his knife or his gun, neither of which were much of a threat to me. Why no grenades?

"This is insane! Why won't Oni Lee retreat?" I called as I opened fire on any gang member stupid enough to stick their head up.

*He can't!* Insight said. *He's guarding something - no, someone! Someone important! He won't leave until everyone's dead or Lung gets here!*

I pushed down the flash of fear at the name. I didn't have time to worry about Lung now, we'd just have to deal with him if he arrived.

Still, that explained why Oni Lee wasn't using explosives: there was too much chance of killing whoever he was guarding.

There was a change in the flow of the battle below me. Alabaster was pulling back, retreating behind a wrecked car and leaving Armsmaster to deal with Oni Lee.

A handful of molotov cocktails arced through the air and shattered on the side of the convenience store. The people inside started to scream as flames spread across the wall and licked at windows.

"Warpath, put those fires out!" I shouted as I saw the Empire readying another volley. I opened fire, not particularly caring when the man I hit dropped the bottle he was holding, showering himself in flames.
A pair of Oni Lee's clones appeared amongst the Empire men still carrying cocktails, driving knives into their exposed backs before turning to ash.

Behind me, Warpath launched containment foam grenades at the building. The thick, fire-retardant foam quickly smothered the flames.

A clone appeared behind me and I spun, batting it away with a wing before it could explode. Instead, it crumbled harmlessly into dust.

The Empire had likely realised Oni Lee was protecting the store. What men were still standing pushed forward, firing wildly and forcing the remaining ABB members to take cover. Ahead of them, Alabaster bolted for the convenience store.

He was barely halfway there when Oni Lee appeared beside him and stabbed him in the back.

Alabaster started to collapse, but his body blurred as his power activated, turning the fall into a stumble that barely slowed him down.

"Stop him!" someone in the press of bodies below shouted. Many of the ABB forced themselves out of cover and opened fire.

Joining them, I rained down bolts of energy. Most of them sailed past harmlessly, but Alabaster quickly recovered from any shots that hit him. Out the corner of my eye, I saw Rune sending more of her projectiles in my direction, only for Kid Win to blast them down.

Meanwhile, Armsmaster spun, slicing through the clones swarming around him and buying him some time. A small grappling hook launched from the shaft of his weapon and embedded itself into Alabaster's leg.

Alabaster pulled it out before his body reset, continuing his sprint unhindered as the hook fell to the ground. Before Armsmaster could try again, three more clones appeared, each one holding a grenade.

Slicing through the nearest clone, Armsmaster threw himself away from the remaining clones just as they exploded, the force of it making his shield flare as he was buffeted by the explosion.

Alabaster was almost at the door when Oni Lee reappeared again. This time, he clearly meant to end the fight as he immediately exploded. An amber sphere engulfed the clone and the Empire cape, freezing the pair where they stood. One of my Null-Ray blasts hung frozen in the air next to them.

*Oh shit!* Insight muttered. *Everyone get out of there!* 

Her warning came too late: Oni Lee was everywhere. One clone appeared amongst the Empire shooters and imploded. Everything and everyone within the bomb's area of effect was pulled into what looked like a small singularity that vanished after only a few seconds, leaving a fleshy ball only a few feet wide on the floor.

On the other side of the street, three ABB men were liquefied. Pillars of ice, fire and glass appeared, reaching up into the sky as the people around them were consumed by the explosions.

One explosion caused everything around it to float upwards into the sky. The van shielding Clockblocker and Vista started to rise and I could see both of them being lifted up with it.

I went into a dive, chasing after them. The anti-grav zone making my stomach turn as I flew through it, but I kept going. Grabbing both Wards, I pulled them both free and the three of us hit the ground
as a ball of lightning went off at our feet.

Warning messages flashed onto my HUD as our shields shorted out. Switching to my HL-system, I created a wall just in time to stop the follow up attack from another clone. The concussive blast washed over us, slamming into my shield and pushing me backwards slightly. Thankfully, the others were unhurt.

"Everybody, get down!" Armsmaster growled, taping something on his wrist. Amongst the sounds of the explosions, there was a small putt noise and four metal tubes were launched from Armsmaster's overturned bike.

Embedding themselves into the walls around us, each tube opened up as Oni Lee appeared next to me, on the wrong side of my shield.

I felt Clockblocker grab my shoulder –

##

Gritting her teeth, Rune sent another wave of debris towards Kid Win. She needed to make it look like she was trying to fight the Ward. Hogger was already down, but Alabaster would be be quick to report her if she hesitated in any way.

*Rune, cover me!* Alabaster snapped over the cheap radio she wore under her hood.

As he charged forwards, Matrix was quick to start shooting at him. Gathering up chunks of concrete, she fired them at the other girl, slowing them down enough that she could dodge them.

Kid Win got there first, pistols blazing as he shot down everything she had. She had to admit, it was a pretty cool move.

Pulling back, Rune ran her hand along the side of a building, charging the masonry with her power and pulling chunks of the wall free.

Below, explosions rang out as the chink went full on psycho and Armsmaster launched something at the buildings around them.

The world lurched and her power vanished. She barely had time to realise what was happening when the car under her dropped. Instinctively, she channeled power into her costume, but nothing happened.

Seeing the ground rushing up to meet her, she was only vaguely aware of her own screaming. *And I wanted to be in an orgy before I died.*

Red and gold armour appeared in front of her as Kid Win attempted to catch her. The collision knocked him off course and sent them both spinning out of control in a tangle of limbs.

The world around them filled with gold and Rune could feel herself slow down just moments before they hit a building and the world went dark.

##

– Oni Lee was gone and Vista was screaming. Something felt… wrong. The air around us felt charged in a way I only experienced when I was sparking a bot.

We were encased in metal that had exploded outward from Oni Lee's clone, wrapping itself around
me and Vista like some sort of metallic tree. Turning my head, my heart stopped when I saw that Clockblocker was hanging from one of the 'branches', supported from where it had impaled him through the chest. Blood was running from the wound and down the metal.

He wasn't moving.

_No!_ "Warpath!" I shouted, fighting to move, to get myself free.

"Vista, Vista! Are you alright?" I couldn't turn enough to see her but I could hear her sobbing behind me.

"I'm fine! B-but what about Clockblocker?!" she said, her voice wavering as she tried not to sob.

"Don't worry, he's going to be fine. Medical emergency!" I called out over my radio. "Clockblocker is hurt! Amy, Ratchet? Can you hear me?!

*I'm on my way,* Ratchet said with a grunt. "See if you can keep him stable!*

*Vicky and I will be there soon! Just hold on!* Running over, Warpath placed a small explosive charge next to my arm and detonated it. The blast shattered the metal-like substance and I was able to pull an arm out, forming a hardlight blade to try and free myself.

Before I could do that, a glowing red circular saw sprung into life and started cutting away at the metal. It looked like one of my hard light constructs, only the colour was wrong. Attached to the blade was a beam of energy being created by a young girl. Her face was scrunched up on concentration and I could see tear marks on her face.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for this –" She cut herself off as I pulled my other arm free.

"Don't worry about me! Can you get Clockblocker down?"

The girl nodded before she ran past me. More of her constructs wrapped around Clockblocker while another blade started cutting into the metal. Gently lowering him to the ground, she knelt by him and starting putting pressure on the wound.

As soon as I was free, I took over while she started working on Vista. I desperately wanted to pull the massive spike of metal out of his chest, but right now, it was the only thing stopping him from bleeding out. At least one of his lungs had to have been punctured, and it was a miracle the spike had missed his heart.

The street around us was a scene of carnage. People were dead, buildings were on fire and Kid Win and Rune were in a crumpled heap not too far away. In the middle of it all was Armsmaster, laying next to the remains of a man in a red mask.

The readout from their suits told me Armsmaster and Kid Win were alive but unconscious. Oni Lee was clearly dead.

There was the sound of jets and I looked up to see Cyclonus overhead. Ratchet was clinging to his undercarriage and in the distance, I could see Glory Girl carrying Amy.

Ratchet dropped from Cyclonus as soon as he was close enough to the ground. He ran towards us, falling to his knees and skidding to a stop next to Dennis. One hand transformed into a medigun while the other sprayed foam into the wound in an attempt to stanch the bleeding.
Panacea hit the ground minutes later. Pushing me to the side, she grabbed Clockblocker's wrist, only to look at me in panic.

"Taylor! I can't… something's wrong! I can't use my power!" Amy's eyes were wide in fear.

*It's Arrmsmaster! Whatever he did is screwing with powers, you ne –*

I ignored what Lisa was saying. Instead, I took aim at the nearest cylinder and fired. It exploded in a shower of sparks and metal. Overhead, Cyclonus pulled a second one from the wall while Warpath blasted a third.

"That did it!" Amy shouted as she started healing Clockblocker. "I… there's too much damage and not enough mass. I can keep him alive, but we need to get him to a hospital!"

Standing up, I looked around and a small map appeared on my HUD. A green dot was charging towards us and a timer appeared under it.

The only problem now was an overturned car that was blocking the road in the direction the ambulance was coming from. They could divert around, but that would take time we didn't have.

"Vicky, there's a car at the end of the road that's blocking the way, can you move it?" I called out.

"Of course I can!" she replied. As she flew off, I kneeled next to the healers.

"The ambulance will be here in three minutes, is that going to be in time?"

Amy nodded. "Yeah, that's fine. Ratchet, if I stay here, can you help the others?"

"Fine. You and you!" Ratchet shouted, pointing at a pair dressed in ABB colours that were trying to sneak away. "I'm setting up a triage station and you're helping me… NOW!"

Both men practically tripped over themselves in their hurry to do as he said. Not even pausing for breath, Ratchet also started barking orders at several Empire men. They gave the ABB people a wary look, but a warning look from Ratchet soon had them in line.

A PRT van skidded round the corner, closely followed by Miss Militia's jeep. As they came to a stop, my Autobots jumped out, the Protectobots spreading out to help the survivors.

Forcing myself to leave Dennis to Amy, I went to help Ratchet, moving through the remains of the battle as I stopped to check everybody I came across. Some of the luckier ones were still alive but too many had been caught by the tinker-tech bombs.

*God damn Bakuda!*

Using a medical foam sprayer, I did what I could, sealing open wounds, making airways clear where it was possible and helping to move the injured to the area Ratchet had claimed as his triage station.

I was at the furthest end of the road when movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Looking up, I saw a large shirtless man with a metal dragon mask looking at me from an alleyway.

*Lung!*

I was tired, shaking from the adrenaline. My hand was covered in the blood of people I'd been trying to save. And now *he* was here.

"What do you want?!" I demanded, far too angry to be intimidated by him. "Haven't you done
enough?! The fight's over, Oni Lee is dead and whoever he was protecting is long gone! So get lost!"

He stepped forward. "You don't tell me –"

Growling in anger, I extended the Null-Ray on my right arm, ramped up the power and fired. The ground next to Lung exploded, showering him in concrete and forcing him to step sideways.

"You're *not* indestructible," I snarled. Behind me, Cyclonus landed and drew his sword. On my HUD, I could see Warpath taking up position nearby and the Protectobots had stopped what they were doing. I didn't doubt the Protectorate were doing the same and I could see Glory Girl floating close by on my HUD.

Lung continued to glare at me. Smoke was starting to trail from his fingers and he'd already gained a few inches in height, but I refused to back down.

He wasn't unbeatable. His power took time to build up, and at rest, he was just a brute with some pyrokinesis. My Null-Ray had put a hole in him once and that was when even Dragon was struggling to hold him. Right now, he was nowhere near that level and he knew it.

Finally, with a dismissive snort, Lung turned and walked away.

I wasn't sure if it was because of my threats, the Autobots, the presence of the PRT or a combination of all three, but right now I didn't care.

*Oh my god I just threatened Lung!* some small part of my mind wailed, but it was drowned out by my anger.

"Thanks guys," I muttered to my Autobots as I turned around and forced myself to walk back to the others.

As I reached them, Miss Militia placed a hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. I couldn't feel it through the armour, but the thought was there all the same.

"Nicely handled," she said. "Now please *never* do that again."

"I won't," I promised. Next time, I'd just shoot him first.

Around us, the rescue efforts were continuing. Clockblocker had already been loaded into an ambulance and taken to the nearest hospital with Amy in tow. The most heavily injured would be sent there for her to heal while Ratchet continued to treat people on site.

Vista was sitting in the back of the PRT van with Kid Win, who'd woken up a minute ago. Rune had woken up at about the same time and had escaped in the confusion. Glory Girl was helping move large pieces of debris, like cars, out of the way so that emergency response could get through easier.

The amber dome was still in front of the convenience store. The PRT were busy roping the area off, but I could still see the Oni Lee clone and Alabaster frozen inside it.

Before I could do anything else, the young girl who had helped cut me free walked over, carrying a baby in her arms. Now that I had a chance to really look at her, I could see how young she was. Younger than me if I had to guess, but older than Vista and far too young for the baby to be hers.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean for any of this to happen," she said quietly.
"You caused this?" I asked. I could feel my anger at the situation returning. "How, why?"

"I just..." The girl took a deep breath and fixed me with a defiant look. "I needed to get away and I'm sorry, but I had no choice!"

Behind me, Miss Militia put a hand on my shoulder. "What do you mean? Who are you?"

The girl sighed. "My name is Miranda and this is Miko." She looked at the baby in her arms. "She's my little sister and... she's Lung's daughter."

Chapter End Notes

An: See, told you I hadn't forgotten about Lungs kid and yes, Taylor is officially tired of Lung's shit and through being scared of him.
Y'know, I think this is the longest combat chapter I've written?
Miranda Nakadai was sitting in a PRT interrogation room, holding her sister in her arms. She faced Director Piggot of the PRT and Miss Militia, while the lawyer who had been assigned to represent her sat at her side.

After the fight last night, she'd spent the night in a hospital, hiding from her mother and being checked out by paramedics. Thanks to her powers, she'd been able to keep herself and her sister safe. But her rather public display of power and her admission of starting the fight meant the PRT knew she was a cape and wanted to speak to her.

Now here she was, sitting here at eight in the morning.

"Miss Nakadai, can you tell me what happened Saturday night?" Miss Militia asked gently. Miranda assumed she was used to talking to people her age. The director continued to watch her in silence.

Looking at her lawyer - Mr Murdock - Miranda waited until he nodded before she spoke.

"I was at the convenience store with my… mother." She spat the word distastefully. "She needed more birth control pills and condoms. She always goes there 'cause they give her a discount. I'm not allowed to be home alone with Miko anymore, so I had to go with her."

"Why couldn't you stay home?"

Miranda shrugged. "Because of Lung, I guess. Some men came to our house a few months ago and said it wasn't safe, that we had to leave. We ended up moving to 43rd street. Then, about two weeks ago, we suddenly had to leave again. After that, we couldn't go anywhere without people guarding us and I wasn't allowed to be left alone with Miko."

Moving the first time hadn't bothered her. She didn't have many friends anymore; they kept their distance once they found out what her mother did for a living. After the move, her mom decided she didn't need school anymore as she was old enough to earn a living, so it wasn't like she'd had time to make new friends.

Mr Kowalski next door had been nice enough, though. For a grumpy old man.

"I see. You said the store gave your mom a discount. Did she work there?"

"No," Miranda said with a snort. "Mom's a prostitute, though she calls herself a 'courtesan'. The store is owned by the ABB. They give discounts to all the girls. They also slip them 'medication' when they need it. Off the books, of course."

Her mom had given her a very thorough explanation on the store long ago, including what she needed to say to get the right medication and what situations to avoid.

Miss Militia’s eyebrows rose in shock at her bluntness, but the director barely reacted beyond a darkening of her expression.

"I see. Is that why you insisted we not locate her?"

Miranda sighed. "Look, I'm going to be straight with you. Mom doesn't love anyone but herself. She slept with some rich guy, thinking she could use me to blackmail him. It didn't work. He died and his family told her to fuck off, leaving her stuck with me. She made it clear that I was a mistake and that
when I was old enough, I'd be repaying her for my father's actions."

"Repay how?"

"How do you think?" She didn't bother hiding the sarcasm as she rolled her eyes. Miss Militia was an experienced hero, surely she didn't need to spell it out to the woman. "She told me she was planning to auction off my virginity and already had a list of clients lined up for me."

She'd told her that after forcing her to pose for some pictures she planned to show to her clients. Unfortunately, her mom 'misplaced' them while drunk one night, along with the camera. *And good luck to her finding that one.*

There was a green blur in the air and a gun appeared in Miss Militia's hand. On reflex, Miranda pulled on her power and a dull red glow surrounded her body as she prepared to shield herself.

Taking a deep breath, Miss Militia carefully holstered her weapon. "My apologies," she said, without explanation.

Miranda released her power. For a hero, she decided, Miss Militia was kind of naive.

"That's quite alright," Mr Murdock said. His eyes were hidden by sunglasses, which made his frown more imposing. Despite what he said, she couldn't help but notice that he was gripping his walking stick so tightly his knuckles were white.

Ignoring them, the director turned to the PRT officer who was standing by the door and snarled an order at him.

"Get in touch with PD, have them arrest Sue Nakadai for child abuse, prostitution, human trafficking and anything else they can make stick." The officer nodded, and she turned back to Miranda once he left the room. "Did Lung know about this?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't think he'd care. I'm not his, after all. I only met Lung once, just after Miko was born. Once a month, he'd send Mom some money for Miko, but that's it."

From what Miranda had overheard, she doubted Lung would allow his daughter to be used in that way, but no one cared about what her mother had planned for her, the bastard older child.

Miss Militia leaned forward. "Miss Nakadai, I understand if this is difficult, but can -"

"No one's touched me," Miranda said with a bitter smirk. "Mom told me a few weeks ago that I wouldn't see my first 'client' until I turned fifteen. That's next month."

"Is that when you got your powers?"

She nodded. "Yeah… I kept it a secret and waited for my chance to get away."

"Why didn't you run immediately?"

"Because of Miko," Miranda said. "I've been looking after her since she was born. I couldn't just… that woman, my *mother*… Y'know the first thing she ever taught me was how to pick a pocket? How fucked up is that? Then it was lockpicking. When I got older, she moved on to teaching me how to dress, how to get attention, how to haggle for prices. I don't even want to think about what she'd do to Miko!"

"Did you cause the fight that night?" the director asked.
"Yes…" Miranda said, pulling Miko closer. "I didn't… It wasn't supposed to go so far…" Trying not to think about Clockblocker bleeding out in front of her, she took a moment to collect her thoughts.

"I was at the store with my mother when I spotted some skinheads nearby. I'd heard about the attack on the news the night before, and I figured they were looking for a fight. So, when no one was looking, I used my power to throw a rock at one of them. When they turned and saw ABB men nearby…" she trailed off, not needing to explain further. It didn't take much to get the Empire and ABB fighting.

"What about Oni Lee?"

"I didn't know he was there! I think… I think he lives above the shop. When he showed up and the fighting got bad, I grabbed Miko and hid upstairs. There was a bed and one of his masks up there."

By that point, it had all gotten out of hand. She'd never meant for so many people to get hurt, for that Ward to almost be killed. But looking down at her sister, she wasn't sure that she wouldn't do it again if she was given the opportunity.

Mr Murdock cleared his throat, leaning forward. "At this point, I think it would be best if we discussed terms. My client is willing to join the Wards, on the condition that she not be separated from her sister and both of them are moved out of the city."

"She's far too young to be given any sort of custody," the director snapped.

"I agree, and my client is willing to enter the foster care system. But while it's uncommon, child protection services have been known to split siblings up. My client wants it in writing that this won't happen. We both know they will be assigned to a PRT approved foster parent anyway, so don't act like she's asking for the moon. Beyond that, it's clear the wrong people know of her existence. Lung's daughter is, and probably always will be, a target. A relocation and change of name would be best for both of them."

"You realise that Miss Nakadai's parental rights won't immediately be dissolved? We can pass a copy of Miranda's statement to the CPS, but even with the PRT pressuring them, it's going to take time."

"I understand," Murdock said gracefully, "which is why I have arranged for my client to stay with some people in New York. They're a certified foster home that specialises in short term cases. I'd rather not name them here as your office has a habit of leaking information."

Miranda bit her lip and tried to not laugh at the jab, especially when the director gave him a furious look.

She knew becoming a Ward wouldn't be easy and that it wouldn't fix everything, but as long as she was with her sister, there was nothing she couldn't deal with.

##

Thunder crashed in the distance as the beast emerged, swathed in flames and screaming destruction. Like a raging, howling storm, it was anger, hatred and dread given form.

Two armies screamed back in defiance, their weapons roaring even as the storm around them tore the planet apart. The metal under their feet warped and shattered as they fought to stop its apocalyptic advance.

I grabbed a discarded weapon from the floor and charged forward, intent on doing what I could.
Around me, the world blurred and before I knew, I found myself standing alone in a grassy field. The sky was dark and the ground underfoot was slick with blood.

In my hands, the weapon vanished and I shivered as a shadow passed over me. Confused, I looked up at the grey clouds overhead. There, amongst the shadows was a dark shape soaring through the sky. Its high-pitched cry drowned out the distant thunder and howling winds.

Spotting me, the creature went into a dive, its large, bat-like wings spread wide as it screamed through the air, its cry echoing painfully in my head even as I turned to run.

Sprinting across the field, the creature's shadow fell over me and large, leathery hands slammed into my back as the creature screamed in triumph.

"Taylor?"

##

"Taylor?"

I awoke with a start, the creature's high-pitched scream still echoing in my mind and blending together with the sound of machinery in the distance.

The details were already starting to fade from my mind. I tried to hold on to what I could, but it was like trying hold water in my fist. The tighter I held on, the quicker it washed away.

"Hey, you okay?" Arcee asked from the doorway.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Bad dream. I must have drifted off." I stood up, groaning as I stretched my back. Sleeping upright in a chair was uncomfortable.

I'd taken a break to charge the Matrix while I had a couple of minutes and on a whim, had tried to meditate, only to end up falling asleep.

"I thought you didn't need sleep?" Arcee said with a dry smirk.

"I don't need sleep," I corrected. "That doesn't mean I can't. What time is it?"

"A little past eleven. Jack sent me to find you. Teletraan's finished."

"Great, thanks," I said, rolling my neck as the pair of us walked back to the main work area of the workshop.

I'd left Teletraan running a final scan of the device Armimaster had used against Oni Lee. Cyclonus had brought one of the emitters back to the workshop, and I had spent time trying to understand how it worked. It might have been easier if I could stand being near the thing for more than a few minutes while it was turned on.

It wasn't harmful; we knew that because Ratchet spent an hour studying the energy it gave off and wouldn't let me near it until he was finished. Still, something about it made my skin itch when I left it running.

It wasn't like I could ask Armimaster how it worked, as Armimaster was still in isolation. He'd spent two days after the fight unconscious. According to Amy, he'd been clipped by a bomb that worked like an EMP for organics. Wheeljack was already trying to copy that idea.

As for Armimaster, the director had thrown him into M/S quarantine the moment he woke up.
Officially, this was to make sure the bomb used on him had no lingering effects. Unofficially, he was confined to a cell until she decided what to do to him. Rumor was that she was apocalyptically mad at him.

The device was experimental, and the PRT had expressly forbidden its use as the Thinkers that reviewed it claimed that it was too unpredictable.

Powers were not straightforward, many could interact with each other in strange ways and Trumps that could outright suppress them safely were rare. As such, anything that could mess with them had a good chance of going wrong.

A good example of 'unpredicted consequences' was Browbeat. The memory enhancing drug, Flash, had reacted with his Corona Pollentia, sending his powers out of control. Even with Amy's help, they hadn't be able to do more than make his body more proportional. And even that failed the moment he lost his temper, which was being made worse by his power.

The chances of such a thing happening again had also made testing the device difficult. Most capes weren't going to voluntarily be exposed to something that could turn their own powers against them, and forcibly testing it on prisoners was a crime.

Thankfully, those PRT rules don't apply to me and now that I had one of the devices, I was free to do whatever I wanted with it. After nearly a week of study, I'd finally figured out how it worked.

"Should you really be messing with this thing?" Arcee asked as I read through the final report.

"It's fine," I said, not looking up from my work. "The device works by mimicking the energy given off by your sparks. It's harmless to most people. If it wasn't, I'd probably be isolation by now since I give off the same energy, albeit in much lower amounts."

"Yeah, but it almost killed you." she said with distaste, the wing-like protrusions on her back raised high in a show of tension. "If laughing boy had been just a fraction slower, all three of you would be dead by now."

Laughing boy had been Rattrap's name for Clockblocker and some of the Autobots had taken to using it as a term of endearment. Most of the Wards had one name or another.

"I know," I snapped, nearly slamming the tablet I was holding. I quickly forced myself to calm down. "Believe me, I know what could've happened. That's why I'm doing this. Maybe I can a way to shield people from the effect. Or at the very least, I can learn how Armsmaster nearly got us all killed!"

"Taylor, Armsmaster didn't… I'm sure he felt like he had no other choice." I tried to hide my wince at Dragon's admonishment, not really surprised by her sudden appearance. Arcee made a coughing noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

"Dragon! How long were you there?" I asked the nearby monitor, thankful I hadn't said anything too bad about Armsmaster. Her 'human' body had spent a lot of time at the PRT-HQ this week, answering questions on the 'power nullifier', as some of the PRT guys called it. The name was was a misnomer really, as the device didn't actually nullify powers. Thinkers, Tinkers and Brutes for example were unaffected.

"Not long," she said as her real body stepped into the room, "but I could hear you from the other side of the building." Her tail twitched in irritation, more at the situation than at me. "I know you're upset, but try not to judge Armsmaster too harshly. Yes, he could have done more testing, and no, he
shouldn't have taken the device into the field without permission, but in the end, he was trying to
save everyone's life. And it's not like he's the only one to take experimental equipment into the field."

"Yeah, I know," I said with a sigh, pushing my hair back, "but I reserve the right to be pissed at him
for at least another week."

Dragon chuckled, one of her large hands reaching out to ruffle my already messy hair. "Deal. Now,
tell me what you found."

"Not much we didn't already guess. It mimics the energy given off by sparks. Range and
effectiveness is dependent on how much power you feed into it."

I flicked my wrist and a nearby hologram came to life, showing a complex diagram of circuits and
equations. "I've got a design you can mass produce, but it's much larger than Armsmaster's. It was
the only way I could reduce the maintenance to something reasonable and increase its lifespan. The
only real problems are cost and power."

"It's a power hog and costs the earth to build, right?" Arcee said from her position by the wall.

"Basically, yeah. A mains power supply would probably be best for it, but if you really need it
mobile, I could -"

"Hey, Boss-Lady? You really need to see this!" Rattrap's worried voice came over the PA system,
interrupting what I was about to say.

Arcee, Dragon and I shared a confused look at his worried tone and the three of us quickly walked
upstairs to the 'recreation room'.

Originally a large, unused room, Dragon had placed a large TV against one wall and added some
couches. Over time, the bots had added to it, using their personal fund to purchase games consoles
and other toys. I'd hooked the TV up to Teletraan, letting them pause, rewind and record anything on
the TV. Jack had somehow managed to get us cable. All of it.

Right now, most of the Autobots were gathered in the room, either perched on chairs or standing
nearby. Wyvern was on the far side of the room by Rhinox, looking nervously between Dragon,
who had stayed by the door, and the TV screen.

Lisa was there too. She was sprawled out on one of the couches, one arm covering her eyes. Rattrap
was perched on her lap and Predaqueen curled around Waspinator by Lisa's feet. She had spent
much more time with the Autobots after our last discussion. Knowing they weren't spying on her
seemed to have helped her relax somewhat, though she was still spending large amounts of time
trying to track down Coil.

"Alright, Rattrap, what's up?" I stood next to the couch. After falling asleep sitting down, I needed to
stretch my legs a bit.

"You better see this for yourselves. Teletraan: rewind and play!"

On the TV, the paused news report reset back to the beginning. It was one of the more sensationalist
channels, quick to report celebrity or cape gossip and prone to exaggeration. They also used any
chance they could get to attack the PRT.

On the screen, a well dressed man sat behind a large desk and, clearing his throat, gave the camera a
tern look. "Good afternoon, I'm James Jonahson. It's been a week since the devastating fight
between the Nazis of the Empire Eighty Eight and ABB forces in the city of Brockton Bay and yet
the effects can still be felt."

The picture changed, showing the flowers, candles and other murals people had put up in the streets where the fight had taken place. In the background, the amber sphere containing Alabaster was visible, roped off and under police guard. The camera's panning slowed as it passed over the grieving, particularly a photogenic teenage boy crying while being supported by a police officer.

"Nearly thirty people were killed," Jonahson continued. "And dozens injured when Oni Lee unleashed Tinker-made ordnance on the city and damaged the livelihoods of hundreds in this spree of terror. Among the injured was Clockblocker, a popular local Ward who was in the area at the time. It is understood he was critically injured and required immediate treatment from Panacea to save his life.

"In the wake of the battle, the Youth Guard has launched a blistering attack on the PRT for allowing the Wards to be present in the first place. So far, the PRT has refused to comment beyond saying the situation is under investigation, but we have recently received information that claims that Armsmaster, leader of the Brockton Bay Protectorate, used an untested and unauthorised device that stripped the Wards of their powers as well as those of others on the scene. Our source, who wishes to remain anonymous, claims these injuries may have been avoided entirely.

"The same source also claims this device was responsible for delaying medical help, interfering with Panacea’s abilities and necessitating hospital intervention."

Rattrap hissed in mock pain and I winced. Around me, many of the Autobots had similar reactions. The PRT had, so far, done their best to suppress that information.

Parahumans that could interfere with another's power were equal parts feared and hated by a majority of capes, with Hatchet Face of the Slaughterhouse Nine being the most prominent example.

He disabled powers in an area around himself and, to make matters worse, he had a Brute rating. So far, Tinkers were typically immune to him, but he was smart enough to pick and choose his battles.

God knows what the gangs would do if they thought Armsmaster was building a man portable device that could do the same thing.

*And here I am, trying to make it mass-producible.* Admittedly, I was thinking more along the lines of prisoner containment: build one of these devices into the walls of a transport van or prison cell and it would be much easier to keep them contained.

"According to our sources," Jonahson said, continuing his monologue with building passion, "the device in question interferes with parahuman abilities and was expressly banned by the PRT due to its - and I quote - 'unpredictable nature'. While it's unknown at this time if the device destabilised the Tinker-made explosives carried by the crazed bomber, our local experts believe it's a distinct possibility.

"So far, the PRT has declined our invitation to comment on this and other issues so we've looked into Armsmaster ourselves. Since his Ward days, we have discovered a damning list of both antagonism to other authorities and individuals as well as a history of questionable decision making. Starting with his inauguration as..."

Groaning, I pinched the bridge of my nose as they dragged up every mistake or public screwup Armsmaster had ever had, some of which I'd never even heard of before.

"With me today is Mr Gil Breen, a well known researcher who works the Blackrock Corporation.
He's here to talk about the dangers and disasters the untested device could have caused. Andrew Froid, noted psychologist and author of 'A Parahuman Mind', has offered an expert analysis of Armsmaster's actions -"

Rung, who was sitting on the back of the sofa, huffed. "That man is a quack. He cherry picks his cases to ensure they fit into his theories and he describes anything that doesn't fit as an outlier and not important. He's ignoring basic, scientific principles!"

I tried not to laugh at his offended expression. Watching someone who was barely a foot tall have a tantrum was more adorable than intimidating.

They then followed it up with 'interviews' with people who'd met Armsmaster in the past and were willing to tell people how much of a jerk they thought he was.

I wasn't surprised by the news report. A lot of people were hurt or killed in the fight, Oni Lee among them. Because the ABB cape was dead, people were probably looking for someone else to blame. Still, the timing of this 'leak' felt a little too convenient and some of the details, like the problems it caused Amy, shouldn't have been known to anyone who wasn't there at the time.

"Let me guess, Coil?" I asked Lisa.

"Or someone in the PRT trying to make some quick cash. These stations pay a fair amount for this sort of information. Not everything that happens in this city is caused by Coil y'know," she said, without looking up. "But in this case, you're probably right. He wants the PRT discredited and Armsmaster's a pretty easy target."

With a sigh, Dragon turned and left the room. "Excuse me, I've got some calls to make."

Shrugging, I found an empty space on the couch and sat down. "How do you think the gangs will take it?"

"Not sure," Lisa said, her lips pressed together as she frowned. "The fact Armsmaster built something that messes with powers will worry them, but I expect Kaiser's going to be more focused on Lung at the moment. The ABB only had three capes, and now one of them is dead. Kaiser's gonna make a push on the ABB and Lung will have to do something big to hold him off or recruit more capes fast."

"Like the city doesn't have enough problems," I muttered, leaning back on the couch and ignoring my stomach as it rumbled loudly.

Smirking, Lisa finally uncovered her eyes and sat up. "Say, weren't you supposed to be meeting Amy today?"

"Hmm? Yeah, but she got called in to the hospital. There was a big pile up this morning and they needed her help."

"I see… Well, you know what to do, right?"

"No," I said, rolling my eyes. Lisa's voice had taken that teasing tone again. "What?"

"Go to the hospital, pick her up and take her out for lunch, of course. Some place intimate and quiet. And who knows? Maybe you could -"

"Do you want me to shoot you?" I snapped. Lisa being more relaxed around me and my Autobots was mostly a good thing, but it also meant she was more willing to tease me about my attraction to
"Oh come on Taylor, you can't keep pretending forever. It's pretty obvious that you like her. The way you stare at her, go out of your way to make things for her..."

I found myself wondering just what Lisa look like with a pitchfork, horns and a red outfit. If Lisa was the devil on my shoulder, that probably made Rung the angel. The only problem with that image was that Rung kept telling me the same thing, minus the teasing.

"Look," Lisa said, her expression turning serious, "if it helps, Amy's just as interested as you."

"Lisa, seriously, I appreciate what... Pardon?"

"Remember the other day? When you had on those jeans that were too small for you? Trust me, Amy's eyes were glued to your backside. If you had put on a pair of heels, I honestly think she would have passed out."

I flushed, both at what she said, and the reminder. The jeans were meant to be slim fit, but I'd bought them months ago and never worked up the nerve to wear them until last week. Unfortunately, all the exercise I did had changed my shape a bit and they ended up being much tighter than I expected.

"Y-You really think she's... interested in me?" Goodbye confidence, I barely knew ye.

"Taylor... I'm a Thinker, remember? Look, go take her out to a nice lunch and see how things go."

I bit my lip as old insecurities flared up again and I found myself worrying about how I looked, what I would say, the idea that I was just going to make a fool of myself.

Getting frustrated with myself, I mercilessly crushed those thoughts. Lisa was right, as loathe as I was to admit it. I wasn't that person any more.

"I'm not agreeing to anything," I told Lisa firmly as I stood up, "but lunch does sound like a good idea. You want me to bring you back anything?"

Lisa grinned. "No thanks. Tell Amy I said hi."

"Stop smiling like that. I never said I'd talk to Amy."

"No, you didn't."

_Fucking Thinkers._

##

I was halfway to the hospital on my bike when I realised I should probably call ahead. It wasn't midday yet, but Amy might have had an early lunch.

"Rewind, can you call Amy?"

As the phone rang, I forced myself not to think about what Lisa had said, or what I would say to Amy and just focus on the road. The last thing I wanted was to sound nervous when it was just lunch.

"Hey Taylor!" Amy chirped when she answered the phone; her general mood had been improving lately.
"H-hey!" Damn it! "You finished at the hospital? I thought we could grab some lunch." Much better.

Thankfully, the mess of sensors and VI programming on my bike meant it could more or less drive itself. I did get a number of odd looks, though.

"No, I'm finished here. Lunch sounds great, where do -"

The sound of thunder filled the sky and I slammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop as the noise of the explosion rolled over me. I'd barely had time to blink when four more went off, the closest one rattling the nearby windows. In the distance, I could see plumes of smoke rising into the air.

*All units be advised, explosions detected across the city! I repeat -*

I ignored the announcement from the console and pulled up a map of the city, the nearest explosion to me was... No!

Glancing at my display, I realised my call had been cut off. Accelerating hard, I took off down the road towards the hospital. "Rewind, dial Amy!"

*I'm sorry, but the number you have called can-* I growled at the automated message at took the next turning at breakneck speed. "Redial!"

Up ahead, the pillar of smoke was getting bigger as thick black clouds rose into the sky.

Please, no!

##

Skidding to a stop outside the hospital, my insides turned to ice at what I saw.

It was chaos. Half the building had collapsed, while smoke was billowing from the other half. People were streaming out of the stricken building, coughing and blinded by the smoke. Around them, doctors and nurses were struggling to help people away from the building and treat their injuries. I could hear people screaming and crying while others called out for help.

Switching my bike to its armour mode, I ran to the nearest doctor I recognised, Dr Sloan, who was leaning against a nearby ambulance and coughing. He was bleeding from an open wound on his forehead, but he didn't seem to be in any danger.

"Doctor, where's Panacea?!"

"What?" His gaze was unfocused and one of his hands was touching his bleeding ear.

"Where's Amy?!" I shouted, stopping myself from shaking the man.

"Am- Amy? She was in the - in the east wing," he said in between coughs, waving his arm in the vague direction of the collapsed building.

I stared in horror at the ruined building. Dread filled my body and only my armour kept me up right.

No, I'm not giving up!

With a surge of determination, I forced myself to focus. "Autobots! Rollout!"

Immediately, blue flashes lit up the area as my bots started to arrive. All of them.
Without a word said from me, Waspinator, Windblade and Laserbeak took to the air in an effort to survey the area.

"Wheeljack, how many Insecticons do we have in storage? Configure them all for search and rescue and send them through!"

Ratchet appeared, a number of large bags slung under his arms. With a nod in my direction, he waded through the crowds, pulling poles from the bags and driving them into the ground. Perceptor, First Aid and Hot Spot ran along behind him, using cables to connect the poles to a generator that had appeared. Once the last was placed, they lit up, creating hardlight shelters. Nothing complicated, just three walls and a roof but they also contained beds.

"You there!" he shouted to some nearby nurses who appeared mostly unhurt. "Get those people over here! Anyone with training, report to First Aid for your assignments!"

Soundwave arrived next, followed by a large crate. Ripping the top off, nearly a hundred Insecticons swarmed into the air and dived into the ruined building. Individually, their sensors were limited, but collectively, they quickly began building a three-dimensional image of the building.

"Soundwave, take the cats with you, find anyone close to the surface and dig them out! If they're too deep, use the Insecticons to ensure they have air until we can get to them!" I shouted to him.

Over by the building, I spotted people digging away at the rubble. "You! Stop there! You're going to bring the whole thing down on your heads! Start at the top and work your way down, set up a chain to clear the debris faster!"

I wasn't sure if it would do any good, but something about the situation felt… familiar. It felt like the right thing to do. All around me, people were watching with the same stunned expression. No one had expected this and all they wanted was for someone to make it better, to make it 'not be happening'.

Right now, it looked like it was up to me.

Surprised at first, the people I had ordered were slow to respond, but soon enough, they were following my orders. Dad told me once that when something went wrong, people were more likely to listen to someone who looked like they knew what they were doing.

In the distance, I could hear sirens as the police and fire department arrived and quickly joined the rescue efforts.

Ambulances with still working equipment were quickly being converted into makeshift treatment centers. Those that could still drive were loaded up with the worst cases and sent to nearby hospitals who themselves were sending help.

Leaving Ratchet to tend to the wounded, I joined crowds digging through the rubble. There was a heat signature only a few feet below me and my armour allowed me to quickly clear the large pieces of rubble. Anything I couldn't lift was picked up by Rhinox, who could lift entire sections of wall with little effort.

I forced myself not to react when I pulled a child free of the rubble. She was crying, covered in blood and one of her arms was a mangled mess. But she was alive. Being as gentle as I could, I carried her down and placed her on a bed.

Inside, fear and anger rolled in my stomach. I wasn't sure if I was going to cry, scream or just be sick. At the same time, I had one overriding thought: Amy was buried here somewhere and I wasn't
leaving until I found her.

"Amy?!" I nearly cursed when Glory Girl dropped out of the sky, screaming her sister's name.

"Where's Amy?" she shouted, grabbing the first person in uniform she saw nearby and lifting him off his feet. The poor doctor quickly pointed at a collapsed building and before he could say a word, Vicky was off, charging towards the building.

The moment the she grabbed the doctor, my world slowed and I could see clearly in my mind what would happen. By the time she dropped the doctor, I was already running.

We collided with a crash just short of the building, the impact hurting me far more than it did her.

"Let go! Let me go! Amy's still in there!" she shouted as I desperately held on.

"Vicky! Calm down! You need to stop!" I shouted back. Realising she wasn't listening, I drew back and punched her across the jaw. I knew it wouldn't hurt her, but the shock stunned her into silence.

"Listen to me! I know, okay? I know she's in there but we can't just smash our way in! You could bring everything down, you could crush her, do you understand!"

Vicky's shock quickly gave way to anger, her aura rushed over me and in that moment, I was willing to do anything to make the goddess before me happy. "I can't just do nothing! She's my sister!"

There were tears and makeup running down her face; I'd never seen Vicky so distraught before.

"Control your fucking aura!" I snapped, using my own temper to ignore the effect it was having on me. "I know she's your sister, she's my - my best friend! Now listen! /Listen/ to me! She's /alive/, and /we will find her/. But we have to be careful. Now, are you going to listen to me, or am I going to have to sedate you? Cause friend or not, if you can't control yourself, I will /knock. You. Out!/"

To my relief, Vicky took a step back and visibly swallowed her pride. Her aura slowly receded, taking with it the feelings of warmth and adoration.

I pulled a spare visor out of subspace. "Good. Here, put this on and follow me and Rhinox. Survivors will be highlighted in blue, red areas are unstable, green is safe. Don't pick up anything that's red; you could crush someone if you do. Is that clear?"

"Y-yeah, I think so." Without waiting for further instructions, Vicky picked up a section of wall the size of a car and moved it out of the way.

In the distance, more explosions sounded and dispatch continued to call for help. Seven or eight bombs had gone off so far, many with strange or exotic effects but nothing matched the first four when it came to damage and lives lost.

It would be gone midnight by the time search and rescue was called off.

##

it was nearly midnight by the time Ratchet forced me into a PRT van and sent me home. The search for survivors was still ongoing but I needed to stop.

I was barely aware of the world around me. Stumbling slightly as I walked, I stopped only long enough to half-climb, half-fall out of my armour.
236 people had been trapped when the bomb went off. We managed to reach ninety-five. Fifty were still alive when we reached them. Thirty-three later died of their injuries and the ones remaining were still in critical condition. And Amy… Amy.

Stopping short of the door, I dry heaved a couple of times. But there was nothing left to bring up. I fumbled at the lock, trying to get the front door open. After three attempts, I finally made it inside and started picking at my shirt. It was filthy, dirty, and stained with sweat.

I needed, I needed a shower.

Moving like a zombie, I staggered into the bathroom and turned on the shower. While I waited for it to heat up, I looked at myself in the mirror. I could feel myself shaking, my eyes were bloodshot, my hair was a tangled mess and my face was blotchy. I'd never been more thankful that my mask kept people from seeing me cry.

At first, I'd been angry at Lung, Bakuda and the ABB as a whole. After a while, when the explosions had finally stopped and the bodies were piling up, my anger burned away, leaving just sadness. And now, I just felt… hollow. Physically and mentally drained.

We'd dug, lifted and worked for hours, but there had been three corpses for every person we'd saved. So many children.

The shower made a pitiful whining noise before it cut out. The pump was old, it needed replacing but we'd never had the money, and when we did, there had just never been enough time.

Shaking hands pushed my greasy hair back as the stink of my clothes became too much. I just wanted it off me! With a sob, I grabbed my shirt and started pulling, desperate to get it off. My flailing only resulted me tangling myself up, my actions getting more frantic.

That stink, it wouldn't leave me alone, the walls pressing in on all sides, things crawl-

Arms wrapped around me, pulling my shirt down and pinning my arms.

"Taylor! It's okay, it's just me! Calm down!"

Looking over my shoulder, I saw my dad's worried face. Turning in his arms, I buried my face in his chest and let myself cry.

Tomorrow, the anger would come back. Tomorrow, Bakuda would burn.
When I woke up the next day, my mind felt numb, lifeless. My body ached from digging through the rubble for hours, but I couldn't summon up the energy to care. I just wanted to curl up and hide from the world.

As I stared at the ceiling, I could still see the piles of debris and the broken and bleeding bodies being pulled from the wreckage. Hear the sounds of people crying as we unearthed corpse after corpse.

The anger I from yesterday was still there, but it felt walled off, detached. Like I was floating above it all. I didn't remember getting changed or getting into bed, but at least my sleep had been dreamless. After everything I saw, I'd been expecting nightmares.

Slowly, I sat up and looked around my room. Rewind wasn't sitting on my bedside table like normal. Closing my eyes, I reached out for his spark and found it around the kitchen.

Listlessly, I forced myself to stand, ignoring the lingering aches in my body as I left my room, stopping only briefly to make sure I was presentable. Walking out in front of my dad without pants was funny exactly once… Ugh, I couldn't even gather the energy to feel embarrassed.

I shuffled my way into the kitchen, refusing to look towards the bathroom or even think about my meltdown last night.

In the kitchen, Rewind and Windblade were standing on the table. Different holographic screens flickered into life around them far too quickly for me to follow. They made gestures like they were talking, but I couldn't hear anything being said, so I assumed they were using their radios for privacy. Next to them was a bodysuit neatly folded up on the table.

Dad was standing near the coffee maker, giving the Autobots a bemused look.

It was all so… normal. If I just shut my eyes and blocked the memories out, I could almost convince myself it had all been a dream.

Unbidden, the image of Amy's small, lifeless body being lifted from the rubble came to mind. She hadn't been wearing her costume and she was covered in blood and dirt. Her pulse had been weak and the paramedics had rushed to get her into a waiting ambulance headed to the nearest hospital.

My dad looked at me and quickly put his cup down, crossing the room and pulling me into a hug.

"Hey, kiddo, you okay?"

Wrapping my arms around him, I took a shuddering breath. "No, not really." I could feel some of the missing warmth returning to my body.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I… no…" I shook my head. "It's just… it was a hospital. There were just so many people and Amy… I was there when they found her and -"

I forced myself to stop, to calm down when I realised I was rambling.
"Sorry, I'll be alright, I promise. I just need… right now, I want to get back out there."

Dad sighed. "Taylor…you don't have to. You've done more than enough. How many lives do you think you saved last night?"

"But I do! I need to do something, even if it's just tinkering in my workshop. If I stay here, I'm only going to keep freaking out."

Dad just held me tighter. I know he didn't want me out there. The city had literally exploded last night, and it was only a matter of time before the Empire retaliated. But I couldn't just stay here and watch it happen, not anymore. If I stayed, then yesterday would haunt me forever.

"I'm really sorry to interrupt," Windblade cut in, biting her lip and flying up into the air to hover at head height. "But… there's been an update from the hospital, Amy came out of surgery two hours ago and has been declared stable. Ratchet is with her now!"

I grabbed the bodysuit and ran from the kitchen.

"Taylor?!!" Dad called as I sprinted upstairs.

I dismissed thoughts of a shower as it was still broken. Once I was in my room, I quickly did what I could to clean myself up with some wet-wipes while I pulled the suit on. Thankfully it felt and smelled like it was clean. Wheeljack must have teleported it to the house last night.

Running back downstairs and into the kitchen, I grabbed Rewind, stopping when I saw the concerned look on Dad's face.

"I'm sorry, I'll explain later -"

Dad put a hand on my shoulder, cutting me off. "It's alright, Windblade explained everything. Go on, we'll talk later. Just… just try to stay safe, alright? That's all I ask."

"I will," I promised. "I've got the Autobots backing me up, after all."

My armour was still standing on the front lawn, right where I'd left it.

I felt a bit foolish for that now. I knew my identity was public, but using my armour as a lawn ornament like that was a bit much. At least the on-board VI had sealed the suit up after I got out.

Divebomb was standing next to my armour, giving me an unimpressed look, while Windblade hovered nearby.

"I know, I'm sorry. I'll be more careful in the future," I told him, patting his head. In return, he gently nipped my fingers before hopping away.

##

"Can you give me a full report?" I asked Windblade as we flew towards the hospital. Even if we flew in a straight line, it would take a few minutes to get there and I needed the distraction.

"There have been eleven explosions so far. Most have produced exotic effects, like turning people to ice, but there have been some mundane explosives mixed in. The current death toll is suspected to be over two hundred people, with even more injured."

She paused and I looked at the city below me; the streets were almost empty. Only the brave, foolish or desperate would be outside today. What does that make me?
"How is the public taking it?"

"Badly. PHO is flooded with discussions and the local new stations have spoken about nothing else since it happened. Amy's injuries are a close second. A lot of people think a kill order is due to be announced. That's what Rewind and I were working on when you woke up. The Protectorate is out in force. They've divided the city up with one cape per sector. Dragon has agreed to help and is visibly searching an area near the workshop. All of them are backed up by police and PRT vehicles."

A small map of the city appeared on my HUD, with lines splitting the city into colour coded sections. Dragon, I noticed, had the largest area to cover, but with her ability to fly or be in two places at once, that was trivial.

"Has the PRT issued a statement?"

"They have. They're asking for any information related to Bakuda or Lung and are even offering a reward. So far, nothing useful has turned up."

"What was the Empire's response?"

"Three men, all asian, were found murdered within an hour of the first explosion. A fourth was publicly executed by Hookwolf an hour before the PRT started patrolling, but nothing's happened since then. Right now, everything's gone quiet."

That wasn't a good thing. The gangs were never inactive, so if all the fighting had stopped, it probably meant both sides were gearing up for something big.

##

I landed outside the hospital and marched towards the doors. There were police and PRT officers standing at the entrance of the hospital, giving people suspicious looks. I saw one of them stop a guy in yellow so they could check through his bag. When I landed, I smoothly stepped out of my armour and marched through the doors, Windblade leading the way.

As I followed her through the corridors, a couple of security guards tried to stop me, but I walked past them without even sparing a glance.

Amy had been given a private room on the top floor, with a PRT guard stationed at either end of the corridor. One of them I recognised as Jenkins, who gave me a nod as I passed.

Without thinking about it, I opened the door and marched into Amy's room.

I'd been expecting the worst, like a room full of machines all wired up to Amy as she struggled to live. Instead the room was fairly large, with a number of chairs and Amy in a bed in the middle.

She was paler than usual, but aside from the IV drip, she almost looked like she was sleeping peacefully.

My eyes took in every exposed inch of her face before they slowly moved down her body. There wasn't a mark on it I could see, and her chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. One of her arms was on top of the sheet while I could see the outline of the other visible under it.

It was only when my eyes reached her legs that the illusion was shattered. Under the sheet, both legs ended abruptly just above her knees. Clenching my fists, I took a deep shuddering breath in an effort to stay calm.
"Taylor?"

I jumped at Vicky's voice. I'd been so focused on Amy that I hadn't seen her sitting in the closest chair. She looked terrible: her hair was a mess, her eyes were bloodshot and her skin was blotchy.

"Vicky, what happened?"

"Her legs were crushed by the rubble. The doctors, they did what they could, but… "

I moved to Vicky's side and pulled her into a hug, grateful when she returned the gesture. Slowly, she told me what had happened.

Amy had been on the ground floor when the explosion happened. The falling building had formed a protective cocoon around her, but her legs had been crushed. Apparently the rubble pressing down on her legs had kept her from bleeding out, but the doctors had been forced to amputate.

"What happened to the rest of her injuries?" I asked quietly, forcing down my anger.

"Othala came by nearly half-an-hour ago." Vicky's face scrunched up in distaste. "How fucked up is that? We had to go to the Nazis for help!"

"So why are her legs still…?"

"It's a limit the Empire has been keeping quiet about. She can only heal one person at a time and she can't regrow limbs." Letting go of me, Vicky slumped back into her chair.

Before I could move, there was a soft knocking on the door behind me and Miss Militia entered the room.

"Taylor," she said with a nod. "Victoria, I'm sorry about what happened. Do you know where your mother is?"

Vicky shrugged. "Getting coffee, I think. Dad forced her to leave the room when Othala said she couldn't fix Amy's legs. Mom practically exploded at her."

"She's in the canteen," Windblade said, landing on my shoulder, "Ratchet's keeping an eye on her. Do you want him to let her know you're here?"

"That would be perfect, thank you."

We waited in silence for Carol Dallon to arrive. I grabbed the seat next to Vicky and Miss Militia chose to stand by the door.

I felt, well, a lot of things. I hated seeing Vicky look miserable, or Amy laying in a hospital bed, and I didn't know what to say or do.

On top of that, my anger from last night had returned and was slowly building under the surface. I felt like I had to do something - anything - to let off some pressure or I was going to scream.

Before I could give in to that temptation, the door swung open and Amy's mom walked in, followed by Ratchet. I'd meet Carol Dallon before; I remembered finding her a bit cool, even abrupt, though she seemed to warm slightly towards Vicky.

Just behind them was Mark Dallon, who walked past everyone else and took up position on Amy's other side, gently taking one of her hands. He looked more focused than the last time I'd seen him.
I felt uncomfortable sitting here, like I was intruding on a private moment. But no one had asked me to leave and I wanted to stay with Amy, so I tried to stay quietly out of the way.

"When will the PRT healer be arriving?" Carol asked, almost immediately after entering the room.

"Mrs. Dallon," Miss Militia said, her voice quiet and heavy. "I'm really sorry, but the Protectorate can't help."

"You can't, or won't?" Carol snapped. Next to me, Vicky finched at her mother's shout.

Miss Militia held her hands up in an effort to calm the situation down. "Miss Dallon, Carol, I understand you're upset."

"Upset?! My daughter has lost both her legs, the PRT is refusing to send in a healer, and you think I'm upset?!"

"Carol, that's enough!" Mark said firmly but quietly, walking over to her. "Miss Militia, what aren't you telling us?"

There was a pause as Miss Militia looked around the room, visibly debating what to say. Her eyes lingered on me and Vicky for the longest time before she spoke again. She was careful to keep her voice low.

"The only healer the PRT has that can regrow limbs is a Ward named Scapegoat. As soon as I heard what happened to Panacea, I put in a request to have him brought here, but… he's been missing for two days now."

"I'm sorry, are you trying to tell me the PRT lost a Ward?" Carol said in disbelief.

With a reluctant sigh, Miss Militia's shoulders dropped. "We suspect a master or stranger power was responsible. Scapegoat went on patrol with the San Diego Wards two days ago and has not been heard from since. To make matters worse, no one even noticed until I made the request."

"Fuck!" Vicky said, ignoring the look her mother gave her. "Why hasn't this been on the news?"

"Thinkers claim whoever took Scapegoat needs him alive for something, but only as long as they think we are unaware of his kidnapping. If we go public, we risk them killing him in an effort to cover their tracks."

"Is this related to the missing healers Dragon warned us about? You think it's the Nine or the Fallen? They have been quiet recently," Carol speculated, her anger momentarily pushed to the side but her posture remaining tense.

Miss Militia looked in my direction. "We do think this is related. As for the who… it doesn't really match the methods of any of the known groups. In fact, based on what the Guild has discovered, the Yangban are currently the likeliest suspects."

"Putting that aside," Carol said, waving her hand dismissively, "what about Amy?"

"I'm sorry, but there isn't much the PRT can do at the moment. If anything changes, if Scapegoat or another healer is found, I promise Amy will get treatment. But for now, the PRT will make sure she's moved to the front of the waiting list for prosthe-"

"Don't bother." I flushed when everyone turned to look at me, but I pushed on regardless. "I can have a set of prosthetics here by…" I glanced at Rewind's display, "tonight. No charge."
Mark and Vicky looked at me, their eyes lit up and for a brief moment, Vicky looked like she was going to smile, but Carol frowned at me. "I… appreciate the offer, but I'm not sure if tinkertech -"

"It's fine! Dragon and I designed a full set of limbs a little while ago. They're in clinical trials at the moment, but they require little maintenance, no surgery and can be mass produced."

I shot Ratchet a pleading look. Despite his grumpy manner, no one was more suited to explaining the benefits of the tech I could provide.

"Maybe we should discuss this alone?" Ratchet offered, before Carol or I could say anything more.

"Yes, perhaps that would be best," Carol agreed.

I tried not to let my frustration show as I was gently ushered out of Amy's room along with Vicky. There was nothing else I could do here, I was too wound up to simply stand and wait outside the room, and there was no way I could focus enough to build something.

Lacking anything else to do, I decided to find a different outlet for my anger.

"I'm going after Bakuda, you coming?" I asked Vicky.

She looked between me and Amy's room, clearly torn about what to do. Eventually, she shook her head with a sigh. "No… I think… I want to stay here, y'know, in case Amy wakes up."

I didn't like seeing her like this, quiet and withdrawn. "That's probably a good idea," I said, pulling her into a one-armed hug. "Let me know when she does, okay?"

Once I got a promise from Vicky, I left the hospital, stopping only to order my smaller Autobots to keep an eye on Amy. If Dragon was right and the Yangban were grabbing healers, I wanted to have eyes on Amy at all times.

Climbing into my armour, I took off and hovered high above the city.

"Streetwise, I need an informant. Any suggestions?"

*Taylor, please tell me you're not going after Lung,* Wheeljack groaned over the radio.

I snorted. "I'm not that stupid. I'm just looking for information. Once I have it, I'll let the PRT handle him."

It was a good plan, a sensible one. I also didn't expect it to work. To be honest, I was hoping it wouldn't. Lung or Bakuda, I didn't really care who was responsible, I was going to make them sorry.

*Fine. By the way, Ratchet asked me to start working on Amy's prosthetics.*

"Good, I want you to go all out on them. Also, can you open the RedWing files and start production?" Hopefully, it would help Amy recover.

I felt my heart unclench slightly. It wouldn't be the same, of course, and it would probably take time for her to adjust, but at least Amy would have a more normal life.

*There's a place called Mama Hong's,* Streetwise said, distracting me from my thoughts, as the building was highlighted on my HUD. *It's a laundromat downtown, but PD thinks it's a front for another casino.*

"And what do you think?" Streetwise lived up to his name; he spent hours going over police reports,
maps and even forums looking for information. At this point, he probably knew the city better than I did.

*The building that backs onto it has been boarded up for years, but it's an older building with thick walls that would block sound. Besides, it's still drawing power. That would make it a good place to set up a casino, but those are typically run by people higher up in the foodchain. Of course, that also means more guards.* There was a slight warning tone to his voice.

"I wasn't planning on going in alone. Are Cyclonus and Arcee in the building?"

*We're here," Arcee said. *Just give us five minutes to get some breakfast.*

"That's fine. Warpath? I want you to stay with Dad. If anyone so much as looks at him funny, you have my permission to blast them."

Maybe I was being a little paranoid, but Amy getting hurt had scared me more than I wanted to admit. I wasn't sure what I'd do if something happened to him.

*Boom, pow! I'm on it! Blamo!* 

With nothing else to do now but wait, I flew towards the laundromat and landed on a nearby roof, positioning myself so I couldn't be seen from below.

It looked like Streetwise was right. The laundromat looked normal enough, but when I used thermal sensors on the building behind it, it was clearly still in use. I couldn't make out any details at this distance, but it was far too hot for an empty building and the ABB guy standing nearby was doing a bad job of blending in.

Getting comfortable, I settled down to wait for the others.

##

*Are you sure this is a good idea?* Arcee asked for the second time. It hadn't taken her or Cyclonus long to arrive, and now she was hidden on a side road less than fifty yards away. Cyclonus stood on the roof with me.

In that time, I'd seen three more people enter the 'abandoned' building through a side door, all of them in ABB colours. All of them looked nervous, moving quickly and glancing around to see if they'd been spotted. At least one of them had been carrying a weapon, and no one had come out. Even the guard out front seemed fidgety and had nearly jumped out of his skin when some glass broke nearby.

"It'll be fine. The ABB doesn't have anything that can actually hurt us." Our armour could ignore small arms fire and heavier caliber bullets would be stopped by our shields. We stood a better chance at surviving than a PRT squad.

*Except for those tinker grenades,* Arcee said dryly.

"Yes, 'except for the tinker grenades'," I said with an irritated sigh. "But Oni Lee is dead and he's the only one crazy enough to use those indoors. Can you deal with the guard?"

"One guy? How will I ever cope," she joked as she emerged from her hiding place and drove towards the guard.

He barely paid the blue motorbike and its female rider any attention until she accelerated towards him.
at high speed. Arcee clipped the curb and used it to jump into the air, transforming as she went.

Before he could even shout a warning, Arcee landed, slamming a fist into his gut and knocking the wind out of him. As he doubled over, she shot him with a Null-Ray, putting him out.

Jumping off the roof, I calmly walked over to her, closely followed by Cyclonus. This close, I could use my sensors to more or less look through the walls of the building. It wasn't perfect, but I could see about a dozen people inside. They were arranged in a semicircle around the side door I'd seen people using.

*Looks like they're expecting trouble.*

Smirking to myself, I moved over to the building's *front* entrance. Thick, heavy boards had been placed over it, but the brickwork around it was old and crumbling. Pulling the same PEP rifle I'd given Vista the other day, I aimed it at the door.

The simple explanation was that the weapon used pulses of kinetic energy to knock people down, allowing them to be dealt with without excessive force. As a side effect, it also caused a great deal of pain, encouraging people to stay down once they were hit.

Of course, if you turned the power up, it made for a good siege weapon.

There was a brief whine, followed by a meaty thwump noise as the door - along with a good chunk of the wall - exploded inwards.

I could have used my Null-Ray and HL-Sheild as I entered the building, but I wanted to make a point, so instead, I marched forwards, ignoring bullets as they pinged off my armour and returned fire with the PEP.

Inside, the ABB men who had been standing guard and hadn't been hit by the exploding wall were scrambling to reposition themselves. Card tables and homemade roulette wheels were overturned as they frantically tried to mount a defence.

While I blocked the hole, Arcee and Cyclonus spread out, flanking me on both sides and firing at the ABB with stun weapons of their own.

Behind the shooters, a heavyset man dived into what I assumed was an office. I decided to deal with him later, focusing on the people still shooting at me. As the number of ABB dropped from a dozen to four, I had to admit I was starting to feel better.

"Stop! Stop! Fucking stop!" one of the still standing ABB shouted from behind a large fridge, throwing his gun away and putting his hands up. Following his lead, the other three quickly copied him.

"Arcee, tie everyone up," I ordered, walking through the debris and stopping at the man who had surrendered first.

"Who's in charge!?" I snapped, doing my best to sound like Miss Militia when she was angry.

The man pointed to the door the other guy had ran through. Leaving him for the others to tie up, I walked up to the door and cycled my vision settings. From what I could make out, there didn't appear to be any traps and the guy inside was huddled in a corner. Giving the door a nudge, I was surprised to find it locked.

*Like that's going to stop anyone.* One swift kick smashed the door off its hinges and I walked inside.
Despite what I'd thought, the man inside wasn't hiding. Instead he'd positioned a desk in the corner of the room and was kneeling behind it, using it as both a shield and a base to steady his aim.

I'd barely walked through the door when three high powered rounds slammed into my chest. Between my shield and armour, I barely felt the impact, but the noise had been surprising. Judging from the warning messages, I had a good idea what had just happened.

"Y'know what cops do to people using armour piercing rounds?" I ground out as I walked towards him. My helmet had a speaker that gave my voice a metal 'flanging' effect, making me sound like my Autobots. I'd been told it could be creepy at times.

The man dropped his gun and stood up, hands in the air. "I'm sure it can't be worse than what you're going to do. Fucking capes, you think you own the city. Now what do you want?"

"Bakuda's head. Where is she?"

"You're insane. I'm not telling you shit!"

I grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him into a wall hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

"That the best you've got?" He coughed. "I've worked for Lung since he came to the city. You know what he does to people who piss him off? You don't scare me. All you heroes are the same, too busy saving cats from trees. You can't do shit to me, you ain't got the balls."

I desperately wanted to prove him wrong, to pound away on his face until he was nothing but a bloody smear on the wall.

There was a noise behind me and I glanced back to see Arcee and Cyclonus enter the room.

Cyclonus stepped forward, placing a clawed hand on my shoulder. "Do you want me to deal with him?" His voice was low and threatening.

The man I was holding glared defiantly at Cyclonus but didn't say anything. Taking a breath, I eased my grip on his shirt. This didn't have to happen, there were other ways to do this.

"You're looking at this all wrong," I said, ignoring his expression. "Bakuda bombed a hospital, and more than two hundred people are injured or dead. The PRT is pushing to sign a kill order as we speak."

I tilted my head sideways slightly. The expression on my mask was stern or neutral and I'd noticed from watching bots like Wheeljack and Warpath - who had no visible expression - that how I held my head could make a big difference. If I positioned my head just right, I could give the impression of what I was 'feeling'.

"Do you know what happens when a kill order is announced? Every two-bit bounty hunter, vigilante, rogue and villain on the east coast will flock to this city looking for blood. And us heroes? We'll let them."

"Oh sure, we'll try to keep them from going too far, to keep innocent people out of the way. But these people aren't going to be nice about asking questions. I'd hate to be wearing ABB colours or worse, be a known informant when they get here."

He paled dramatically, the smug expression slipping off his face. "You wouldn't dare."

"Two. Hundred. People," I repeated. "Do you think anyone's going to give a shit about some bottom
feeding gangbanger getting killed?"

There hadn't been a kill order announced in Brockton Bay since the Teeth were driven out, long before my time. I was mostly just repeating what people like Assault and Dragon had told me when it had come up in discussions.

"What are you offering?"

"Tell me what I want to know, and you can wait out the chaos in the safety of a prison cell."

"You haven't spent much time in prison." He snorted. "Fine. Not like it's my problem if you get yourself killed. I don't know where any of the capes are. No one does. They both vanished the night Oni Lee died."

"You expect me to believe that's all you know? Your men were waiting for someone out there."

"Of course they were! We're not stupid, the bitch blows people up and it's us the capes come after. Look, last I heard, Bakuda was at Garden Rise Apartments."

"Garden Rise was one of the places bombed last night," Arcee said, crossing her arms and glaring at the man. "It's covered in green crystal. You expect us to believe she's there?"

He returned Arcee's glare before giving me a shrug. "The boys dragged a load of heavy equipment into the underground carpark months ago. It was sealed up so tight, they had to cut their way in. After that, I had guys taking all kinds of weird shit up there at odd hours, that's all I know."

"Even if it's an abandoned workshop, we might be able to learn something of use," Cyclonus offered, giving the man a dismissive look.

He was right: it wasn't much of a lead, but it was better than nothing. Shifting my grip, I pulled the man forwards and forced him to his knees so that Arcee could zip-tie his hands.

"Jack? Send PD to collect these guys and try to dig up anything you can on the Garden Rise Apartments."

*On it. But are you sure this is a good idea? I thought you said you weren't going to fight Lung?*

"I'm not. Arcee and Cyclonus are right. The place is probably abandoned by now, but it's all I've got to go on. We should probably move fast, though. Cyclonus, you okay with carrying Arcee?"

"You're kidding, right?" she asked, giving me a flat look.

##

Immediately after hitting the ground near the apartment building, I started scanning the area for any possible threats.

"I am never doing that again," Arcee muttered as she and Cyclonus landed. "Give me a moment for my tank to settle." Despite her protests, she'd ended up laying on top of Cyclonus as he flew across the city in jet mode.

I wasn't sure what her problem was. I'd seen how she drove through the city, after all. Cyclonus was probably safer. In the end, I decided not to comment and Cyclonus wisely stayed silent.

Ahead of us was the apartment block. Like Arcee had said, the lower three stories were completely encased in a green crystal and the upper floors had already been evacuated. Police tape ringed the
building and officers could be seen patrolling the perimeter.

I started walking around the building, looking for an entrance to the underground parking lot while staying away from the tape.

"Well, that's not ominous or anything," Arcee said, looking at the crystal growths on the building. "Is this stuff safe to be around? It's making my head tingle."

I frowned, moving closer so I could run a more in-depth scan. "It's fine," I said eventually. "The crystal is giving off low level radiation that messes with electronics. It won't actually hurt you, it's just creepy."

The pulsing, sickly green glow that the crystals were giving off didn't help. The steady, even beat reminding me of a heart beating. Oh that's a lovely image, I snapped at my imagination.

That aside, the radiation - while harmless - was messing with my equipment. Nothing major, but it was weakening my radio signal and my bots couldn't teleport anywhere within two blocks of the building.

*The parking lot was closed when the Endbringer shelter was installed,* Lisa suddenly said over the radio, making me jump. *They were worried the underground construction would weaken the structure.*

"Fuck! Don't do that!" I hissed, thankful I hadn't screamed or done something rash.

An image of Lisa sitting in the workshop appeared on my HUD. She quickly masked her smile with an air of seriousness. "Sorry. You know, if you were planning to start digging around, you should have called me."

"It was early and you were asleep," I muttered.

"Yeah, well, this is important, right. How is she?"

"Othala healed her this morning, but her legs..." I shook my head, forcing the images down.

Thankfully, Lisa chose not to comment.

"Don't worry, we'll get them," she said. "Now, the original entrance was on the street corner just north of you. It was bricked up years ago, but I doubt that will stop you."

A small indicator appeared on my HUD, highlighting the entrance. As I walked towards it, I noticed the nearby police officer had taken an interest and had walked towards us. He made no effort to stop me, but he was watching intently.

If he wasn't going to say anything, then neither was I.

Eventually, I found the entrance, just where Lisa said it would be. There was a turning on the road that went down a ramp and under the apartment building and when we walked down that path, we were almost completely hidden from view on the street. There was more green crystal covering the entrance and trying to scan through it was nearly impossible.

The best I could make out was a large, fuzzy room with lots of objects scattered around it.

"Looks like we'll need to blast our way inside," Arcee said. It looked like she was right, but I was reluctant to try it. Something about the pulsing and radiation made my skin crawl.
Cyclonus scraped a finger down the material, leaving a deep scratch.

"That might not be necessary," he said, drawing his sword. He lifted it high overhead in a two-handed grip before he brought the sword down. The blade cut deep into the crystal, then shattered at the hilt. Frowning at the broken weapon, he made a quiet, almost growling sigh and dropped it into his subspace.

Arcee opened her mouth to say something, but I quickly silenced her with a look.

Activating my hard light emitter, I created a sword and made it as sharp as I possibly could, then followed Cyclonus's example and drove the blade deep into crystal. Pulling it back out, I looked at the hole I'd made.

"This'll take forever," I groaned. Fine, explosives it was.

I made the hole bigger before pulling a concussion grenade out of subspace and placing it inside the gap.

Heading back to the street, I used my HL-Shield to protect myself. "You might want to stand back," I called to the nearby officer.

I detonated the grenade, and the explosion shook the street, creating a small energy pulse that scorched the ground nearby and caused nearby lights to flicker. It also knocked the officer off his feet. Not waiting for him to get over his surprise, I walked forward to examine the damage. The blast had cleared a large section of the crystal and the wall behind it, creating a doorway wide enough for all of us to fit through.

Power to the building had already been cut, so the lights were out; instead, the lot was lit by the glowing crystals, bathing everything in an eerie green colour. Before I could walk inside, Cyclonus placed a hand on my shoulder to stop me and walked on ahead, followed by Arcee.

Huffing a bit at his over-protectiveness, I entered the building.

I didn't know what the lot had looked like in the past, but now it was a maze of crystal. The deep coating and occasional spire on the walls outside was nothing compared to what had happened inside.

The crystal was thick on the walls, ceiling and floor, and stepping on it was almost like walking on sheet ice. By shifting the wheels on my armour, I was able to use them like outriggers, providing stability and a little extra grip.

Once I reached the center of the room, I took a look around. The parking lot had to be the size of the apartment building and was full of crystal. Trying to pick our way through could possibly take hours.

"Hold up," I ordered. "Let's see if I can speed this up."

Pulling a tube from subspace, I threw it ahead of us and activated the insecticons inside. Sending them off ahead, I started trying to map the layout. The task was made more difficult by the interference the crystals were giving off. I'd lost all outside communications the moment we'd entered, and the insecticons had to stay within a few meters of each other to be able to provide transmission relays.

It wasn't as quick as I'd have liked, but I soon found what I was looking for.

There, near the eastern wall was what looked like a workbench and possibly some tools. The crystal
here was thicker than ever and from the way it seemed to radiate outwards, I assumed this was the center of the blast.

Stepping around a large, oddly shaped piece of crystal, I tried to examine the workbench. In an effort to restore a connection to Teletraan, I had the insecticons line the route to the exit, spaced out evenly so they could daisy chain the signal.

*Taylor!? Thank god, you had me worried when you cut out like that,* Lisa said as her face reappeared on my HUD.

"I'm fine," I muttered. "Just interference."

"Umm… Taylor? I think you need to see this," Arcee said from behind me. Her tone caused the hairs on my neck to stand on end as I turned to see what the problem was.

*Taylor? What's going on?*

"Dispatch! This is Matrix, I've found Lung!" I hissed into my radio.

*Matrix, this is Dispatch, get out of there! Protectorate forces are en route, do not engage! I repeat, do not engage!*

"Don't bother," I said, my voice hollow as I looked on in horror. Arcee had been standing behind me, looking at the large crystal I'd walked past a minute ago. A large, shirtless man with a metal mask was encased inside.

"Lung's dead."

Chapter End Notes

AN: This chapter took far too long to write and I'm really not that happy with it but fuck it, it hits most of the points I wanted.
Standing carefully still, Lisa watched as the world spun around her. Constant upgrades, refinements and tweaks from Wheeljack and Taylor had turned her office into her own personal 'info-sphere'.

Holographic interfaces could be spawned, moved or discarded with simple gestures. Information was gathered all around the world and streamed directly to her. Maps, police reports, news articles: if it was online, Teletraan could reach it.

The amount of information she could gather was overwhelming. The first time she'd tried to use the info-sphere, she'd gathered everything and anything she could or even suspected about Coil and let her power loose.

The resulting migraine had crippled her for days. Now, she was much more careful.

Currently, a holographic screen hovered in the air to her left showing Lung's frozen form. Frozen, possibly still alive. On the right, screens showed the ruined hospital and a map of the city with all the bomb sites marked on it. A psych report compiled by Rung floated nearby, along with a report on the university bombing.

Finding Bakuda was a waste of time. In a city the size of Brockton Bay, there were simply too many places for her to hide. Instead, she was focusing on the why. She almost had it, but there was just one last piece that didn't fit, one thing she kept coming back to.

Why the hospital?

It wasn't important strategically, there were no major businesses or anything nearby they could extort, and the police had a constant presence there, which ruled out drug dealing. All destroying it had done was piss a lot of people off. So why would she do it?

Trying to make a point? No... important target? Ugh, this was getting her nowhere.

Lisa moved over to her chair and sat down with the coffee Wyvern had left for her sometime ago, forcing herself to stop and relax.

She knew she didn't need to push herself like this. It had only been an hour or so since Taylor had found Lung and she was certain Bakuda would go to ground for now. There wasn't going to be another attack any time soon after all and - why did she only hit one side of the hospital?

The thought came from nowhere, but her power latched onto it. Bakuda could have easily brought that entire building down. Instead, she collapsed just one section, with only minor structural damage to the rest.

Jumping up, Lisa quickly moved to the center of the room. "Teletraan! Do you have access to the patient list for Brockton Bay General?"

"All hospital data was backed up offsite. I am able to access this data," the synthetic voice intoned happily.

After a few moments where nothing happened, Lisa forced herself not to groan.
"Then get it!" she snapped. Teletraan was a useful system, but sometimes it had a little trouble picking up intent. "Compare the patient list with police databases. Highlight anyone who has connections to the ABB and create a profile for them!"

She paced slightly as she waited for the computer to finish. Teletraan could out muscle any supercomputer on the planet, outside of whatever Toybox could whip up anyway. It wouldn't take long for it to find something.

"Searching… One match found… building profile… profile complete. Do you wish to view?"

"Yes!"

A single screen appeared in front of her with the name, picture and details of a patient in the hospital and with it, everything fell into place.

"Taylor! Can you get back to the workshop? I know what's going on!"

##

When I arrived at the workshop, I found Lisa and Dragon in the rec room, with most of the smaller Autobots. It made sense to hold meetings here as the large TV and holographic systems could be used to display information and the room was large enough to house all the Autobots at once.

Dragon was still on patrol and had sent her gynoid body instead. It had practically become a second skin at this point. She was constantly sending it to meetings in place of her real body, which was often either tinkering in the workshop or on missions with the Guild.

Her choice in appearance had surprised me at first, but it all worked to sell the story of a crippled tinker. The clearly cybernetic arms or devices on her face didn't need to be visible, but in doing so, she showed why she'd never been seen outside a workshop until now.

"Alright, you got us all here, you gonna tell us what was so important?" Rattrap asked. He was sitting on the table with Waspinator.

Rolling her eyes, Lisa took up position in front of the TV. "What's going on right now is nothing more than a hostile takeover. Bakuda is trying to take control of the ABB and the explosions were all part of that. Looking at the timing of the blasts, Lung was ground zero of the first blast."

That… wasn't that surprising. From what I understood, power plays were common, even inside the gangs, but it was normally just lower ranked members vying for more power. It was rare for someone to risk trying to take out the leaders themselves, especially when most gang leaders were parahumans.

_Besides, a really big bomb is probably the best way to deal with Lung._

"Okay," Dragon said, frowning in thought. "If it was just one explosion, aimed specifically at Lung, then it would make sense. But what about the other explosions?"

"Secondary targets," Lisa said with distaste.

"Even the hospital? What was she hoping to gain?"

Stepping to the side, Lisa aimed a remote at the TV and pressed a button. An image of a Japanese man appeared. He had to be in his thirties, and there was a nasty looking scar running down one side of his face.
"This is Shion Izumi, third generation yakuza and leader of what was once the Brockton Bay Crows. From what I could find out, he willingly handed his gang over to Lung and has been one of his most loyal lieutenants ever since. He's been arrested five times and every time, it was Lung himself who broke him out."

Rattrap whistled. "Wow, guess there is honor amongst thieves."

"Not really," I snorted, "Loyal followers work harder than conscripts. If Lung keeps rewarding those loyal to him, it strengthens his own position."

Maybe I was being cynical, but I doubted people like Lung gave a damn about anyone but themselves.

Dragon pulled up a hologram with Shion's information on it and started reading. "I assume Shion was in the hospital?"

Lisa nodded. "Yeah. He was injured in a shootout with the cops more than a week ago and moved there under guard. He'd signed a NPH the last time he was arrested so the police were waiting for him to recover."

"What's an NPH?" I asked. The acronym sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"No parahuman healing. Some people don't like or trust capes or have some religious beliefs that won't allow it, so they file a NPH. It doesn't just cover healers like Panacea, but tinker derived medicines and equipment. People like Shion use them as a delaying tactic. The hospital can't force him to accept cape healing, so he's gotta lay in a hospital bed until he's better."

"And by that time, someone has broken him out?" I guessed.

"Sounds like a lot of effort just to kill one guy," Rattrap said.

"Pretty much, yeah. As for the effort involved, Shion was responsible for most of the ABB's unpowered muscle and he was truly loyal to Lung. No way he was going to support Bakuda's takeover, and trying to fight him would end with the Empire rolling over both of them. So, she had to make sure he didn't survive. So far, his body hasn't been recovered."

A hologram of the hospital appeared in the center of the room. A red dot on the third floor highlighted where Shion had been held and circles showed the blast damage. By the look of things, the bomb had been placed against the wall on the ground, directly below his window.

"What about the other blasts?" Wyvern asked from the doorway. She flinched slightly when Dragon turned to look at her.

"I can't give you names for those ones, but my power says they were all loyalists."

Rolling my neck, I leaned against the wall and tried to rein my anger in. All those people, all that death, and for what? Cause Bakuda wanted to wear the big pants?

"Why now?" I asked. "Bakuda's been in the city for months, why'd she go after Lung now?"

"That's… okay, I'm mostly going on conjecture here, alright?" Lisa said. "Right. So, Bakuda triggered earlier this year. Her first major act was to hold Cornell University hostage. Best guess? She was a student and her trigger was related to her grades."

Holograms appeared with news clippings and police reports of the incident. Three teachers and two
students died before the Protectorate put an end to her tantrum. The teachers had been professors of engineering, chemistry and... political sciences? Bit of an odd mix.

I could see how the first two might be related, but political science?

The students killed on the other hand had no real connection to each other. Different classes, social groups, ages and gender.

Lisa waited for us to finish reading before she continued. "So, needing somewhere to hide, Bakuda came here and offered her skills to Lung, which is where I think she fucked up. She expected Lung to be just another thug with a strong power, and that she would quickly take control."

I snorted in dark amusement. "Lung's not an idiot. He managed to keep the ABB together and hold the Empire off without triggering a full on war."

"Yeah, but I think Bakuda didn't realise that. I had to spend ages going through what little footage I could find, but I think she's got an ego. She's smart and knows it. What's more, she wants everyone else to know it."

"I know the type," I said dryly. Around the room, several Autobots quietly chuckled while Rattrap laughed outright.

Lisa gave me an amused look. "Now, now, Taylor, you're not that bad."

I glared at Rattrap when he laughed and Lisa continued without pause.

"Anyway, like I was saying, Bakuda probably thought she could use Lung as a shield and take control of his gang away from him. Instead, she found herself stuck under him and with no way out. Then Oni Lee dies and she sees her chance."

"What about Lung? Is he really dead?" Hot Spot asked from the couch.

"No one's sure," Dragon said. "It's impossible to scan through the crystal for confirmation and thinkers have been unable to give a clear answer."

"Why not just break him out and see?" Hot Spot said.

"Because if he is alive, trying to free him might very well kill him."

"Why bother? I say leave chopper face where he is," Rattrap said, crossing his arms and ignoring the dirty look Hot Spot gave him.

Dragon sighed, drawing their attention and stopping the argument before it could begin.

"Actually, a number of people in the PRT are asking the same thing. Even if it is possible to free Lung, he will simply be sent to the Birdcage. As it is, Armsmaster has been released from confinement and is working on a way to extract Lung from the building so he can be sent to the think tank for examination. Ultimately, it's up to them to see if Lung can be freed or not."

With nothing else to say, everyone lapsed into silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts and worries.

My own thoughts kept drifting back to Amy laying in that hospital bed. Vicky had told me she was still sleeping. The doctors were going to reduce the sedatives soon and let her wake up on her own time, but they didn't know when that would be.
"So what happens now?" I asked eventually, hoping to distract myself. "Lung's pretty much dead, now. What are the other gangs going to do?"

"For now, they'll keep their heads down," Lisa said. "The news about Lung hasn't gotten out yet. Until it does, his reputation will buy Bakuda time to get herself organised. But when it does, it's going to get bad."

I could see what Lisa meant. Right now, the ABB were leaderless. The group I'd arrested earlier hadn't known what was going on, after all. Bakuda would need a power base, groups loyal to her that would force the others in line and keep the Empire at bay.

How long would that take? How long had Bakuda been planning this takeover? How much of her plans were already in place?

Too many questions and not enough answers.

"How long can we keep the news about Lung under wraps?" As much as it galled me to help Bakuda, a unified ABB was better than a dozen splinter groups all fighting for control. Throw in Bakuda's grenades and the other gangs and things could get so much worse.

Lisa shrugged. "It's probably already too late. Chances are one of the cops who was there when you found Lung reports back to Kaiser, or sells the story to a local news station before the end of day."

Damn.

##

Her name was Kei Chiyome and as far as everyone else knew, she was Bakuda's right hand.

In truth, her real name was Sarah, but trying to get one of these fuckwits to take her seriously with a name like that was near impossible, so that had been the first thing to change when she joined the ABB.

Lung never really cared about her gender, just that she did as she was told. Unfortunately, that same belief wasn't shared by the rest of his men. To most of them, spreading her legs was all a woman would ever be good for. More than one person would have shipped her out to the farm if they thought they could get away with it.

She had torn the balls of the first, and only, ABB man to lay a hand on her. Point firmly made, people left her the fuck alone.

Despite, or perhaps because of that, she'd never managed to rise as high as she wanted. She'd never been given territory and only had a handful of men serving under her.

Then the bombs went off and she got the call.

Nearly twenty of them had walked into the tinker's workshop deep in ABB territory that morning. The workshop had been set up in an abandoned building in the north side of the city. The building itself had once been a large house that has been converted into a small office.

Kei had been here once before. The ground floor, where they currently were, was mostly unused, though a small room off to the side was being used for storage. The next floor up had a mess of work benches, tools and whatever else the tinker needed. The top floor had been converted into an apartment. A bed, small shower and hot plate had all been wired in up there.
Looking at the people around her, Kei noticed something odd. All of the people called here today were only minor lieutenants or small team leaders like her.

Mentally, Kei recited the names of all the high lieutenants and tried to match names to faces. Shino wasn't there of course, everyone knew he'd been grabbed by the cops and was waiting for a breakout.

Had that been why Lung had blown up that hospital? To cover for Shino's escape? Even so, Kei could only see two high lieutenants in the room and both of them looked more nervous than anyone else.

Around them, two dozen men stood guard and while Kei considered it odd for the cape to warrant so much protection, she wasn't stupid enough to say so out loud.

Normally, when a group of them gathered, it was a rowdy affair with drinking, shouting and posturing, but right now, the air was filled with a nervous tension. All of them had seen the news, heard the blasts. Whatever Lung was planning next, it had to be big.

So they waited. Nobody dared speak or ask why they were here, even at a whisper. Only Lung would have called a meeting at a time like this and he would demand respect.

Around Kei, the tension climbed, and just as she expected one of the more excitable idiots to do something stupid, Bakuda appeared, stopping halfway down the stairs.

"Good, I'm glad to see you were all smart enough to show up." Her voice held a hint of a nasal Boston accent.

"What's going on? Where is Lung?" one of the main lieutenants - Yamanaka - demanded. He typically dealt with moving girls to or from the farm. It had been his nephew Kei had castrated.

"Lung's dead," Bakuda said without preamble. "I killed him. I'm in charge now."

"Bullshit! Lung fought Leviathan. You expect us to believe a halfbreed tinker like you killed him?"

With a sharp movement of her arm, Bakuda threw a collection of paper at the man. It took Kei a moment to realise they were pictures. Kneeling down, she quickly snatched one up while others around her did the same. In the picture, Lung's dragon mask was just about visible, buried in crystal.

Yamanaka said something harsh in Cantonese and pulled a gun. Bakuda didn't even twitch as he aimed it at her.

"Bat po! Do you know what you have done!? Without Lung, the Nazis will destroy us! Chee lun seen! And now you think we'll just bow to you? I'll see you dead or on the farm for this!"

Before he could fire, the other high lieutenant reached out and grabbed his arm, forcing his gun towards the floor.

"Chang, what are you doing?!"

"I'm sorry, I-"

Bakuda cackled, the sound made inhuman by her mask. "He doesn't have a choice. Here's the thing, I may not turn into a fucking dragon, but I understand fear and I can make people fear me just as much as him."
Walking forward, she gestured to the men standing guard. Two of them walked over and took Yamanaka by his arms, forcing the gun from his hand and letting a still trembling Chang stand back.

Bakuda pulled out a small object from her pocket, no bigger than a sugar cube and forced it into his mouth.

"Swallow," she ordered.

When Yamanaka glared back defiantly, Bakuda sighed, walked over to a nearby table and grabbed a bottle of drink. Taking the top off, she forced it into his mouth as a guard pulled his head back, holding Yamanaka's nose closed.

He fought against them at first, holding his breath and shooting the gathered crowd angry looks. But even if Kei hadn't considered him scum, she still wouldn't have helped him.

The remaining guards had pulled their weapons and gave the watchers pointed looks. This was Bakuda's show and they weren't to interfere.

Eventually, Yamanaka started to choke, gulping down air and water together in a desperate attempt to breathe.

Bakuda waited until the bottle was empty before stepping back and gesturing to the guards, who let him fall to the floor, right next to his dropped weapon.

Yamanaka continued to cough and heave on the floor, but kept himself from throwing up. Bakuda half-stepped, half-skipped back a few feet and the gathered watchers pulled away from them both.

This was a fight for control, Kei knew. If Bakuda wanted any hope of remaining in power, she had to prove herself here and now.

Having cleared his airway enough to breathe, Yamanaka grabbed the gun off the floor and brought his arm up quickly.

Bakada didn't even twitch. She made no sound or movement that Kei could see. Yet he had barely raised the gun when there was a sound, like a cell phone vibrating, and Yamanaka liquefied into a soupy mess in the span of a second.

Around her, the others panicked, shouting and screaming in different languages and dialects. Even the guards looked like they wanted to run, but they didn't. Instead, they blocked the doors so no one could leave. Kei found herself wondering how many of them had bombs inside them.

In the center of it all was Bakuda, doubled over and holding her stomach. She was making choking noises that almost sounded like she was heaving. For one moment, Kei thought the Tinker was going to be sick.

The she realised what was really going on. Bakuda was laughing. Pushing herself upright, the Tinker made a hissing noise that Kei figured was an intake of breath.

"Oh wow! That worked better than I thought!" Bakuda said. Her mask filtered out most of the inflection, giving her voice a raspy, metallic edge, but Kei was willing to bet she was excited.

"So!" Bakuda said, spreading her arms wide, "this is how it's going to be. Lung's dead, and I'm in charge. Unlike that overgrown lizard, I'm not going to just sit back and ignore our enemies. I'm going to destroy them!"
"But… we don't have the numbers!" one man protested. He flinched back quickly when Bakuda turned to look at him.

"That's not a problem. We'll soon have plenty more people. Anyone want to guess how?"

"Implanted bombs?" Kei offered, stepping forward. This was starting to sound promising.

"Exactly! As of right now, everyone gets a choice. You either work for me willingly, or you just work for me. There's no other option here. Oh! And just in case any of you get any funny ideas, I've hidden more bombs throughout the city. Some of them are in buildings, some are in people. If anything happens to me, they go off. All of them at once. So you better wish me a long and healthy life!"

She let that sink in before walking over to the stairs and grabbing one of the boxes that had been left there.

"Still, Lung did teach me a few things before his unfortunate 'accident'. Fear is good, but sometimes loyalty is more useful."

Opening the box, she tipped the contents out and a dozen shiny black cell phones hit the floor, thankfully missing the puddle that had once been Yamanaka.

"I'm going to need lieutenants, people to take over territory and make sure the money keeps flowing. So, consider this an audition, a one time deal. You pick up a phone, you swear to work for me and you don't get a bomb in your head. You try to screw me over, and you end up like that shit stain there."

Kei barely had to think about it. While the others hesitated, she stepped forward and snatched up a phone. She wasn't stupid, the phone was likely rigged to blow the moment she pissed Bakuda off. But she'd take that risk.

"Shame about the carpet. Where do you want me to start?"

Laughing, Bakuda clapped her on the shoulder and pushed a grenade from her bandolier into Kei's free hand. "Don't worry, I'm moving out. The Nazis are gonna start sniffing around soon. Take some men and keep them out of my territory. Do a good enough job and you can consider yourself made!"

In the end, three more people had claimed phones before Bakuda had sighed and told the four of them to leave the room. On her way out, Kei had seen Bakuda's guards forcibly restraining the people who had remained.

Kei was willing to bet they would all be rigged to blow by the end of the night.

That had been hours ago and now, it was starting to get dark. News of Lung's death had started to circulate. Mostly it was just rumors and speculation, but it was only a matter of time before it hit the news channels.

If the Nazis had heard any of the rumors, they would soon be here to cause trouble.

That's why she'd claimed this area for herself. It was on their southern border with the Empire and followed the road towards Winslow. Strictly speaking, the school was neutral as it was one of the biggest recruitment grounds for both gangs.

The shit stains that went there had little choice but to join a gang just to survive. Even the smaller, 'unaffiliated' gangs that offered protection from the big gangs were just doorways into the ABB or
Empire proper.

It's where Kei had been recruited actually. Before her cunt of a mother had kicked her out, anyway.

Around her stood the seven men - actually six men and one woman - that she had managed to gather who could handle a weapon and were good enough in a fight, but weren't bright enough to try and turn on her.

Three of them, including her, were gathered by an alleyway and visible from the road. They were the bait. Three more were hidden deeper in the alley with the seventh member up on the rooftops, looking out for the Empire.

As long as the skinheads didn't send a cape her way, she was confident she could deal with anything. Of course, it never hurt to have an extra edge. Reaching into her pocket, Kei pulled a small bottle of eye drops.

"Hey, Ling! Get over here!" she said, holding up the bottle.

Ling was a shorter woman with a gaunt face. Heavy drug use had ruined her looks, but her reputation for viciousness kept her useful. The moment she saw the bottle Kei was holding, she started to tremble.

"Is-is that? You have flash!?
"

"That's right," Kei said with a nasty smile. "You can have two drops now, and if you're really good, I'll give you two more tomorrow."

Ling looked like she was wanted to argue but Kei closed her hand, the threat implicit; you do what I say or you get nothing.

"Okay, fine!" Ling said quickly.

Removing the eye dropper from the bottle, Kei handed it over to a disappointed Ling. Yeah, cause I'm stupid enough to let you hold the bottle!

Grabbing the dropper, Ling quickly tilted her head back and dripped the contents into her eyes, sighing in relief. Almost immediately, her body relaxed, the trembling stopped and Ling giggled with happy energy.

Watching people on flash was almost like watching a cartoon character who'd drank coffee. They were twitchy, energetic, almost hyper. But at the same time, Kei had seen Ling shoot a fly out of the air while she was on it.

"Now get back into position!" Kei snapped. Ling quickly skipped off into the alley. She'd have to keep an eye on her, now that girl knew she had flash. The come down was harsh and Kei had seen users do some desperate things just to avoid it.

It didn't help that Ling had never learned to ration her stash. She'd just burn through whatever shit she was taking as fast as she could. Kei was honestly surprised the girl hadn't killed herself yet.

"How did you manage to score some flash?" one of the guys asked in hushed, almost reverent tones, "I thought the cops killed the guy who made it."

She'd never bothered to learn his name. Instead, she mentally dubbed him Numbnuts. Kei gave him a considering look, but decided it wouldn't hurt to tell him.
"Did you ever meet Chi-chi?"

He looked blank for a moment, then recognition dawned. "I think so, wasn't she the whore with big - "

"Yes, her," Kei said with a put upon sigh. That was all people ever remembered about the girl. Never mind she'd been a fantastic singer, dancer and whatever else she turned her attention to. She'd also been one of the few people Kei considered a friend.

"I found her after she OD'd on this shit and pocketed her stash."

The dealer used to give Chi-chi all kinds of extras, and in return, she'd let him do whatever he wanted to her while she was high. Kei had felt bad about robbing the girl at the time, but Chi-chi was dead and she couldn't do anything about that. So she'd grabbed the girls stash of tinker drugs, it had been too valuable to waste.

Personally, Kei never tried the stuff herself, but it was a good way of keeping control.

Kei debated telling him more, since flash wasn't the only one she'd picked up. Currently, she had a shot of regen and a surge in her pocket, the rest was safely hidden away where these fuckwits wouldn't find it.

"You ever used flash before?"

"No, I was locked up when that stuff hit the streets. I heard about it from the other guys."

Smirking to herself, Kei showed him the surge. "What about this one?"

When he shook his head, she handed him the injector.

"It's called surge. When the skinheads get here, put it against your neck and push the button. Trust me, they won't know what hit them."

Several of the others looked on with dark amusement, but no one said anything.

The phone Bakuda had given her beeped and Kei checked the screen. Her lookout had spotted some skinheads hanging about nearby. If they followed the usual script, they would stay out of sight for a few minutes, waiting for more people and building up their nerve.

"Alright, here they come!" she called, leaning against the wall behind her.

Sure enough, less than two minutes later the first skinhead arrived. Tall, built like a brick wall and wearing Empire colours, he was flanked by two more men built along the same vein.

\textit{Typical Nazis,} Kei thought as she stood up and took a few steps forward.

"This is our territory, you're not welcome here!" she shouted

"Yeah right, how'd you plan on keeping it? All your capes are dead," the leading skinhead shouted. Behind him, more people emerged from the alley. All of them were male, white and built.

She wasn't impressed. Brandishing her pistol, she pointed it roughly in their direction. Not outright threatening them, but enough to put them on edge.

"Bakuda's in charge now, and we don't need a cape to kick your pale asses. Or maybe you're too scared to fight without one of them to suck you off!"
The leader went red, pulling a weapon of his own. "Fuck you, chink!"

The skinheads started to edge forwards. Behind her, Kei's own people looked to her for guidance. She refused to back down, stepping forward to meet the Nazis. It was enough to inspire the rest of her 'team', who emerged from the alley.

They had the skinheads beat in terms of numbers, but she was willing to bet the Nazis had better guns. There was a grunt behind her and she risked a quick glance over her shoulder.

Numbnuts was doubled over and breathing heavily.

The leader of the skinheads must have noticed because he laughed. "Typical slant-eyes, can't stomach a real fight! Why don't you just run home while you still can!"

Kei looked back to him and smirked, her free hand pulling Bakuda's grenade from her coat pocket. She only needed to stall for a few more seconds.

"How about you leave? Bakuda made this. Trust me, you don't wanna know what it'll do to you!"

Actually, now that she thought about it, Bakada had never mentioned what the grenade did. Oh well, as long as she made sure to throw it a good distance, it wouldn't be a problem.

At the sight of the grenade, the skinheads faltered, unsure what to do. However, the leader however raised his pistol and fired. The first shot went wide, hitting the building behind her, while the second clipped her arm. Refusing to scream, Kei threw herself sideways and opened fire.

Her shots missed, but with her out of the way, the rest of her people moved. Ling stepped forwards, throwing a knife across the street and embedding it deep into a Nazi thigh.

With a primal scream of rage, Numbnuts charged forward, heedless of the bullets that slammed into him and threw himself at the first skinhead he could reach. The pair of them fell to the floor in a tangled heap as he lashed out like crazy, punching, scratching and even biting anything he could reach.

As the skinheads turned to shoot the berserker, Kei scrambled behind a car for cover. Leaning over the trunk, she opened fire.

Even as Numbnuts finally fell, Kei laughed as the skinheads grabbed their stricken friend and tried to drag him to the alley they had came from, their leader positioning himself behind a car.

With both sides finally behind cover, the shooting stopped.

"Last chance," Kei shouted, drunk on adrenaline, "take your trash and leave!"

A bullet punching through the side of the car next to her was their reply.

Fine! Seeing her people taking cover nearby, she gestured with her gun. She needed them to cover her. When one of them shook his head, she aimed at him and fired a warning shot over his head.

Point made, she gestured again. This time, they stood up and started shooting, keeping the skinheads trapped. Grabbing her grenade, Kei pulled the pin, leaned round the car and threw.

The grenade arced across the road, landing between the alley and the skinheads. They never had a chance to move before it exploded and the world twisted itself inside out.

Kei threw herself backwards. The bomb's effect stopped just short of the car she was hiding behind.
Beyond it, however, every living thing was twisted up like a pretzel. The skinheads were warped, misshapen messes, Their limbs shrunk, blown up, stretched and bent like wax figures left in the sun. All of them were screaming, desperately flopping and twitching.

*Fuck!* Forcing down the urge to vomit, Kei clambered to her feet.

"We need to get out of here! Go, go!" she shouted to the others. She'd barely made it five feet when a figure dropped from the sky. Streetlight shined off the red and blue metal of her armour and she glared at them with glowing blue eyes.

"Cape!" someone shouted. They immediately opened fire. The bullets created little blue flashes when they hit, but did no damage. The cape created a glowing blue shield with one arm, while a barrel mounted on the other returned fire.

Leaving her people to stall the cape, Kei turned and ran in the other direction. She was cut off by a blue motorbike that transformed into a robot. Metal hands lashed out, knocking the gun out of Kei's hand and seizing her by the wrist. Lifting her arm up, the robot punched her in the stomach, letting her collapse to the ground. A foot on her back kept her pinned and her arms were roughly pulled behind her and bound up.

Still fighting to catch her breath, Kei turned her head and saw the red and blue cape smash one of people in the face with her shield and shoot the other.

Leaving them on the ground, the cape walked forwards, picked Kei up and slammed her against the wall.

"Let's talk about Bakuda," the cape said. Her voice had a metallic echo, almost like Bakuda's. Rather than flatten her voice, it added to it, giving it an angry growl.

"Go to hell! What makes you think I'm going to tell you anything?!" Kei shouted. Her ears were still ringing from the explosion, so she couldn't hear her phone ringing, but she could feel it vibrating.

*Oh shit!*

Before she could say anything, the cape moved. Not bothering to be gentle, the cape reached down, grabbed the lump her phone was making in her jeans and pulled, tearing her phone, pocket and all, free.

She glanced at the phone, then turned and threw it down the alley, a blue shield springing up between them. The phone exploded, creating a six foot tower of ice.

The cape stared silently at it for a minute, then turned to look at her.

"And this is the woman you're protecting?"

She'd known the phone was a trap. But once she saw the pillar of ice that had almost killed her, Kei found herself agreeing with the cape.

Maybe… maybe this hadn't been such a hot idea after all.

"Fine." She didn't bother keeping the bitterness out of her voice. "I'll talk."
AN:
Translations for the Cantonese (apologies if these are not exactly right).
Bat po : Bitch
Chee lun seen : You're fucking crazy
There was a rumble in the distance and another red dot appeared on my HUD, showing me the location of the explosion. It had been the last one I'd heard of in nearly an hour. Explosions and gunfire had filled the night so far, and it finally looked like the fighting was starting to slow down.

The question was, would the calm last? Was it just a temporary reprieve while all sides licked their wounds and rearmed, or would Bakuda decide she had made her point?

I doubt it!

The fighting tonight had been vicious, with the one I'd interrupted being one of the tamer ones. There had been skirmishes all along the Empire/ABB borders that had started soon after sunset. At first, it looked like the Empire was winning, their capes quickly pushing the ABB back.

Then the explosions started. Not just at the borders, but deep in Empire territory. Bakuda was practically waging a terror campaign against the Empire, forcing the capes to pull back and deal with chaos while the ABB pushed on the borders. To make matters worse, there were rumors of ABB men grabbing people off the streets. So far, the reports hadn't been confirmed, but people were being advised to stay indoors.

And yet here I was, standing on a roof near an old office and watching for anything suspicious while anyone with any sense was running for cover.

I'd been given the address by the same group I'd dealt with earlier. I knew I should probably wait for help, that attacking a tinker's lab was a bad idea. But then I'd remember Amy, or those Empire thugs twisted up like a Picasso painting and suddenly I wasn't so interested in waiting.

Bakuda needed to be taken down.

[Taylor, please! Think about this! It's got to be a trap!] Rewind's message filled my HUD with bright flashing text and alarms.

"It's not a trap when you know it's coming," I muttered, dismissing the message. "Besides, I'm not going to charge straight in, I'm not that stupid."

[What kind of logic is that!]

Rhinox and Soundwave teleported in behind the building I was standing on, so they were hidden from view. Arcee had to drive and would be here in a few minutes.

I'd have liked to bring more Autobots, but Cyclonus was dealing with a fight on the far side of the city, Warpath was guarding Dad, Ratchet was still at the hospital and I didn't want to risk taking the smaller bots into this fight.

Until Arcee could get here, I planned to learn everything I could about Bakuda's workshop.

Reaching into my subspace pocket, I pulled out a pair of tubes and threw them towards the building. They split apart, each one released nearly a dozen insecticons. I directed them into the building, many of them burrowing through the stonework or through cracks in the walls. A cursory scan with
thermal sensors showed a number of people in the building, but I wasn't going to jump to conclusions.

"Soundwave, start scanning the area for any unusual signals. Get ready to jam the entire block if necessary."

"Confirmed, beginning scan," Soundwave said, folding into his van mode.

Inside the building, the insecticons had managed to identify a number of devices, all of them wired to the doors or windows. They had also found people inside. The cameras on the drones wasn't great, but I could see five people on the ground floor, only two of them in ABB colours. The rest were huddled together on the ground.

There was no one on the top floors, but I could see the remains of a workshop. There were tools scattered all over the place and a number of workbenches had been bolted to the walls.


So the building had a camera system that was being watched remotely, and the viewer could be anywhere inside of - I quickly pulled up a conversion tool - one mile. Even if I assumed they didn't have a repeater hidden nearby, it was pointless to try and track them down. As long as they were passively viewing the footage and not transmitting, we would never find them.

Given that, and the lack of guards, Bakuda was probably not here anymore. But even an abandoned base might be able to tell us something.

First things first, I needed to deal with the traps and then, we needed a way in.

##

Joichiro Nishi was an experienced member of the ABB. He'd joined years ago, and while he'd never really risen in the ranks, he'd built a reputation of being dependable.

Not that Bakuda had given a fuck. He'd been among the first people the bitch captured, knocking him out with some kinda gas. He'd woken up strapped to a table, Bakuda cutting his fucking head open. The bitch shoved a bomb in his head, and then forced him to help her gather more.

Nearby, somebody sobbed quietly.

"Be quiet!" he barked, not wanting to deal with this. The three teens sitting in the middle of the room had been implanted with bombs two hours ago. After that, he'd been ordered to stay here with them and wait for the heroes to arrive.

The bitch was going to use them all as both bait and trap. The entire place was rigged and if any one of them stepped outside, they all died.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he never knew something was wrong until the lights went out and a small tank smashed through the wall.

##

Rhinox went in first, hitting the building with an EMP and plowing through the nearest wall. Arcee and I followed close behind. Soundwave was jamming the block, letting no signals in our out. With any luck, this would keep Bakuda from setting everything off remotely.
Inside, two men were holding guns and three people were huddled together on the floor, screaming as the armed men opened fire.

Rhinox transformed, grabbing the man closest to him and lifting him effortlessly. He slammed him into a wall and let him slide bonelessly to the ground. A blast from my Null-Ray put the other guy down.

The entire 'fight' had taken seconds from start to finish.

I assumed the three on the floor were hostages. They were young and clearly terrified. I could see tear marks on their faces and, more worryingly, dried blood.

I kneeled down near the closest one, a girl in an Immaculata uniform. "It's alright, you're okay now."

"No! Get away!" the girl screamed, crawling away from me. She collided with the other girl who quickly pulled her into a hug, trying to calm her down.

"Please," the boy said, giving me a pleading look. "Please. You're a tinker, right? Can you get them out?"

"Get what out?"

"The bombs!" he said, turning his head so I could see the wound on his head, "That… that woman, she stuck things inside us! She said she'd kill us if we left the building!

Fuck!

"Arcee! Get outside the jamming field! I need First Aid here now! Let the PRT know what's happening here! And tell Soundwave to keep the field up!"

Cursing, Arcee sprinted out of the hole Rhinox had made, transforming as she left.

"Rhinox! Can you check the traps? Most of them should be dead, but I don't want to take the risk if we're going to be stuck here."

Before hitting the building with an EMP, I'd had the insecticons disable any and all of the traps Bakuda had left behind. Using small cutting tools, they had been able to sever power supplies and isolate the explosives.

Leaving Rhinox to deal with that, I focused on the hostages.

"Don't worry, you're going to be all right. I've got help coming." I did my best to sound reassuring, like I knew what I was doing. It seemed to work as the boy nodded and the panicking girl was finally starting to calm down.

"Matrix, can you take a look at this?" Rhinox said. He'd pulled apart one of the interior walls and was carefully holding a cylindrical device.

As I stood up, the boy gripped my arm tightly and I had to gently promise them that i wasn't going to leave them before I could cross the room to get a better look.

Outwardly, the device in his hands was about the same size and shape as a soda can. Wires fed out from it and connected it to a small battery box and a circuit board that was attached to even more wires.

"This doesn't feel right," he said quietly. "If I didn't know better, I'd say it was hollow."
Tusting Rhinox's judgement, I gently placed a hand on the device. If it really was a tinker based explosive, then I'd know immediately.

Nothing...

My power didn't respond at all. Getting another idea, I quickly reconfigured my suit's sonar so it could function like an ultrasound and focused it on the device. According to my sensors, it was was empty.

Taking it from Rhinox's hands, I decided to risk breaking the can open. The thin metal parted easily in my hands, revealing nothing but polished steel.

A decoy?

"Why would she leave a fake?" I asked. The last thing I wanted to do was spook the hostages.

"A distraction maybe?" he rumbled. "How would the PRT handle this?"

Slowly and with a lot more care than I'd shown. Not being able to check the entire building at once and disarm the bombs remotely, they would have to evacuate the entire area. That would take time and manpower that they couldn't afford to spare.

So… they would have to pull more people in to evacuate the area, then carefully move through the building. Checking each room and attempting to defuse each device in turn. Even after the first fake was discovered, they would still treat any other devices they found as real. The hostages would slow them down even more…

"It's a distraction," I said. "This building alone would occupy the PRT for hours and take a large number of people to secure. Meanwhile…"

"Meanwhile, the ABB and the Empire are free to fight," he finished for me.

"Yeah. Make sure to check and disable any other devices you find. Just because one is fake, doesn't mean the others are."

Nodding in agreement, Rhinox carried on working.

##

Barely five minutes later, Arcee returned, closely followed by Ratchet and Dragon's gynoid body.

"Dragon, Ratchet? What are you doing here?" I thought Ratchet was still at the hospital, which was why I called for First Aid.

"I was at the workshop recharging when the call came in. Figured I'd be the better choice."

Ratchet walked past me and started examining the hostages.

Meanwhile, Dragon positioned herself so the hostages couldn't see her face and opened her helmet. Although the were the same person, it was easier to think of the gynoid as 'Tess' and the Autobot as Dragon. It helped further the illusion that Dragon was being controlled by Tess.

"You took a big risk coming here tonight. Why didn't you call this in?" Tess said. I felt a stab of guilt at the concern on her face.

"I… I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking."
"It's alright, I understand. But you need to be more careful next time, okay?"

This probably wasn't the end of the discussion. I didn't doubt for a moment that Dragon wouldn't have more to say when we got back to the workshop. Either way, I nodded in agreement; this wasn't the time to be beating myself up.

"Good." She closed her helmet. "Now, what next?" I gave Tess a surprised look and she shrugged. "You lead the Autobots. I'm just here to observe."

"R-right! Ratchet, any news?"

"Hmm?" He looked up from the readout he was studying. "Yeah. Looks like the the devices are deposited just under the skull. Doesn't look they're anchored down or attached in any way. Removal should be a simple matter."

I looked around. The dirty conditions of the building weren't exactly ideal for surgery, but I really didn't want to risk moving them.

"Can you do the operation here?" Ratchet gave me a dirty look and knew he was seconds away from launching into a rant about dirty conditions and unsafe practices, and while he was right, we didn't have much choice.

"Bakuda said she's rigged them with a proximity trigger," I said just as Ratchet opened his mouth. "If they leave the building, the bombs go off!"

Closing his mouth, Ratchet huffed. "Fine, but I'm not happy about this."

"Me either," I muttered.

With Ratchet temporarily mollified, we started putting a makeshift operating theatre together. Rhinox found a large, leather-backed swivel chair upstairs and I quickly wiped it down with an antibacterial gel Ratchet had with him.

The young boy had volunteered to go first and was making a valiant effort to not look scared. I stood in front of him, gently cupping his face so he couldn't move and then locking my armour in position.

Arcee was relegated to holding a bright flashlight to give Ratchet better light and Tess was going to assist Ratchet directly as, aside from Ratchet, she had the steadiest hands.

A small needle extended from Ratchet's hand and he pressed it into the boy's head.

"I'm injecting you with a strong, local anesthetic." Ratchet's voice was soft and gentle. For all his bluster and complaining, Ratchet was a medic to his spark. He wouldn't let anyone suffer if he could help it. "I'm sorry I can't do more, but I need you to stay awake and be as still as possible. You won't feel any pain, I promise."

He pulled a small saucer-like drone out of subspace and turned it on. The drone hovered above the boy and started emitting a soft green light. I recognised the drone as an AutoDOC, a design Ratchet and Wheeljack had come up with. It was basically a full biometric medical scanner, running on the same VI as the insecticons that could be remotely controlled by Ratchet or First Aid.

Unfortunately, getting all that tech into a drone that small had required Armsmaster's help. That meant while we could build more of them, it would be impossible to mass produce. I'd still tried to, of course, but my drones ended up being much, much bigger and the resulting cost had just been too high.
I hadn't realised Ratchet had taken to carrying the prototype around with him, but I wasn't surprised he did. With the drone scanning and decontaminating the area, Ratchet would be free to focus on what he was doing.

Using a holographic control system, he positioned and focused the drone's beam on the boy's head. Then, taking Arcee's hand, he positioned the light she was holding to where he needed it.

A small scalpel folded out of Ratchet's wrist into his hand and he carefully started to cut along the original wound.

The girl's gasped and the boy shuddered, but my hands kept him from moving more than that.

"It's alright, you're doing fine," Ratchet said as a set of clamp scissors appeared in his hand and he used them to fold the flap of skin back, exposing the bone underneath. Tess gently reached out and took the clamps from him, keeping the skin out of the way.

Despite the tone of his voice, I could feel Ratchet's anger burning away just below the surface, mirroring my own anger at the situation.

One of Ratchet's fingers opened up, allowing a set of tweezers to fold out and grip the piece of the boy's skull. The scalpel in his hand was replaced with another tool, which had a small cutting disk on it and made a sound like a dentist's drill.

The boy shivered as Ratchet carefully cut section of the skull and lifted it out of the way. Then, reaching in with another pair of tweezers, Ratchet slowly pulled the device free and dropped it into a small metal tube Rhinox was holding.

"Okay, see, it's out," Ratchet said. "Just hold still a little longer and I'll be done." Using some medical cement, he fixed the piece of skull back down and then he glued the flap of skin down. Regen cream would remove the need for stitches on such a small wound. Once he was satisfied, he sprayed a small amount of regen cream onto the boy's head and the green light from the drone brightened.

In less than five minutes, only a pale scar remained.

As I let go of the boy, Rhinox helped him to his feet and walked him outside where paramedics were waiting.

"You want to take a break?" Ratchet asked me.

Throughout the operation, I was in a perfect position to see everything. It had been nauseating and I was desperately trying not to vomit. Taking a deep breath, I pushed the feelings down and shook my head.

"No, I'm fine." My ability to sense an Autobot's emotions when they were close went both ways. Most of them didn't mention it, but they always knew what I was feeling.

He gave me a doubtful look, but didn't argue the point. "Alright, if you're sure. Who's next?"

Next turned out to be the girl who had panicked when I first arrived. She'd calmed down somewhat, but the other girl had insisted on holding her hand throughout the operation. Once the explosive had been removed, the girl promptly burst into tears and had to be carried out of the building by Rhinox.

The final hostage, now that I got a clear look at her, was actually older than the other two, between eighteen and twenty. I could see part of a tattoo hidden by her shirt collar and her eyes were almost
unnaturally blue.

"Before we start, I need to ask you something," Ratchet said. "Do you know there are -"

"Two bombs?" the girl said with a defeated chuckle. "Yeah... I-I mouthed off at Bakuda, called her a half breed. She really didn't like that. Said she was going to make an example of me."

"Alright, do you want some of us to leave the room?" Ratchet offered.

"No, it's fine." She gave him a sad smile. "Just please, get them out."

Ratchet nodded and got to work, carefully removing the bomb in her head. Once he was done, he gently cut the girl's shirt open, exposing the bloody bandages that had been wrapped around her chest..

Ratchet slowly cut away the bandages to reveal the flesh underneath. Bakuda had not been gentle and I felt the bile rising in my throat at the sight.

Another shot of painkiller, and Ratchet slowly got to work. In order to put his patient in a better position, the chair had been tipped back and was being supported by Rhinox, while I held the girl's shoulders to keep her from moving.

The second bomb was much larger and had been implanted into her right breast. Ratchet was mindful to keep the scarring minimal, but she was always going to have some reminders of tonight.

##

As the final ambulance left, carrying Ratchet and the last hostage, I stood on the street next to Soundwave with my mask open. I was thankful my mask had filtered out the smell of blood and other substances.

Taking another deep breath, I forced my nausea down. I was NOT going to be sick, not now.

Off the east, the sun was just starting to rise over Brockton Bay. Things would be quiet during the day, but if Bakuda was willing to go this far, the fighting was only going to get worse.

No. More!

Taking another deep breath, I activated my comm system.

"I want all Autobots back at base as soon as possible! Bakuda's insane, she's not going to stop until someone makes her and with Lung gone, the Empire will use this chance to seize the city. Between them, they'll tear this city apart! But I'm not going to let them. Who's with me?!"

This wasn't like Uber and Leet; these guys wouldn't think twice about killing me or my Autobots, so I wasn't going to order them to fight.

The messages came pouring in.

Wheeljack: Like you need to ask.
Perceptor: The gangs have a distinct tactical advantage. However, I believe we can negate that through superior firepower.
Warpath: Let me at 'em!
Arcee: Where do we start?
Cyclonus: I'm in.
Hotspot: We're not gonna let criminals hurt innocent people!
Soundwave: Mission accepted.
Rhinnox: We're right behind you.
Rattrap: Oh for booting up cold! You're all glitched if you think this is going to work. But fine, we'll do it your way... We're all going to die..
Windblade: Shutup Rattrap. I want to help, but I think it's best if Rung and I stay with Amy.
First Aid: That's probably for the best
Waspinator: Wazzpinator, Terrorize!

One by one, all of the Autobots volunteered and I felt a swell of pride at their actions.

"Thank you. All of you." I took another deep breath and called up a map of the city. "Right now, Bakuda is the biggest threat. Until we can locate her, we're just gonna have to keep winning battles. If you see anyone in Empire or ABB colours, take them down!"

I was breathing hard and when Tess placed a hand on my shoulder and I realised I'd all but been shouting, I flushed.

"Nicely said. I'll do what I can to help. Just be careful, okay?"

"I will."

##

"Go home, Victoria," Carol Dallon repeated for the second time that morning.

Victoria hadn't left the hospital since Amy had been found. The staff had turned a blind eye, letting her stay throughout the night and even providing food and drink.

Carol herself had spent the night at home staring at the ceiling, her thoughts running in circles.

She'd never wanted to adopt Amy, never felt like she could trust a child that wasn't her own flesh and blood.

But Sarah had insisted. The daughter of the Marquis couldn't go into the foster system. He had too many enemies, too many 'interested parties' that would stop at nothing to have the girl. In the end, Carol agreed to take Amy.

It had never been easy. The resemblance between Amy and Marquis was uncanny. The nose was different, but the brow, the hair. Knowing she was his flesh, his blood created a gulf between them that never closed.

Carol would be the first to admit that she'd never been much of a mother to Amy. She'd never allowed herself to bond to the girl, always afraid that if she did, Amy would only end up betraying her.

And now here Amy was, laying in a hospital bed, her legs missing above the knee. Crippled by a villain for no other reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Why was she even there to begin with? Carol and Sarah had put strict limits on how much time Amy could spend in the hospital in a single week and Amy hadn't been wearing her uniform at the time. So why was she there?

Her daughter's snort brought Carol out of her thoughts and she realised she'd spoken the question out loud.
"You don't know, do you?" Victoria said bitterly. "You never figured it out?"

"I thought you were going home?" Carol said, ignoring the question.

"She was at the hospital because of you, because they called her, again, for help and she never says no. Not after you gave her that big speech about 'responsibility!'" Victoria's voice was rising steadily and the chair under her gave a warning creak as one of her hands squeezed the armrest too tightly.

Victoria was a teenager, almost a carbon copy of her mother as Sarah was fond of reminding her. Displays of temper were nothing new, but this was the first time she could remember seeing Victoria this angry with her.

"I don't see how that -"

"Because she'll do anything you ask!" Victoria shouted, cutting Carol off and jumping out of her seat. Her feet didn't touch the ground, but Carol refused to be intimidated by her own daughter.

"Fuck! Don't you get it?! Ever since she came to us, all you've ever spoken to Amy about is responsibility. How she needs to be better-"

"Responsibility is important," Carol snapped, rising to meet her daughter. "New Wave -"

"Fuck New Wave!" Victoria shouted. "This has nothing to do with them! Maybe if you'd ever spoken to her you'd know how Amy really feels! She spends every moment she can in hospitals healing people just so you'll say something nice to her!"

"That's enough, young lady!" She knew her own failings, but that didn't mean she wanted them thrown back in her face. "I won't be spoken to -"

"Exactly! You won't talk to Amy, and you won't listen!"

"That's not-!" Carol tried to deny it, but a part of her, a small quiet part that had been growing louder all night knew it was true.

"When was the last time you gave her a hug, when was the last time you touched her in any way?! Can you even name her friends? Even one of them? What about her favorite fucking colour?!" Carol struggled to think of an answer and Victoria used her silence to push onwards.

"Exactly! You can't! Fuck, Aunt Sarah knows more about Amy than you do and you're our mother!" Tears were running down Victoria's face and Carol found herself unable to meet her eyes.

"Enough!" Ratchet's voice was loud and both women jumped at his sudden interruption. "This is a hospital," he said much more quietly. "Either keep it down or I will have security escort you both outside! Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Victoria said, landing with a thump and storming out of the room, stopping to throw Carol one last angry look.

"I'm… Sorry, it won't happen again," Carol said eventually.

"Good, see that it doesn't." He placed a large orange toy on a chair and turned to leave, but stopped before reaching the door. "I think you should know. Scans of Amy's body show signs of prolonged stress, lack of sleep and possible long term depression."

Carol closed her eyes, not wanting to know, but asking anyway "... Do you know the cause?"
Ratchet gave her a flat look. "Yeah. I think I do." That said, he walked quietly out of the room.

With a huff, Carol dropped heavily into the chair next to Amy. Her thoughts chased each other through her mind as she tried to refute Victoria's claims.

**Amy's friends with that tinker... Matrix. Her favorite colour...** She almost said pink, that was the typical answer after all, but she couldn't think of a single time she'd seen Amy pick up or wear anything in that colour.

**Long term depression...** She hated to admit it, but looking back now, she could see the signs. Amy acted so much like Mark in his earlier days it was almost scary. Even Sarah had noticed it. She'd brought it up after that mess with Concert and they had forced Amy to spend less time at the hospital.

Or, at least they thought they had. How often did the hospitals call her regardless? How often did Amy come here when she shouldn't have? She knew the girls would sneak out at night sometimes.

She didn't mention it to them at the time; there wasn't much she could do to stop Victoria after all and she trusted her to behave. But Amy... had she looked the other way to be fair, or was it because she was waiting for an excuse. Some evidence that Amy was no better than her father?

Unbidden, her mind turned to Marquis then, inevitably, to her time in the basement with Sarah.

A quiet groan distracted her from her thoughts and she looked up to see Amy starting to stir.

Taking the girl's hand, she gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Amy? Can you hear me? Come on, you need to open your eyes."

"M-mom?" Amy moaned quietly, her eyes unfocused. Carol's heart twinged at the pitiful tone. "W-where? My legs hurt."

"It's alright, you're in the hospital. Just relax."

"Why... why do my legs hurt?" Amy shifted under the covers. Carol held her hand tightly, but her free hand groped for her legs.

"No! It's alright, don't worry about it, Amy!" Carol said quickly, standing up and trying to keep the girl calm, but Amy's eyes opened wide as she felt the remains of her limbs and her breath hitched.

"Wha... my legs? Why... I can't..." Trying to force herself upright, Amy's breath came faster, her movements more panicked. Finally, the truth hit her and Amy screamed, tears ran down her face as she started pulling at the sheets.

Not knowing what else to do, Carol leaned forward and pulled Amy tightly to her chest.

"Shh, it's okay, it's going to be alright," she repeated, ignoring the wetness on her own cheeks as Amy twisted in her arms. Turning to face her, Amy wrapped her arms around Carol, hanging on tightly as she cried herself out.

Eventually, she calmed and looked up beseechingly at Carol with wide, scared eyes. In that moment, Carol didn't see the Marquis, but the scared girl in her arms. Her memories of her time in a cell parted and she realised Amy looked like Sarah had, when they'd stumbled from the house they'd been kept in. Lost, helpless and scared

"M-Mom?"
"Shh, it's alright," Carol murmured, holding her daughter close. "I'm here."

Neither of them noticed Ratchet quietly closing the door and walking away.

Chapter End Notes

AN: before anyone says anything. No, Amy and Carol's relationship is not magically fixed. Carol has taken the first step by acknowledging Amy as her daughter, but it will take a long time for that rift between them to heal.
(Night after Amy woke up.)

Ducking for cover behind their cars, Brockton Bay's finest tried to keep the advancing ABB forces at bay.

The fighting had started when Empire gang members tried to attack an ABB drug dealer wandering around their territory, not realising that it was a trap. The moment the Empire made a move, a nearby delivery van had opened to reveal nearly a dozen men in ABB colours. The police had been called in soon after.

Nearly twenty yards away, there was a blue flash as Warpath appeared on a low rooftop. Jumping down, he hit the ground in tank mode and charged towards the fight, sensors highlighting every human in the street and assigning them a targeting priority.

"Blamo! Make way!" he shouted, moving past the cops and upping the power to his hover system to jump over an abandoned car.

His main cannon roared and the car the main ABB force was hiding behind crumpled, sliding sideways with a screech of tortured tires and forcing them all to hunker further down as they were suddenly exposed.

Not slowing his charge, Warpath pushed forward. Bullets pinged off his shields and armour as he returned fire with interest. A grenade arced through the air, exploding into a shower of sparks and electricity that danced across his metal skin.

"Hey! That hurt! Boom!" he shouted, turning and firing a grenade of his own. It bounced off a wall and landed at the feet of the man who'd thrown the previous grenade. There was a muffled cry as it exploded into a cloud of containment foam.

Seizing the chance, the police rallied behind Warpath, standing up and gunning down another ABB man. The rest finally broke under the pressure and scattered. Warpath gave chase, catching one in the leg with a rubber bullet and another with a blast from his cannon. Set to stun, of course.

"Well hey! Boom! I thought they'd put up more of a fight! Kapow!" he complained as he transformed. First real fight he'd had in ages and they were already giving up.

A blur in the air coalesced into Velocity, who whistled at the destruction.

"Damn, you don't mess around!" he muttered in awe, making the Autobot preen.

##

Rune hovered above the street on a wrecked car, watching Cricket carve her way through the chinks below while she hurled the occasional chunk of car at them.

It had only been luck that she'd been in the area, patrolling with Cricket, checking on safehouses, and looking for a fight when nearly two dozen chinks had flooded the street, pouring out of cars and charging the nearby Empire building - a private Empire bar that also doubled as a safe house.
Cricket had been in a mood ever since her rescue from prison and threw herself at the surprised fishheads with barely controlled rage. For her part, Rune was willing to pull back and let the woman get it out of her system.

Jerking right, Rune dodged a poorly thrown chunk of brick. With a wave of her arms, she pulled more metal from the car and launched it at the moron stupid enough to take a shot at her.

She'd fought against the other gangs before, but this didn't feel right. Most normals gave up and ran when confronted with a cape, never mind two. Yet the ABB men below her wouldn't back down, throwing themselves at them in a desperate charge that was doing nothing but getting them killed.

*Are they hoping to beat us by numbers?* she thought, pulling a small ball bearing from her pocket and shooting it like a bullet at a guy holding a grenade. There was a spray of blood and he dropped to the ground, clutching his arm.

Cricket was weaving through the gathered forces, the blades of her kamas glinting in the streetlights. She wasn't wasting time toying with her opponents like she did in the pit fights, she just cut them down and moved on. Rune knew she'd tire eventually, especially if the ABB sent reinforcements.

*Where are they getting them all from anyway?* There were rumors about implanted bombs, but they couldn't be true, right? Surely no one would go that far…

A blue flash further up the road distracted her from her thoughts as a dark blue miniature SUV appeared on the street. Charging towards them, it transformed as it skidded to a stop.

"Steeljaw, Ravage, Laserbeak, Waspinator, attack. Operation: Pacification!" he said, almost tonelessly as two robotic cats appeared beside him. High up in the air, a bird and small helicopter also appeared.

*Autobots? Fuck!* "Cricket!" Rune shouted, keeping a close eye on that fucking helicopter. "We've got company!"

Rune jerked her flying car to the side as Laserbeak dived towards her, talons aiming for her hood. She felt something land on her back, and realised with horror that she'd lost track of the helicopter.

Without thinking, she used her power to violently throw her robe away, in-built clasps giving way so she could shed it easily. Thankfully, she thought ahead and wore a separate mask under the hood.

There was a squeak as whatever had landed on her back got tangled up in her robes and she quickly used her powers to keep it from escaping.

"Wazzpinator not like thizzz!" the robot cried from inside the cloth as Rune smirked. She wasn't going to fall for the same thing twi-

With a screech, Laserbeak slammed into her back, talons digging into her shoulder and heavy wings beating her around the head.

Screaming, Rune tried to bat the mechanical bird away, losing her concentration and freeing the struggling Waspinator. She barely retained her hold on the levitating car beneath her feet. As both of them took to the air, Rune took a deep, ragged breath.

"When I get hold of you, I'm gonna -" Thoughts of revenge were quickly dashed when she heard a high pitched noise. It was painfully loud, switching pitch and tone so quickly that it made her nauseous.
Hands on her ears, she risked looking back and was horrified to see Cricket on the ground, hands clamped over her ears as the Autobot continued to fill the air with unbearable noise. The two large cats were busy mauling anyone they could get their claws on.

Tearing the roof she was standing on free, she threw the main body of the car at the Autobot, forcing him to dive sideways. It wasn't enough to stop that sound.

Rune ignored him as best as she could and plummeted to the street below, metal scraping on the ground as she grabbed Cricket and pulled the woman onto the roof with her. She focused on getting them both out of the area as quickly as possible. Thankfully the Autobots seemed content to let her go.

*Kaiser is not going to be happy about this,* she told herself. Not that she could bring herself to care at the moment.

##

"Are you sure you should be doing this?" Arcee asked the cape currently sitting in her saddle.

"Nah, it's fine!" the cape replied, patting her fuel tank in what Arcee assumed was supposed to be a placating gesture. "Besides, unpacking is boring and I can do that any time. Right now, the city needs me!"

*How did I get wrapped up in this?* Arcee groaned. "Did you at least let the PRT know you're here?"

"Of course I did," she replied. "I'm not that silly, you know!"

With a sigh, Arcee started her engine. Accelerating down the main road, she banked hard, skidding down a side road between two tall buildings that were currently a battleground between the ABB and Empire forces.

"Halt, evil doers!" the cape on her back yelled as Arcee skidded to a stop. Putting both her feet on the saddle, the cape jumped into the fray. Bullets followed her as she arced through the air, twisting and protecting herself with her circular shield.

Using the cape's antics as a distraction, Arcee transformed, her right arm forming a gun while she grabbed the nearest man with her left and threw him at his allies.

The cape rolled to a stop, sword flashing as she leaped to her feet. Hitting the nearest man across the face with her shield, she held her sword aloft.

"Malcontents! Face the mighty Mouse Protector!" she cheered, grinning like a loon. Around her, the fighting stalled briefly, with several shouting something about capes. Then a gunshot glanced of Mouse Protector's forcefield and the battle resumed.

Arcee quickly put her gun away since Mouse Protector was in the middle of the mass of fighters and her movements were too random to risk shooting in her direction. Instead, she focused on putting down anyone she could reach with her bare hands. It wasn't hard, since a simple punch was enough to break bones. After that, most people stayed down.

Those who didn't run quickly found themselves hemmed in. With the buildings on either side and Mouse Protector and Arcee blocking the only avenue of escape, only a few were able to slip past.

Mouse Protector spun and launched her shield down the alley, bouncing it off the wall and slamming it into the head of the last guy to get past Arcee.
"Nice shot." Arcee smirked, looking down at the collection of groaning men at their feet.

"Thanks! You wouldn't believe how long it took to learn!" Before Arcee could shout a warning, a man in red and black dove out of the shadow of a dumpster, raising his gun and pointing it at the cape.

Arcee switched her arm back to gun mode, but Mouse Protector was between her and the gunman. Mouse Protector had been outfitted with a personal force field which would stop the bullet from killing her, but at that distance, the shield wouldn't be able to stop it from doing serious damage.

"Fucking nigger loving bitch! What'cha gonna do now?" he shouted at the diminutive cape.

"Well!" Mouse Protector said, bouncing slightly on the spot. "First! I'll wiggle my cute little nose and-" she vanished, reappearing next to her shield at the far end of the alley, and - more importantly - behind Arcee.

The moment she vanished, Arcee fired. She had a perfect view of the gunman's shocked expression as the energy bolt hit him, blasting him into the wall and knocking him out.

"Nice shot," Mouse Protector said with an easy grin as she strapped her shield back into place. "Can you gather the weapons while I call this in?"

"Sure."

Walking over to the gunman, Arcee picked up his discarded weapon. It was more of a hand-sized cannon than a pistol, weighing between four and five pounds. The odd part was the colour. The entire thing had been gold chromed with a small skull and crossbones stamped into the grip.

"Hey!" she called out. "Tell them to put a rush on it. I think this guy's important!"

Arcee tried not to jump when Mouse Protector simply appeared right next to her.

"Really? What makes you say that?"

Carefully unloading the weapon, Arcee held it up so Mouse Protector could see it better.

"Can you see a random thug being able to afford something like this?"

She whistled. "No, you're right. Nice job! Still, not a bad haul for my first night in the city… Say, what do you-"

"No," Arcee said, "you can't call me the Mouse-Mobile."

"... Mouse-Cycle?"

"No…" Arcee sighed. It was going to be a long night.

##

Rhinox grunted as Stormtiger's claws scraped across his forearms. His return punch was met with air as the cape dodged sideways.

They were on the western side of the city, worryingly close to an Empire bar Hookwolf was known to frequent. Thankfully for them, he was reportedly fighting some new cape near the trainyard.
Behind Rhinox, Duette continued dealing with the non-powered fighters, her glowing clone blinking in and out of existence.

This is getting us nowhere! Rhinox thought. Stormtiger couldn't do much to hurt him, but he was too slow to actually hit the cape.

Changing tactics, he threw a wide punch. As expected, Stormtiger jumped backwards as Rhinox allowed the momentum to spin him around. Facing away from Stormtiger, he transformed and charged towards Duette.

"Tag out!" he shouted in warning.

Glancing over her shoulder, Duette's clone appeared in front of Stormtiger and lashed out with its tonfa, preventing him from launching a blast of air into the Autobot's back.

Duette switched places with her clone as Rhinox passed her, switching her focus to the Empire cape. Her clone flipped in the air, landing on Rhinox's back and vaulting into the fight with Stormtiger.

Stormtiger and Duette were closely matched in skill, with both preferring to fight up close, but her clone allowed her to simultaneously outnumber him and dodge his more powerful strikes.

With Duette occupied battling the Empire cape, Rhinox charged through the remaining fighters, skidding to a stop and transforming into his humanoid mode. Pulling his chaingun from subspace, he set it to stun and opened fire.

Most of the humans ran or dived for cover. Those that didn't were sent flying by the energy bolts.

Duette fought to stay on her feet as a focused blast of air from Stormtiger knocked her backwards. Her foot caught on some debris and she stumbled, but before he could capitalize, she switched places with her clone, letting it take the brunt of his attack.

She winced at the feedback from the clone's near disruption. She didn't feel its pain, but creating or dispelling one took a toll, and she was rapidly reaching her limit.

"Getting tired, chink?" Stormtiger taunted.

Neither able nor willing to reply, she moved her clone behind him as a distraction while charging forwards. However, an angry voice from nearby distracted her.

"Fuck you, skinheads!" The voice was frothing and heavily accented, and when she turned she saw a man in green throw a purple tube towards the largest concentration of Empire colours. The tube imploded in midair, forming a well of pure darkness that drew everything towards it.

Wind howled as it rushed into the void and debris was sucked in to fill the sudden vacuum. The ABB man barely had time to scream before he too was pulled inside.

Fighting against the pull, Rhinox grabbed onto the base of a street light. It buckled and groaned, but thankfully didn't snap, even as the top bent towards the singularity. There was a blue flash as Duette's clone appeared adjacent to the Autobot before quickly swapping positions with the original.

Reaching out, Rhinox grabbed her wrist with his free hand and held on tight. She gritted her teeth in pain, but he didn't dare loosen his grip. Around them, people in Empire and ABB colours were sucked into the void indiscriminately.

On the other side of the street, a man in green had managed to grab onto a street light with one hand
and Stormtiger with the other.

Rhinox couldn't hear what was being said. He could only watch as Stormtiger crawled up the man's body, then struck out at the man's hand, breaking his grip and sending him tumbling through the air.

Just as Rhinox began to worry about the buildings crumbling around them, the hole collapsed in on itself and a tennis ball sized mass dropped to the ground with a heavy bang, sinking into the concrete.

Relaxing with a sigh, he looked around, but Stormtiger had already fled.

"You okay?" he asked a trembling Duette while finally releasing her wrist.

She nodded silently, but made no attempt to stand up. Figuring she had the right idea, Rhinox let his head fall back against the ground and stayed there.

What kind of lunatic weaponises black holes?

Around them, the few people lucky enough to survive tried to crawl away as police cars started to arrive.

###

Originally, I thought the Merchants had disbanded when their capes - Skidmark, Squealer, and Mush - had been arrested. In reality, the gang had simply fractured into smaller groups that quickly started fighting amongst themselves.

For the most part, the police was able to keep them under control, but a faction calling themselves The New Merchants had recently moved into the old trainyard and forced the smaller gangs into line. I could see why. New capes had crawled out of the woodwork and claimed leadership over the gang. New capes that were currently fighting against Hookwolf.

I was standing on top of an old cargo crane near the middle of the yard. Most had either been taken down or collapsed due to neglect, but despite the rust, this one was still standing, even if it no longer worked. It also gave me a perfect view of the battlefield.

One of the capes fighting Hookwolf was a man so thin he looked like skin stretched over a skeleton. The ground under him was smoldering and he glowed like a small sun to my suit's thermal imaging sensors.

The other was a youngish woman with torn clothes and a bandana around her face. With the way she'd calmly walked up to Hookwolf at the start, I assumed she was a brute of some kind before he'd smacked her clear across the yard.

Her power seemed to be invulnerability without added strength. Hookwolf wasn't able to hurt her, but she couldn't even scratch him. They were currently at a stalemate, slowly circling each other.

Honestly, what was wrong with these people? Bakuda was letting off explosives in the streets and the 'Merchants' and Empire were fighting over territory? Worse, they were fighting over territory nobody but the Merchants had wanted.

I was sorely tempted to leave them to it. No one lived here and I didn't care if a bunch of drug addicts wanted to fight some Nazis. But there was always a chance the fighting could spill out into other areas or attract the ABB.

I was about to make a decision when I noticed movement around one of the discarded railcars. The
abandoned vehicle was tilted in such a way that the dark figure lying prone on the roof was hidden from the people fighting, but not me.

Zooming in, I switched vision modes to get a better look. Size was hard to tell at this distance, but the figure was probably shorter than me and wearing either a dark robe or a thick cape. There were three known capes in the city who matched that description: Amy, Rune, and Shadow Stalker.

Given that Amy was in the hospital and Rune was fighting Soundwave, it looked like the disturbance had drawn Sophia out of hiding.

Part of me wanted to hurt her. If I jumped from the crane, she probably wouldn't notice me until I was right on top of her…

I sighed in frustration. Stopping Bakuda was more important than pounding Sophia, no matter how satisfying it would be. Still, I smirked. There's nothing wrong with making a point.

##

Shadow Stalker cursed her luck. This was supposed to have been a simple patrol. A quick test to see how well her new team could handle a couple of drugged up Merchant capes who'd been using the chaos to build up their forces.

Then Hookwolf had shown up.

*I can take him!* Gunner hissed. *It'll be easy, one shot and it's all over.*

*And if you miss?!* Widow hissed back.

*I won't!* "Both of you, be quiet!" Shadow Stalker snapped.

She was really starting to regret this team up. Their first few hunts together had worked out well, even if she had been forced to stay quiet about being a cape, but then she’d screwed up. A fight went bad and she had to choose between exposing her powers or getting shot.

Now everyone in her 'team' insisted on having names. Gunner was a skinny guy with an unhealthy obsession for guns. Widow was a muscular girl who favoured a pair of short trench knives.

She didn't know why they'd become vigilantes, and honestly didn't care. This wasn't some play group, they were here to do a job that the pussies in the PRT were too scared to do.

"Look, it's simple," a skinhead in Empire colours explained to the Merchant capes. Behind him, Hookwolf cracked his knuckles. Shadow Stalker rolled her eyes. The Empire must be desperate if they were sending Hookwolf to negotiate.

"The Empire is willing to lease this land to you. We'll look the other way, letting you deal to or recruit whoever you want."

From her perch, Shadow Stalker could almost see the dismissive sneer Hookwolf gave the dark-skinned female Merchant. "In return, you give the Empire a percentage of your profits and help us deal with the ABB. You won't get a better deal than this!"

The skinny man went to speak, but the woman cut him off.

"Be quiet, Cook. As for you, the answer is still no! We work for Oil Slick. You want to make a
"Where is this 'Oil Slick' then?" Hookwolf said, stepping forward. It looked like negotiations were about to fall apart. "Hiding like a coward while you do all the work? This is our territory now nigger, you either work for us, leave, or die."

"G-go fuck yourself!" the skinny man half-shouted. He was pacing and twitching with a nervous energy Shadow Stalker had seen in other addicts.

*High, strung out, scared, or all of the above?*

"Cook, keep your fucking mouth shut!"

*Are we just gonna watch this?* Gunner asked.

"Yes!" She wasn't stupid: Hookwolf was out of her league. Having a couple of extra guns pointed at him wasn't going to change that. "We don't pick fights we can't win!"

*Fuck you! You're a coward, just like all the rest!* Before she could say anything, a shot rang out. Hookwolf bellowed as the bullet missed his head, slamming into his chest close to his shoulder. Clutching at the injury, Hookwolf exploded into a mass of razor sharp blades that deflected the follow up shots.

The Empire members dove for cover, pulling guns and opening fire as they ran.

Shadow Stalker tried to stay as flat as possible; the others were on their own.

Now in his metallic wolf form, Hookwolf charged towards the woman, a swipe from his claws sending her flying. She collided with a nearby carriage, punching through the rusted metal and leaving a perfectly round hole in her wake.

Cook ran forwards, a fiery glow emanating from under his skin. Jumping on Hookwolf, he ignored the blades stabbing into him as his body glowed brighter and the metal started to melt from the intense heat.

Shadow Stalker briefly considered launching a surprise attack, but quickly dismissed the idea. She wasn't going to risk getting caught up in this mess and instead waited for a chance to escape unseen.

Meanwhile, the Merchant woman was back in the fight, the ground flattening just ahead of her. Shaking Cook away, Hookwolf dived at her, snatching her up in his jaws.

For a moment, Shadow Stalker saw his bladed teeth deform, bending around an invisible bubble, before he shook he head and threw her across the yard yet again.

There was another scream as Cook jumped on an Empire thug who got too close. The man screamed as his clothes burst into flame and his skin began to bubble and run like wax.

Turning, Hookwolf slammed a claw down on the fiery cape, only for it to start melting as well. Shedding the ruined blades, he generated more to replace them.

This fight wasn't going to end quickly and both sides seemed to realise it. Pulling back, they assessed each other, waiting for an opportunity to present itself.

Shifting her weight, Shadow Stalker inched backwards, ready to phase through the carriage under her and run while they were distracted.
The sound of jets filled the air and Shadow Stalker looked up to see a weird purple aircraft streaking towards the train yard. She forced herself not to growl at the incoming Autobot. The tinker toy would make a good distraction once Hookwolf and the Merchants noticed it.

There was movement under the jet's wings as two small objects shot off ahead, leaving smoke trails in their wake.

Shadow Stalker's eyes widened in horror when she realised what they were.

*She wouldn't!*

She dropped through the roof and into the carriage below. It wouldn't offer much protection, but it was better than nothing. Putting her hands over her ears, she took a deep breath and braced for the impact.

Outside, there were a number of loud bangs, followed by a lot of swearing. The jet made another pass and she heard more explosions. She stayed still, waiting until she was sure there wasn't going to be a third strafing run.

Confident she was safe for the moment, she carefully stood up and looked through one of the passenger car's broken windows. Half the trainyard was covered in rapidly expanding containment foam. Hookwolf, both Merchant capes, and the bangers they'd brought with them were encased in the stuff.

Moving in the opposite direction, Sophia phased through the wall and looked around. It looked like the target had been the fight and she'd gotten lu-

There was a sharp whistle above her. Looking up, she saw Hebert! standing on top of a crane. The tinker gave her a jaunty wave, then flew off into the distance.

Shadow Stalker seethed. Did that bitch Hebert think she was clever? Taunting her like that? She was gonna, gonna...

With a growl of frustration, she thumped the side of her fist against the train car. There was nothing she *could* do. The bitch had her outnumbered and outgunned. Even if she did manage to catch her off guard, then what?

She had the PRT and Dragon kissing her ass. Any attack on Hebert would only get her caught and thrown into juvie, or worse.

Sophia stalked off into the darkness. Gunner and Widow couldn't have gotten far, and when she found them she was going to kick the shit out of him for that stunt and maybe work off her frustration at the same time.

##

"Come on, Amy, you need to eat!" Victoria pleaded as she pushed the tray a little closer. It was resting on a wheeled, height adjustable platform that allowed the food to be positioned in front of a patient without having to put the tray on their lap.

"I'm not hungry," Amy muttered, turning her head and staring at the wall.

Flaring her aura, Victoria put a hand on Amy's shoulder. "Please… for me?"

Letting out a long sigh, Amy started picking at her food with her fork, slowly taking small bites.
She knew it was manipulative, but Amy needed to eat. She'd woken up for the first time yesterday and then spent most of the day slipping in and out of consciousness or being examined by doctors. That meant Amy hadn't eaten in nearly four days.

Mom had said it was fine, that a loss of appetite was to be expected after what had happened.

The really strange thing was that Mom never came home yesterday. She spent the day at the hospital with Amy and refused to let anyone else visit. She came home early this morning, her hair and makeup was a mess and she had large bags under her bloodshot eyes. She immediately went to her room, but not before telling Victoria she was grounded. She was only allowed to visit Amy or stay in her room for the rest of the day.

Needless to say, Victoria chose to spend her time with Amy.

Not that the two of them were alone. Ratchet made regular appearances and Windblade was sitting unmoving on the windowsill, eyes closed as she rested.

Looking at her sister now, though, she felt worry worming its way through her gut. She'd expected Amy to be upset. She'd expected tears or even anger. She hadn't expected apathy. For Amy to just sit there, staring at the wall and barely talking.

She didn't know how to fix this.

She wasn't stupid. She knew things were bad at home for Amy. Mom barely looked at her and Dad… Dad tried, he honestly did, but his depression made everything an uphill battle for him. On his good days, he was great. He would go out of his way to include Amy in whatever he was doing. Honestly, watching the pair of them on those days, it was nearly impossible to know Amy was adopted.

But then the bad days would catch up with him and it was all he could do just to get out of bed. She didn't blame him, she couldn't. But when he wasn't there, it left Amy alone to deal with Mom.

Mom liked to pretend everything was fine, that she didn't snap and growl at everyone, but it wasn't true. She hid it better, but Mom would get funny about the oddest things. She got downright intense about things like trust, and her mood could switch from calm to furious at the drop of a hat.

Mom had never directed that anger towards either of them, but Amy had never really learned how to deal with her when she was angry. Not knowing what else to do, Victoria did what she always did, smile and pretend everything was okay so that maybe, just maybe, it would be. Eventually.

Seeing Amy had stopped eating, Victoria gave her a small nudge and upped her aura a bit. Amy often said she was immune, but Victoria had noticed long ago that she would perk up whenever she increased the intensity.

"Look, if you eat a little bit more, I've got a surprise for you!" Victoria said with false cheer. Amy ate a few more bites before pushing the tray away.

Figuring that was the best she was going to get, Victoria sighed and picked her bag up off the floor.

"So technically I'm still grounded, but I managed to make a stop on my way here and Mom can't complain, cause my feet never touched the ground!" She gave Amy a cheeky grin. Amy's lips twitched, but she didn't actually smile.

Victoria rummaged through her bag. Aside from the usual bits and pieces, like makeup and her purse, she had a small handheld police scanner she'd talked Taylor into making for her, and… "I
Smirking, Victoria pulled a tablet computer from her bag. The Autobot symbol had been stamped on the back, showing where she got it.

Moving the plate of food to an empty chair, Victoria tapped the screen then placed the tablet on stand and propped it up so Amy could see it. The tablet beeped a couple of times, then an image of Taylor appeared.

She looked a little worn out, with dark bags under her eyes and her hair pulled back, but she smiled brightly.

"Amy! I'm so glad to see you!"

Amy smiled briefly, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Hey…"

Taylor's smile dimmed, but she recovered quickly. "I'm sorry I couldn't visit you in person, but I'm kinda… confined to base for the day."

Victoria snorted in amusement, and leaned down to whisper into Amy's ear.

"What she means is she's grounded for using air to surface missiles in the middle of the city."

The look of surprise was the most emotion Amy had shown all day. "You did what?"

Taylor blushed. "Well… not exactly -"

"Technically," Wheeljack said from somewhere off camera. "They were rocket propelled containment foam grenades!"

"Yes, thank you, Wheeljack." Taylor rolled her eyes. "Anyway, it wasn't in the middle of the city! It was just the old trainyard."

"… why?" Amy ground out and Victoria felt her spirits rise as her sister became more animated.

"Hookwolf was fighting some Merchant capes."

"And?"

"… I wanted to scare Shadow Stalker?"

Victoria giggled while Amy groaned and Taylor's blush darkened. As Taylor tried to explain herself, there was a loud bang behind her and Arcee came storming into view. What really caught Victoria's attention was the large mouse ears taped to her head.

"Erm… How did the patrol go?" Taylor asked. "What's with the-"

"I don't want to talk about it," the Autobot growled. Before she could leave the frame, Waspinator came into view, hovering close to Arcee's head.

"Did bike-bot get Mouzzze Protectorzzz autograph?" he asked, only to run screaming when Arcee dived for him.

"Arcee! Stop!" Taylor shouted, chasing after both of them and out of view.

Victoria gave her confused sister an amused grin. "Our heroes, ladies and gentlemen. Did you know
they set the local record for the most arrests in a single night?"

Looking away from the tablet, and ignoring the sounds of chaos it was making, Amy gave her a surprised look.

"Really?"

"Yup!" With that, Victoria repeated everything she'd heard on the news and PHO this morning. Some of it was hearsay, but a surprising amount was true, and Amy's mood slowly started to improve.

In an effort to keep her sister's mood from dropping again, Victoria ramped her aura up a bit further. She'd notice if Victoria overdid it, so she was careful to keep it just below that point.

At some point Victoria slipped onto the bed, taking care not to touch Amy's legs, and put an arm around her sister. She smiled to herself as Amy snuggled into her side. As Amy relaxed, so too did Victoria and the reins she held on her aura. Suppressing it was like tensing a muscle: it took concentration and doing it for long periods of time could get tiring.

Realising Amy had fallen asleep, Victoria picked up the tablet and started to browse PHO.

It was nearly two hours later when Amy started to stir. With a deep breath, her eyes started to open.

"Hey, sleepyhead!" Victoria said, leaning in close as Amy struggled to wake. She'd never been a morning person, she was normally stuck in a fugue for ages upon first waking.

Amy stared at her for a moment then smiled warmly for the first time in what felt was like years.

"Morning," Amy mumbled, wrapping her arms around Victoria and leaning forward. Before she had a chance to say anything, Amy pulled herself up, closing the distance between them and pressing her lips to hers.

Victoria tried to pull back in surprise, but Amy held on tight, bringing them closer. When she felt her sister's tongue brush against her lips, Victoria finally snapped out of her surprised stupor and pushed her back onto the bed.

"Amy? What the hell?!” she asked, keeping herself from shouting.

Amy's eyes snapped open. "Victoria! Oh god! I'm sorry, I didn't, I mean, I was was just-!

Wiping her mouth, Victoria ignored her sister's babbling and tried to push down her own embarrassment, moving away from the bed.

"Fuck Amy, who did you think I was? I mean -” Whatever she was going to say died in Victoria's throat when she saw the look on her sister's face. She was deathly pale, her eyes wide and brimming with tears. Her breaths were coming in short sharp gasps.

"Fuck! Amy, calm down!"

"Don't touch me!" Amy nearly screamed, pulling her hand back in fear.

"Idiot." She grabbed Amy's hand and pulled her sister close.

##

"Whatever the problem is, we can fix it. Now please, just tell me," Vicky said as she pulled Amy
close.

She could feel Vicky's body through their joined hands. Every heartbeat, every cell brimming with life. Feel it as Vicky's body responded on a biological level by releasing different chemicals. Worry, concern, a bit of fear, love.

Amy could see it all and in that one moment of weakness, her power surged... only to cut off suddenly as Vicky's body disappeared from her senses.

/That is not the way./

All the stress, all the pain, the knowledge of what she had nearly done finally became too much as Amy burst into tears.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Amy cried, clutching at her head, words rumbling from her mouth. "I- I didn't mean to! But you you were there and so beautiful, so perfect! And I tried, I tried to keep things normal between us! I kept ignoring it, but it wouldn't go away!"

"Oh my god," Victoria muttered, her confusion shifting towards realisation.

"You have to understand," Amy said, desperately trying to make her understand, to not hate her. "For so long, you were all I had and somewhere along the line, my feelings got messed up! I knew I couldn't tell you, I thought being near you would be enough! You've always been so perfect. You made me feel warm and safe! Please don't hate me, please understand!"

She could see the anger and the revulsion slowly spreading across Vicky's face.

"Vicky, please!"

"I've got to go!"

"I love you!"

Vicky grabbed her bag and ran from the room, not stopping to look back.

"Vicky!" In her desperation, Amy leaned too far forward and was about to fall off her bed when something grabbed the back of her hospital gown and pulled. Amy was barely aware of the sound of fans going into overdrive as Windblade clung to her clothes.

"Vicky!"

Ratchet burst through the door at a run, putting an arm under her shoulders and lifting her back onto the bed. As she fell back onto the mattress, Windblade landed on her chest. Grabbing her and pulling her close, Amy let herself cry.

##

Victoria was too shocked to be upset with her sister. Instead, she listened with mounting horror as Amy spoke.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Amy cried, clutching at her head, words rumbling from her mouth. "I- I didn't mean to! But you you were there and so beautiful, so perfect! And I tried, I tried to keep things normal between us! I kept ignoring it, but it would go away!"

Amy had… feelings for her? She'd never known, never even considered it. And yet, now that she did, so much made sense. Amy's attitude towards Gallant, her almost desperate need to touch her.
How could she have not seen it?
And yet, when Amy spoke, something didn't fit.

"You've always been so perfect."

There it was again. The same words, the same sense of... awe, Victoria had heard before... From the mouths of fans exposed to her aura.

No!

Was this her fault? Had she done this? She was always exposing people to her aura, she couldn't shut it off. All this time, she'd been exposing Amy to it, for years, every since she'd triggered.

She had to... she had to go, to get away from Amy before she made things worse.

"I've got to go!" Without thinking, she grabbed her bag and rushed from the room, forcing herself to ignore her sister. She had to fix this.

Turning left, she bolted for the roof, charging up the stairs and crashing through the door, then soared into the sky. She needed, she needed time, space away from everyone where she could think without, without fucking with anyone else's head.

##

The Medhall headquarters was the tallest building in the city, and on a clear day one could almost see Boston in the distance. Victoria wasn't interested in the view, she just needed a place to land. She couldn't go home, not now, and she couldn't keep flying with tears in her eyes, so this would have to do.

Landing on the roof, Victoria sat down and drew her knees to her chest. Staring off into the distance, her blank expression masked the maelstrom of thoughts running through her head.

'You're perfect, you're beautiful.'

Did Amy really love her? Or was it her aura? Had she been unknowingly brainwashing Amy for years? And what about her friends? What about Dean?

Desperate for something, anything, to distract herself, she'd turned her police scanner on. It was getting dark and the fighting would probably start again soon. Robbery, car chase, domestic dispute, she listened as the scanner reported one crime after the other. In a city like Brockton Bay, there was always something happening.

What's the point? It wouldn't change anything. With a sobbing laugh, she let the scanner fall from her fingers and clatter to the roof.

Anger, fear, and revulsion battled for dominance. Anger and revulsion for what she might have done to Amy and to others, and what she might still be doing. Fear of people's reactions when they found out, about what would happen to her.

Did the effect build up over time? Or would people go back to normal if she stayed away? Did it mean she had to leave?

She didn't know how she could fix this.

Throughout her confusion was the slow burn of anger. She was angry at Bakuda for hurting her
sister, at herself for hurting Amy, her powers, at the world.

*All units be advised! Possible Bakuda sighting at-* Victoria listened to the address, and like clouds parting after a storm, her fear and confusion fell away, leaving only her blazing anger.

_Bakuda!_

Without thinking, she jumped up and kicked off the roof, cracking the concrete beneath her.

_Bakuda was going to pay._

##

"No, Jack, Dragon vetoed that idea," I explained with a tired sigh. After my stunt with the con-foam rockets, I didn't feel like pushing my luck a second time. "She said something about -"

"Taylor! Windblade needs your help!" Rewind shouted from the top of a workbench.

"Put her on speaker!" I called back.

*Taylor! You need to find Victoria!*

"What? Why? Isn't she still at the hospital with Amy?"

*No, she just left! I can't talk about it, but please, go before she does something she regrets!* It was the fear that got to me. I'd never heard Windblade so worried about anything. She was usually better at hiding it.

"Teletraan, prep my armour for launch!" My armour was in its bike mode and plugged into a recharge station by the main doors. Dragon had insisted on putting a lock on it so she could keep me from using it when needed.

"Unable to comply. All armour functions have been suspended by Dragon," the VI responded. I really needed to work on its inflection system. It sounded cheerful ninety percent of the time.

"Override. Code: shut up and do what I tell you!"

"... Acknowledged." And now he sounded sulky. I really needed to work on that.

Strapping on my armour, I ran outside and took off. If there had been some sort of argument, then Vicky would be mad and looking for a way to vent. Typically, that involved finding a fight club and beating up skinheads. But with the way things were at the moment, she could just as easily settle for some unfortunate ABB members.

"Rewind, start scanning social media, see if you can find any sightings of Glory Girl," I ordered, flying roughly towards the centre of the city. Maybe I could try checking her favorite places? There was that ice cream place near the Boardwalk she liked to visit whenever she'd had an argument with Dean. Maybe she was there -

*All units be advised! Possible Bakuda sighting at -* My suit's VI automatically brought up the police band. I was always connected to it and had set the VI to prioritise anything that mentioned Bakuda.

An actual sighting was big. If I could get to her now, I could put a stop to her rampage. In the distance, a building glowed on my HUD, marking the location. My desire to find her warred briefly
with my intent to find Vicky, until I was hit by a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Teletraan! Activate the tracer in police scanner GG1!"

Knowing Vicky's tendency to go overboard, I'd installed a tracking device inside the police scanner I'd built for her. A red dot appeared on my HUD, rapidly approaching the building. *Fuck!*

Pointing in the direction of the Bakuda sighting, Divebomb accelerated. It wasn't going to be enough: even at full speed, Vicky was too far ahead. My only hope was that she didn't do something stupid before I could get there.

##

Victoria's temper hadn't cooled in the slightest. In fact, it had grown worse as the images of Amy being pulled from the rubble and her missing legs only added to the fire her own self-loathing had started.

She could see the warehouse in the distance now. There were people in ABB colours lingering out front.

Victoria crossed her arms across her face and aimed herself at a set of large loading doors that were off to one side. The thin corrugated steel never stood a chance. The metal exploded from the impact, warping and twisting from the forces unleashed.

Victoria felt her personal shield fail, then snap back into place just before she crashed through a dozen wooden crates, sending the contents flying.

Coming to an immediate stop, Victoria found herself inside a small loading area full of crates. Nearby, three men in ABB colours and armed with bats and knives looked on in shock at her explosive entrance.

She grabbed the nearest one by his shoulder and lifted him off the floor. He screamed as she swung him in a horizontal arc, slamming him into his partner with a crunch of breaking bones.

The third guy had been smarter. By the time Victoria grabbed the first man, he was already running. It didn't help. She easily caught up to him and grabbed him from behind, slamming him face first into a wall, barely slowing down enough to avoid killing him.

"Bakuda! Where. Is. She!"

Bloody and whimpering, he lifted a trembling arm and pointed at a nearby door that she assumed led into the warehouse proper.

She dropped him and immediately charged through the door, smashing it off its hinges. She flew straight up, dodging the grenade that sailed past her and into the outer room.

There were nearly a dozen people in the warehouse, most of them hiding behind workbenches or crates. All of them were armed with guns.

Behind them all was Bakuda, standing atop a modified jeep with grenade launcher in hand. The wall behind her had a shutter installed in it, the gleaming metal looking out of place next to the worn brickwork around it.

Victoria saw red.
Screaming in rage, she flew at the tinker, ignoring the bullets bouncing off her shield. As her aura filled the warehouse, several people turned and ran for the doors while others hid in fear. The rest fired wildly and were ignored.

Bakuda herself seemed unfazed by the effect, raising her grenade launcher and firing.

Victoria barely had the presence of mind to dodge, jerking to the side as the grenade exploded, filling the air with smoke. As the thick cloud rapidly expanded, Victoria could feel it burn her lungs.

Covering her mouth with one hand and shutting her eyes, she flew straight up, right into the path of another grenade. It slammed into her shoulder with enough force to drop her shield, then it exploded and all Victoria knew was pain.

Her whole body shook, muscles spasming from the agony. It felt like every inch of her body was on fire as her vision blacked out. When she opened her eyes again, she was laying in a crater on the floor.

"Hah! I knew that would work!" Bakuda cackled. "Not so invulnerable now, are you?"

Growling in pain and anger, Victora forced herself to her feet, only for another grenade to slam into her stomach. This time she didn't pass out, but she was forced her back to her knees. Her head felt like it was splitting open and she gasped for air, fighting down the impulse to vomit. She refused to give Bakuda the satisfaction.

"You! Get that open and bring it over here!" Bakuda snapped to someone Victoria couldn't see. Her voice was getting closer.

Forcing herself to focus through the pain, Victoria prepared to strike the moment Bakuda was close enough. However, before she could act, the barrel of the grenade launcher was shoved in her face.

"Don't even think about it," Bakuda warned. "I've got plenty more where that came from."

Taking a grenade from her belt, she passed it to a nearby henchman. "She so much as twitches, use it!"

"B-but, won't we get hurt too?" he asked, handling the grenade like it was an angry viper.

Bakuda shook her head with a snort. "Pussy, it won't kill us. But Glory Hole here is invulnerable. She doesn't know how to deal with pain."

Victoria felt another flash of anger at the insult and tried again to stand up. This time, the butt of the grenade launcher crashed into her head, doing no real harm beyond making her headache worse.

"On the floor, bitch!"

When she didn't move, Bakuda placed a foot on her shoulder and pushed. Victoria refused to move, and Bakuda ended up pushing herself backwards.

"Alright, fine!" the woman snarled. She pointed at a boy standing nearby. "You! Get over here! Now!"

The boy looked no older than Victoria. His face was pale and his eyes were red like he'd been crying.

"P-please, please don't," he begged as Bakuda grabbed him and forced him to kneel in front of
"Tell her your name."

"P-please!"

"Do it!"

"M-mike! My name's Mike!"

"You see, 'Mike' here is one of my little volunteers. My boys grabbed him and his friends from a nearby college. In his head is…"

Pushing his head forward, Bakuda forced the back of his collar down.

"359… Ohh, that's a nasty one. It breaks things down into their base elements. Hurts like hell too." Her mask flattened most of the tone, but Victoria was fairly sure Bakuda was enjoying this.

She put her foot back on Victoria's shoulder. "Now, lay down on your back or I'll set it off and you get to watch him die."

Glaring daggers at the tinker, and wishing she had laser eyes, Victoria allowed herself to be pushed over, but refused to actually say anything.

Bakuda pressed a large circular device against Victoria's chest. It was roughly the width and shape of a dinner plate, but nearly four inches thick. There was a number of things hanging off the sides and when Bakuda gave the device a twist, she felt them wrap around her, pressing into her back as the sharp tips tried to drive themselves into her skin.

"Now, I'm sure other heroes are coming, so I don't have time to mess around with you. As fun as it would be to test different toys on you and see what works, I've got to go. This thing," she tapped the device on Victoria's chest, "is a very special bomb. If it goes off, you and everything for five blocks… well… I'm sure you'll turn up again… eventually. Oh, and don't even think about trying to break free, if you do -"

There was a loud crash as Matrix punched through the roof and hit the ground in a perfect three point landing.

"Get away from her, you bitch!"

##

Soaring over the warehouse, I could see the smashed door where Vicky had gone in through and the heat signatures of more than a dozen people moving around inside. They were circling around a single heat signature and I hoped that Vicky was safe.

Picking a point a safe distance from them, I disconnected from Divebomb and let myself fall. It would be too confined in there for me to move with him on my back.

The half-rotten roof gave way when I hit it and I could see Vicky laying on the floor with a tinker device strapped to her chest, Bakuda standing over her.

I hit the ground with enough force to crack the concrete and immediately extended one of my guns, pushing the power level up to bone breaking force.

"Get away from her, you bitch!" Not the most elegant threat, but it got the point across.
Turning to face me, Bakuda dropped her grenade launcher and pulled a small trigger from a pocket.

"Rewind, block all transmissions!" I hissed.

The device on Vicky's chest let out a loud beeping noise and Bakuda waved a finger at me. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. If that bomb loses signal for more than thirty seconds, it goes off!"

Behind her, Vicky had gone very, very still.

Damn it! "Rewind!"

The instant the jamming stopped, the device went quiet.

"Good girl." Her mask made her voice sound flat, but wasn't hard to guess she was teasing me. "Just so we're clear, you touch me and every bomb in this building goes off. Now put the gun away and don't move."

Gritting my teeth, I retracted my Null-Ray.

"Boss," a guy shouted from near the door, "lookout just spotted Dragon and Armsmaster on the way!"

"Tch, no they're not," she said without turning around.

Off in the distance, I heard a number of explosions and I couldn't help but hope no one I knew had been hurt. On my HUD, the icons for Dragon and Armsmaster stopped moving.

"That probably bought us five minutes," Bakuda said. "Grab whatever you can and get out! And don't be late. You know what I'll do if you are!"

Around us, henchmen started grabbing whatever they could and loading it onto a nearby jeep.

"Now, as for you!" she said to me, holding up the trigger in her hands. "I'm not stupid, I learn from my mistakes. This is a deadman's switch. If anything happens to me, or you try blocking the signal, that bomb on the bimbo's over inflated chest goes off. Let's see how good a tinker you really are; you've got ten minutes to disarm it."

Bakuda gave me a pat on the shoulder as she passed. She stopped just short of the door. "Oh! I almost forgot. You really don't want to try hitting this one with an EMP. Not unless you wanna know what your own eyeballs taste like! See ya!"

I couldn't do anything but watch as she drove out of the building. The moment she was out of sight, I rushed forward.

"Vicky, what were you thinking?" I said, dropping down next to her. "Attacking a tinker in her workshop! You know better than that!"

The device was circular, with a glowing core in the center. Around it was a mess of coils and exotic materials that would probably take me weeks to examine. Vicky's aura was flaring wildly: one moment it was stirring up thoughts that made it hard to concentrate, the next it was virtually gone.

"I'm sorry, I just… I didn't know what else to do!"

Placing my hand on the bomb, I let my power map out its insides, and wasn't that a terrifying thought? This bomb was advanced enough that my power could work on it. The glowing core was a ring of some exotic material that was feeding back into a series of repeating loops.
It almost resembled an EMP in construction, and my suit's sensors were picking up different types of radiation. Mostly harmless, but it was all building up in the core.

*Feedback loop causing exponential growth that leads to…*

Right, so that was what Bakuda meant by ten minutes. The core was its own timing device, building up potential energy to a critical mass which it would then release.

"I-it's fine," I said, hoping to reassure Vicky. "I'm going to try disarming this. Your power should protect you, yeah?"

The tangled mess of parts in the bottom portion of the ring really had me worried. It almost looked like Kid Win's teleporter.

"My power?" she asked with a bitter laugh, fingers gripping at the ground under her. "My power is the problem!"

Accessing Teletraan, I quickly downloaded hardlight specifications for tools, allowing me to create a collection of small, handheld precision instruments. I took one of them and slipped the edge under the top cover, gently easing it off.

"Does this have anything to do with you storming out of Amy's room earlier?" I asked. It would have been easier to concentrate in silence, but I needed to keep Vicky distracted. I was starting to get an idea about what this bomb did, and it terrified me.

"Of course you know about that," Vicky muttered. "You got listening devices in her room, don't you?"

I retracted my mask just so I could glare at her. "No, Windblade called me after you ran off."

The fight immediately vanished from Vicky as her body went limp. It took me a moment to realise there were tears running down her face as she visibly tried not to sob. I felt my anger lessening, worry quickly replacing it.

"Hey, it's not that bad." I put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure we can fix it."

"No, you can't! Don't you get it? I've been mind fucking my sister for years and never known it!" I'd never seen Vicky so… distraught. This wasn't like when Amy was hurt. Back then, she'd been angry at everyone. This, this was directed inwards?

"W-what are talking about?"

"Amy loves me, or she thinks she does! My aura has been messing with her head! All this time she's been telling me to control it better and I ignored her!"

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself not to react. This really wasn't the time for this. Even so, new ideas came to mind, small devices that could be used to shield minds.

"Just… just get out of here. Forget about the bomb, it'd be better for everyone if you just let it-

My armoured hand struck her across the face. It didn't do any harm, but it did shut her up.

"Is that why you did this? Some stupid attempt at death by cape? What about your family? What about Amy? What do you think would have happened if I didn't arrive? How do you think they would have felt if you died?"
Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to calm down as I resumed prying open the ticking bomb on her chest. "I don't care how bad you think the situation is, there's always something we can do!"

She opened her mouth, but I refused to let her talk.

"/Not a word!/ Do you hear me? I'm gonna finish disarming this thing, then we're going back to my workshop where you will tell me everything. As that clear?/ Then, once Jack and I have finished building something to help her, you, me, and Amy are going to have a very long talk. Now be quiet. I need to concentrate."

Vicky stared at me in shock for a moment, then chuckled quietly. It was weak, and her smile didn't quite reach her eyes, but she looked marginally calmer.

Nodding, I turned my full attention back to the bomb.

I'd already isolated most of the important parts, like the trigger and the primer. Opening up part of my armour, I cut a pair of wires and carefully attached them to the bomb. In theory, my armour was now completing the circuit, completely bypassing Bakuda's deadman switch and signal trigger.

At four minutes twenty seconds, my hunch was proven right when Bakuda sent the detonate signal. Two seconds later, she sent the signal again, and again. I could almost picture her screaming in frustration when she realised I'd taken control of the bomb.

That done, I disconnected the teleportation components. What kind of mind combines a bomb with a teleporter? Now I just needed to carefully pry the core free. I lifted it up and was prepared to sever the last of the connections when I realised something.

No matter what I did, the core was doing to discharge. At this point, it would mostly be light and heat, but nothing my armour couldn't handle.

"Vicky, you should close your eyes," I warned.

I waited until she had screwed her eyes shut before I severed the last of the cables. As I expected, there was a bright flash that even my darkened visor hadn't completely suppressed. Blinking the last of the spots out of my eyes, I realised the ring had welded itself to the armour of my hand, which had also gone numb.

From what my armour had detected, it had been a high volt, low amp shock. Kinda like a really big static shock. Looking down at Vicky, I forced myself not to laugh.

"Right, I didn't expect that."

"Expect what?" Vicky asked, blinking rapidly as her eyes tried to adjust. Her normally luxurious blonde hair was puffed out like a dandelion.

"Oh… nothing…" I quickly snapped a couple of pictures. I knew I'd probably pay for it later, but God knows I needed a laugh.

She was still confused when Dragon arrived two minutes later. Sure, Bakuda had escaped, but I'd managed to defuse the bomb and now we had an entire workshop to examine for clues regarding her whereabouts.

Yet at the back of my mind, I could still hear the distant crash of thunder.
An: special thanks for Essex and SpiralAK of Spacebattle for doing the beta on this one. I know it wasn't easy, being over 10k words

ugh, I really wish this site allowed coloured text. words written /like this/ should be coloured blue (the colour of Taylors power/voice of primus.)
"You sure I can't just smash it?" Vicky asked, tugging at the now safe bomb that was still strapped to her.

"No, I want to study it and I can't do that if you turn it into scrap."

While Dragon, Armsmaster and some PRT officers started examining the workshop for clues, I was using my free hand to pry the radio receiver from the bomb. It had survived the discharge from the core and was still connected to my armour.

More importantly, it was still receiving a signal.

"Taylor, what are you doing?" Tess asked, making me jump. I'd been so focused on what I was doing, I hadn't noticed her approach.

"It's a receiver; I thought I'd take this back to the workshop and see if I can trace the signal."

Tess looked between me, Vicky and the nearby search effort and sighed. "Alright, that's probably for the best. We need to focus on what we are doing here anyway, but when you reach the base, I expect a full explanation for what happened. Understand?"

I wasn't looking forward to that, and from the way she cringed, neither was Vicky.

"First, let's get that device off of Miss Dandelion."

"Wait, what?!" Vicky said, finally realising what had happened and grabbing for her still fluffy hair. Tess and I just exchanged a glance and laughed.

##

After whatever Bakuda had put her through, Vicky wasn't in the best condition to fly, but neither of us really wanted to trouble the PRT for a ride. Especially when we found Bakuda had slowed Armsmaster and Dragon down by triggering a bomb in a police station.

Instead, we chose to fly slowly, taking it easy in case Vicky needed to stop. The long flight gave me plenty of time to think, about what had happened and what I'd done wrong.

It had been stupid of me to go rushing in like that. I should have called for backup or waited for an Autobot. Soundwave could have hacked her control signal, Laserbeak could have followed her when she escaped.

*What's that saying about hindsight?*

Still, there was no point working myself up about it. Yes, I'd screwed up but the important thing was to learn from it. Didn't mean I had to be happy about it though.

Storming into my workshop, with Vicky trailing close behind, I ran into my next problem for the night. My left gauntlet was welded closed and Wheeljack was forced to cut my still numb hand free before I could get out of my armour.
That done, I handed him the receiver and took Vicky upstairs to the medical room, where First Aid was waiting to examine us both.

He hummed quietly to himself as he turned my hand over, gently poking it with a needle, without breaking the skin. He'd already scanned Vicky and found nothing really wrong beyond elevated heart rate, signs of stress and a truly massive headache.

"The nerves don't appear to be damaged. How does it feel?"

"Tingles," I said, trying to flex my fingers, "stiff, kinda numb. Like it's fallen asleep."

"Well from what you described, it looks like your armour protected you from most of the shock. You should be fine by tomorrow. For now, please try to take it easy. Both of you. You're both lucky to be alive after a stunt like that."

"Tell that to my head," Vicky groaned, an arm over her eyes.

"What did Bakuda do to you anyway?" I knew it was possible to bring her shield down and some powers could bypass them entirely, but this was the first time I'd actually seen Vicky hurt.

"I dunno. Some sorta pain bomb."

"What about your shield?"

Vicky laughed bitterly. "Bomb-bitch nailed me with the grenade. The hit took it down, then the fucking thing exploded..." She grimaced. "It still hurts."

"Will painkillers help?"

"Well, that depends," First Aid said, scanning Vicky again, "if the lingering pain is psychosomatic, then it won't do much, but it should alleviate the headache if nothing else."

Walking over to a cabinet, he grabbed a bottle of water and some pills from a drawer. "Take two of these and call me in the morning, if the symptoms don't alleviate by then."

"Heh, thanks, doc," Vicky joked, swallowing the pills and downing the entire water bottle.

While she laid back down, I gently nudged First Aid to follow me out of the room. Outside, I opened a comm to Windblade.

*I've got Vicky. She's sore, but she'll be fine. How's Amy?*

*Inconsolable. At Rung's insistence, Ratchet sedated her. He wants to talk to Victoria as soon as possible though.*

*Alright, I'll see what I can do.* Rung had been at the hospital for a couple of days. Ratchet had taken him there just before Amy woke up for the first time. I could have someone collect him, but I'd rather he stayed at the hospital for now.

*Tell him to grab that tablet Vicky brought; he'll have to settle for telepresence for now.*

Trusting Vicky to be okay if I left her alone for a bit longer, I collected Rewind from downstairs and had him create a chatroom with video feed. Might as well get everything dealt with at once.

*Boss, you there? Looks like it's happening tonight.* Rattrap's voice came over the comm, distracting me from Vicky. He was doing some undercover work for me in the seedier part of the city.
"You sure?"

*Oh yeah, buckethead himself just walked in. Tell blondie I owe her twenty bucks.*

*Tell her yourself,* I muttered. *Arcee, you ready to head out? Insight, you online?*

*Always! Okay Rattrap, give me a video feed. You wanna watch Taylor?* Lisa chirped.

I shook my head, then remembered she couldn't see me. *Sorry, I've got another situation to deal with.*

*Oh? Oh! Ouch, yeah, don't worry, we'll handle things from here.*

I wanted to be involved, but there wasn't really anything I could do but watch. I would just have to trust them to handle it and deal with any fall out later.

Walking back into Vicky's room, I gave her bed a nudge.

"You up for that talk now?"

Groaning, Vicky sat up. "Sure… you want to do it here or in an interrogation room?"

I rolled my eyes at her. "Honestly, this isn't an interrogation. It's a discussion. Just you, me, Rung and Dragon." Actually, it was the copy of Dragon back in Canada, but no one else had to know that.

As I spoke, a wall mounted monitor switched on, showing a split screen of Dragon and Rung.

"... Fine… Whatever, where do you want me to start?"

*Wherever you think is best,* Rung suggested. Deciding to let him take the lead, I sat on the bed next to Vicky's and listened as he slowly eased the details out of her.

It wasn't a pretty picture. The Dallon household was broken. I didn't have to be a professional psychologist to know that what'd happened there had been outright toxic. The fact Vicky's aura had apparently forced Amy to love her was… sickening and I had to force myself not to react.

I couldn't imagine how Vicky was feeling. Sure, it would have been easy to blame her, but Vicky hadn't known. New Wave had never subjected its younger members to official power testing and didn't like to talk about her aura. Given the way people tended to react to Masters, I could almost understand.

This whole situation was making me feel uncomfortable. Amy had feelings for Vicky, Vicky only saw her as a sister and I had a small—shut up—crush on Amy. We were starting to sound like the characters in a bad romance story. That aside, my plan to talk to Amy about my own feelings was going to have to take a back seat, as I'm sure that was the last thing she needed right now.

At some point, I'd grabbed a discarded tablet of a nearby counter and started scribbling ideas I'd been having for most of the night now. In theory, it was a variation on Armsmasters power canceler, but on a much smaller, more focused scale.

By the time Vicky finished talking, I was almost done and she looked ready to cry.

*...Very well,* Dragon said, rubbing her forehead, *for now, I'll tell the PRT the stress of the last few days overwhelmed you, and you responded badly. You've been seen publicly reacting to defend your sister so it fits past behaviour. As for what happened between you two—*
"It's a family matter. The PRT doesn't need to know!" I said quickly.

*Taylor, I know you want to protect your friend, but if Victoria's aura has long-term effects, the PRT needs to know.*

Before the two of us could get further into an argument, Rung said gently, *Um, actually, I'm not sure her Aura is to blame.*

"W-what do you mean?" Vicky asked, her expression torn between disbelief and hope. "The way she was talking, the things she said—!"

*Yes, I know. I was there after all,* he said gently. *Still… I don't think your aura is entirely to blame. From what you have told me this evening, it is my opinion that Amy's attraction to you is the result of a number of factors. Constant exposure to your aura was not the cause, it simply compounded the issue. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say Amy was addicted to it.*

"But… Then why did she… why did she kiss me?" Her voice broke, changing pitch halfway through and taking on an almost shrill tone. Her eyes were wide, seeming almost manic in their intensity.

Poor Vicky. Right now, she was trying to find something, anything, that could provide answers.

*Victoria, mentally speaking, Amy is very fragile right now. When she woke up, she was likely dazed, confused and being exposed to your aura. As such, she acted on an impulse she would otherwise have ignored.*

*You think Miss Dallon's... Amy's case is a unique situation then? That others won't be affected in the same way?* Dragon said, her eyebrows furrowed in thought. *Could she be treated?*

*It's… difficult to say. I do feel that Amy's situation made her vulnerable and from what we know, no one else has been affected to the same extent. As for her condition, if she's willing, the incestuous feelings can certainly be treated, with time and effort. Either way, I would recommend that you find a way to block or, at the very least, minimise Amy's exposure to Victoria's power.*

"So, that's it? I can't ever go near my sister again?" Vicky said, looking at her hands in defeat.

Rolling my eyes, I got up and whacked Vicky on the shoulder. "Oh don't be so dramatic."

I handed her the tablet. "Here this should shield a person from your aura. Actually, in theory, it should stop most low-level Masters."

*Really?* Dragon said in surprise sitting up in her chair up. *How? What about more powerful ones such as the Simurgh?*

"I don't know. I wouldn't want to risk trusting it. Besides, this is only in theory. I would need more data to be certain but—" Next to me, Vicky tried to choke back a sobbing laugh and clutched the tablet tightly, web-like cracks forming on the back.

"I'll talk to you the later?" I said quietly to Dragon and pulled Vicky into a hug.

Nodding, Dragon and Rung disappeared from view, giving us some privacy.

*Taylor, you need to see this!* 

I let out a small growl of frustration at Wheeljack's worried voice on the intercom and Vicky laughed
quietly next to me. It was weak, but at least she was laughing again.

"Alright, I'm on my way!" I called out and gave Vicky a questioning look. "You coming?"

She gave me a wan smile. "You go ahead, I need to wash up first."

She did look like she needed it. Her hair was a mess and even the light amount of makeup she usually wore was ruined. She'd been in her normal clothes when she'd gone after Bakuda and they were now covered in a layer of grime.

"There's a shower down the hall. Plus, you left one of your costumes here—I'll have someone bring it up. It's not proper clothes, I know, but I don't think anything of mine will fit you."

"That's alright, thanks."

Leaving her to get cleaned up, I hurried off to see what Wheeljack wanted.

##

"Alright, I'm here, what's the problem?" I said as I walked onto the main floor.

Wheeljack held up a CD. "Some guy in ABB colours just stuck this on our door. I had the defenses stun him. He's tied up outside until the cops arrive."

The 'defenses' as Jack called them were a collection of turrets and shield units setup around the perimeter of the workshop and were capable of firing both lethal and nonlethal ammunition. Most of the turrets were derivatives on the Null-Ray technology. But some of them could be outright mean, like the turret that was currently manhandling the ABB guy on the video feed. A pair of mechanical arms were holding him tightly in place while irritating piano music—the kind you heard in elevators—played.

I smirked at the footage. It was funny and I was so gonna upload it to PHO later, but there were more important things to think about for now.

"So, what's on the CD?"

"Don't know, we were waiting for you to get here before watching it. I've had Teletraan create a virtual system, just in case of viruses and—"

*Boss? The ABB just crashed the party!* Rattrap said suddenly.

"What's going on?"

*Surely not another fight.*

*I'm an ABB guy just walked in a put a laptop on the table, looks like he's playing a message.*

I looked at the CD Jack was holding and quickly snatched it from his hands and loaded it into Teletraan. It took a few moments to read the CD and as I expected, it turned out to be a video file.

I hit the play button and the screen showed a view of the city. From the height and position of the docks in the distance, I guessed it had been filmed on top of a highrise in the northside.

"Is this what you want?" A man's voice asked nervously.

"Just hold the fucking camera," Bakuda growled from her position, somewhere to the right of the shot.
Walking into view, she held her grenade launcher in her hand and casually slung it over her back, using a strap to hold it in place. Her long red coat billowed in the wind, with the lights of the city behind her. The eyes of her mask practically glowed and the filter flattened her voice to a dull, mechanical monotone.

In all honesty, if it had been anyone else, the effect would have looked cool or even intimidating. As it was, I was too pissed with her to think of her as anything more than a moody teen trying too hard to act cool and edgy.

"I'll make this easy for you," Bakuda said, looking directly at the camera. "For those who don't yet know, my name is Bakuda and I run the ABB now. As for Lung? He's dead. I killed him. I know the Protectorate has his body, even if they won't admit it." She snorted

"But of course, killing the overgrown lizard apparently isn't enough. See, while I inherited the ABB, I also got Lung's enemies. So, I asked myself, what can I do to you that's going to convince you to leave me the fuck alone?

She clapped her hands together in what I assumed was faux cheer. "Then I remembered the most important thing Lung ever taught me. See, he was a terrible leader, nothing more than a thug. But he understood fear. People are only truly loyal to someone if they are terrified of them. Enough fear and the world will step outta your way as you pass. Isn't that right? I said, isn't that right!?"

"Y-yes ma'am!" the camera man said quickly, making the camera shake slightly.

"Good. Now, here's a little demonstration I've arranged." She jerked her head sideways and the camera panned right, focusing on a pair of men in Empire colours, with a few ABB men keeping them hemmed in. Both were covered in blood and bruises and the smaller of the two swayed slightly on his feet.

"Now," Bakuda said from off screen, "this is Ryan and Cole. Prospective skinheads who thought they could get away with beating the shit outta my people. Both of them have small bombs planted inside of them."

A handgun was thrown into view and clattered to the ground in front of them.

"Here's the deal. One of you shoots the other. Do it, and I'll let the winner leave."

Both men looked at the gun, then each other.

"Go to hell chink!" the smaller one growled. The taller guy dove forwards instead, snatching up the gun and pointing it towards his 'friend'.

I looked away quickly, not wanting to watch another murder. I couldn't stop myself from flinching at the sound of gunfire. I kept telling myself that this video had to be hours old, these people were already long dead and there was nothing I could have done for either of them. It didn't help.

I could hear Bakuda laughing, as the man demanded to be set free. I looked back up into to see him die. Bakuda didn't say anything, he just died. Metal burst out of his body, rooting him in place as it grew, like a twisted parody of a tree.

I'd seen that effect before. That was how Clockblocker had nearly died.

Bakuda was still laughing when the camera, trembling so much I was surprised it hadn't been dropped, turned back to her. Taking a deep breath, she got herself under control.
"Do I have your attention now? Leave. Me. The fuck. Alone. Oh! And just in case someone has the frankly *brilliant* idea of trying to kill me? I've planted bombs like this all over the city! In buildings, in schools, in people! If anything happens to me, they go off. All of them."

Even through the voice filter, I could picture the smirk on her face as the video cut out.

"Taylor...?" Jack said quietly. "What do we do?"

"We—" Before I could say anything else, there was a loud explosion and alarms went off across the base. The air was filled with the sounds of voices shouting to be heard.

"What was that!?"

"Warning: attack detected!"

"Damage report!"

"Taylor! What was that!"

*Boss! Help!*

"It wasn't us!"

"QUIET!" Rhinox roared, loud enough to rattle my bones and everyone fell silent.

"Thank you," I said, giving him a grateful nod. "Now, can someone get me a damage report?"

"Taylor! What happened?" Vicky had come into the room just as the alarms had sounded.

"That's what I'm trying to find out! Rattrap! You okay?"

While Jack called up a holographic terminal, I started typing on Teletraan.

*Yeah… I'm fine… just, y'know, in need of an oil change.*

"Alright, get to Arcee. Arcee? The moment you have Rattrap, get back here!"

*I've got a report!* Jack called out, his fins flashing quickly, showing his unease. "Looks like bombs went off all over the city. One of them was right outside the base but our shields stopped it."

Bringing up the information on Teletraan, I also accessed the CCTV system. Outside the base was a large tower of green crystal.

"Taylor! Are you okay?" Dragons face appeared on the screen. The connection was poor, however, small glitches and stutters appearing on the feed.

"I'm u…hurt, but Bakuda's crystal towers have appeared all over the city… communications are being affected but I'm trying to fix it. I've been called to the P—in-HQ. Stay in the work—top!"

"The hospitals! Is Amy okay?" Vicky said, rushing over to me.

Just to be safe, I sent out a status ping to all of my bots, along with recall orders. Ratchet was the first to signal back, stating he—and Amy—were fine, but he wasn't leaving the hospital until the danger had passed.
"They're fine," I told Vicky, "it looks like even Bakuda's not stupid enough to hit another hospital."

This is getting ridiculous! "Jack, any luck with that receiver?"

"I don't know! I gave it to Soundwave!"

I looked over to Soundwave, who hadn't so much as flinched when the bombs went off.

"Any luck?"

"Receiver codes: decrypted. Origin of transmission: impossible to determine."

"Why?"

Calling up a terminal, he sent the data to Teletraan. A map of the city appeared along with nearly a hundred little red dots.

"Markers show all signal repeaters within detection range before interference was established."

"What did he say?" Vicky said, giving him a sidelong look.

"Bakuda is transmitting a signal across the entire city. I'm guessing she's using the system to send her deadman signal and to trigger the bombs."

"That's great, can't you just trace it?"

"No, she's got the signal bouncing through so many repeaters that it's nearly impossible to tell where the signal starts… But maybe if I…" I trailed off as the idea took shape.

"Maybe if you what? Taylor?" Vicky asked in confusion.

Not answering her, I typed a command into Teletran. A large number of Insecticons came online, filtering out of storage and landing on a mostly clear workbench. Calling up a hologram, I started making notes for what I needed to change. It was only a few minor tweaks, so it should only take a few minutes each.

"Perceptor, Rhinox!" I ordered. "Can you follow this? We need to change as many of them as possible! Jack, I need you to get my armour fixed as quickly as possible."

"Yeesh, need me to fix the crack of dawn while I'm at it?" he grumbled, but I could hear the amusement in his voice so I just smiled.

"Thanks, Jack."

Grabbing some tools and an Insecticon, I popped the shell open and began working. Next to me, Rhinox and Perceptor quickly started to help. Vicky muttered something about 'tinkers', and took a seat in mid air. I know I said I would help her, but stopping Bakuda would have to take priority.

"Soundwave, can you start uploading coordinates for the repeaters? I'm going to need to start teleporting Insecticons to them as soon as they're ready."

"Teleporter is non-functional. High levels of electromagnetic interference are preventing targeting lock."

What's the odds Bakuda knew that would happen?
"Damn, alright, fine. Looks like I'm going to have to do it the hard way."

"Do what?" Vicky said with an irritated huff. "What are you doing anyway?"

Given everything else she'd been with today, I decided it would be best if I tried to explain.

"I'm reconfiguring these Insecticons so they can take control of Bakuda's repeaters. If we can control enough of them, I can lock her out of her own system. She won't be able to trigger any bombs and maybe I'll be able to find where she's hiding. But since the teleporter is down, I'm going to have to carry the Insecticons there myself."

"... What about me?" she offered. "I can fly just as fast as you; the two of us should be able to get it done faster."

She was right. What's more, if I got Cyclonus and Arcee to help, I could get the job done even faster.

"Okay, fine."

"Here, this one's done," Wyvern said, placing an Insecticon off the side. She'd been hanging around the edge of the room and I'd been so busy talking to Vicky, I hadn't noticed her taking up a spot on the bench with her own tools.

"I can help. I'm an Autobot too!" she said, her expression faltering when I gave her a pointed look.

"Thanks." I gave her a soft smile—it was good to see Wyvern taking a more active role.

She smiled herself in reply before she turned back to her spot on the bench and the two of us began to work.

##

In the end, it took nearly two hours to modify enough Insecticons. Bakuda had more than a hundred repeaters and we needed to control at least ninety percent of them for this to work.

Dropping out the sky, I landed on a roof and started scanning the area. Eventually, I found the repeater hidden underneath an old air conditioning unit. Pulling an Insecticon from subspace, I held it close to the device.

Its little antenna wiggled for a minute, then it flew off my hand and onto the repeater. Small cutters built into its 'mouth' made a hole big enough for it to fit through. Forcing its way into the casing, it clamped down onto the circuitry inside.

On my HUD, the device glowed blue, showing it was now under my control. Sighing in relief, I took off and headed for the next one.

The plan was actually fairly simple. I, Arcee, Glory Girl and Cyclonus were working our way outwards from the base in a spiral. Each of us carried a supply of Insecticons and at each repeater, we would stop and deposit one.

Once we had enough of the system under our control, we could duplicate Bakuda's signal, stopping her from sending a detonate command, and disabling her deadman switch. What's more, by monitoring the lag on the signal, we could identify where it was coming from.

*One down, a million more to go,* Glory Girl said with a sigh. She had been supplied with a visor, similar to Amy's. Along with the standard communications packet, it also had a HUD that would
highlight the repeaters and send a live video feed back to Teletraan. *You're sure Bakuda won't notice us?*

"We should be fine," I said as I flew across the city. "This entire system looks ad-hoc, so I doubt Bakuda's had time to really secure any of it. Plus, she's got so much redundancy here that any glitches caused by our interference will be impossible to notice."

That wasn't entirely true. If Bakuda had access to any really advanced tech or a Thinker, this would be a lot harder. Thing was, all of the repeaters I'd found so far were just off the shelf equipment. It had all clearly been modified, but it was still mundane tech.

"Soundwave, status check?" To help track and control the system, I'd been forced to hook him directly into Teletraan. The connection was simple and safe enough, but I still found myself worrying about it. That was a lot of data he was trying to process after all.

*Current status: optimal. Signal duplication: successful, current level of control, thirty percent.* And that was probably all I was going to get out of him.

*He's fine. His system is coping with the influx of data surprisingly well,* First Aid said. I had him monitoring Soundwave while Jack finished up some other projects.

*Good, let me know if anything changes.* With that, I turned my attention back to the task at hand.

##

After nearly an hour of placing—heh—bugs, and a further thirty minutes of tests, we finally had an answer.

The signal was originating from two separate locations at opposite ends of the city. One to the north, the other south. From there, it was sent on to the other repeaters.

I'd gathered everyone back in the base while we waited for the results to compile and even Dragon was present via remote connection to Teletraan.

"Okay, so odds are, Bakuda is in one of these locations. The problem is, which one?"

"At this point, I don't think it matters," Dragon said, her voice cold, business-like. "A kill order has been issued for Bakuda. The PRT hasn't announced it because of her threat, but now that it has been neutralised, they are getting ready to move. Especially now you have given us a possible location."

"If you need extra numbers, I can—"

"I'm sorry, but no." Dragon's voice was still calm, but her avatar refused to look directly at me. "Taylor, this isn't going to be like your fight with Uber and Leet, or the Merchants. The PRT is not planning on taking Bakuda alive. I don't want you part of that."

"But!" I clenched my fists in frustration. All this effort to find Bakuda, and now I was being told I couldn't.

"Taylor, please. Let the Protectorate handle this." She gave me a sad smile. "Don't make me order you."

Huffing, I tried not to chuckle. It was something of a private joke between us; if Dragon ever gave me a direct order, I would obey it. On the condition that Dragon never actually gave me an order.
I suppose I could see where she was coming from. This was likely to be messy; Bakuda was insane and clearly didn't care about hurting people. So, of course the PRT was planning to go in guns ready.

"... Alright... fine..." I ground out. To be honest, I wasn't sure I could kill anyone, even Bakuda. Catch her, sure. Beat the crap out of her? No problem. But I wasn't ready to kill anyone yet.

"Thank you. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to brief Armsmaster."

Dragon vanished and I kicked Teletraan's base in an effort to vent my frustration.

"Well, that sucks," Vicky muttered.

"Yeah, but I guess that's life."

"You think this is going to be like the Merchants?" Vicky asked while I leaned back against a work bench. In front of me, the screen showed a map of Brockton Bay and the relay locations. Something about it bugged me, but I couldn't think what.

"Hopefully not." I snorted. "Or did you forget about Vista getting shot?"

"Ouch, good point."

"No, they will probably make two teams. At least one heavy hitter per team, which would mean Dragon or Armsmaster in lead with the rest split between them. Maybe some PRT officers for backup. With the shields I gave them, they could easily overpower a large ABB force. After that, it's all a matter of who gets to Bakuda first."

Sighing, I shook my head, "Come on, it'll probably take the PRT half an hour to mobilize and get into position. We can listen in when they attack, but until then, we might as well get those scans I need for that aura blocking device."

Grabbing some equipment, I was just wiring Vicky up to Teletraan when my mind made the connection.

Swearing loudly, I turned and ran back across the workshop, ignoring Vicky's shouts and calling up the map again.

"Taylor, what's going on?" Vicky had followed after me, trailing wires as she moved.

"See this?" I pointed at the two signal origin points.

"Yeah, and?"

"I thought she had positioned them to get the best coverage possible, one at each end of the city." Tapping another button, I drew two lines, one horizontal, one vertical, forming a cross. Where they met was the exact center of the city. "But I was wrong, see?"

The signal points laid outside of the center of the cross, closer to the eastern edge of the city.

"Oookay? So little miss mad bomber screwed up, what's that got to do with anything?... Have you been drinking Amy's coffee again? 'Cause you're not making much sense..."

I spared Vicky a quick dirty look but didn't stop what I was doing.

"Look, Bakuda's smart, she knows it and wants the world to know it. It's always about her, 'Look at me, look how clever I am'." I said, putting as much sarcasm into my voice as I could. "If she's going
to set up her own transmission system, especially one that can stand up to the interference she's just caused, she's not going to screw up."

"Wait… you're using her own ego against her?" Vicky said with a grin.

The smaller repeaters vanished, leaving only the origin points, then a third dot appeared on the map. This one was to the west of the city, almost exactly between the north and south transmitters and equal distance from both, the three points forming an equal triangle.

"So, she's got a third base?"

"I don't know, maybe? This is mostly guesswork. Soundwave? Can you pick up anything from that area?" He was still hooked up to Teletraan and he'd probably have to stay there until Bakuda had been dealt with.

"Negative. No transmissions detected."

"Think we should tell Dragon?" Vicky suggested.

"Yeah, it would be best if I did." I'd already gone charging into a fight without telling anyone. I wasn't in a hurry to do it again.

Knowing Dragon was busy, I opened up a line to her base in Canada.

"Dragon, you there? I think I've found another base."

Dragon's avatar appeared on screen. She looked tense, for lack of a better word. "Where?"

As I uploaded all the data I had, I explained my reasoning, making sure to mention Rung's psych profile and my own meeting with Bakuda.

"That's… certainly possible. Well spotted," Dragon admitted. "The problem is, what do we do now? If you're right and there is a third location, the Protectorate and the PRT can't spare enough people to check it out."

"What about me?" I said. "I could take a team of Autobots and check the area. It would -"

"Certainly not! Bakuda is dangerous and I'm not going to let -"

"What other choice is there?! You said it yourself, the PRT can't hit all three places. Besides, the moment the attacks start, Bakuda's going to realise I've got control of her bombs and we'll lose that advantage!"

"Taylor, that's not -"

"Look, we don't even know if there really is a base. If nothing else, let us scout ahead. We can check the area and if we do find anything, we'll keep watch until you and the Protectorate arrive!"

Letting out an aggravated sigh, Dragon rubbed her face with a hand. "Very well, but reconnaissance only! Stay out of sight, and do not do anything without my say so. Understand?"

"I promise. Besides, for all we know, there's nothing but some abandoned buildings out there."

"Just stay in contact the whole time."

Nodding, I cut the connection and took a breath. "Jack, is my armour ready?"
"Almost, just give me five more minutes."

"Wait, I'm coming too!" Vicky said quickly.

I was about to say no when I recognised the stubborn look on her face. She would probably just follow me if I said no anyway.

"Fine, but I want your word that this won't be a repeat of earlier." She began to say something, but I wasn't finished. "And if Bakuda is there, you're going to follow orders and not going to go running off on your own. This isn't about revenge, we're bringing her in alive. Understand?"

Vicky gave me a sullen look tinged with no small amount of hurt. I felt bad, but I wasn't going to budge on this. Unless I could trust her to follow orders, she wasn't coming. I'd sedate her if I had to.

"Alright, fine, I'll do as I'm told," she said between gritted teeth. When I gave her a pointed look, she growled and rolled her eyes. "Yes, I promise, no killing the bomb bitch!"

"Good, but I'd feel better if you had some more protection. Jack? What do we have in the armoury she can use?"

Vicky stood there, mouth and eyes wide in shock, then she quickly grinned and ran after Wheeljack.

Now that I'd made the decision to investigate, I felt the nervous energy I'd had since I'd gotten back bleed away, replaced by a sense of calm purpose. I didn't know if anything would be waiting for us there, but I was already preparing for the worst.

I activated an Autobot-wide comm line. "Protectobots, Cyclonus, Arcee, Rhinox, fuel up and meet me by the main doors. We're going to investigate a possible ABB hide-out!"

Chapter End Notes

AN: yeah, okay. I decided to split the chapter. It's been far too long since I posted anything and there's enough going on that keeping it all in one piece makes it feel cluttered. Next chapter ends the arc, I promise.

Edit: adjusted the ending slightly.
Half an hour after leaving the base, I was outside the city, and kneeling in the dirt behind a small copse that overlooked an old power plant. There was only one road leading to it and it sloped gently downwards, giving us the height advantage.

The plant had been built years ago, burning coal to supply Brockton Bay with power. Eventually rising operating costs, the poor economy and growing coal prices had forced it to close down. Most of the city's power now came from a larger plant further north, closer to Boston.

It was a long squat building that almost looked like a fort. It had four tall outer walls, with tower-like structures topped by large chimneys at each corner. The main building's roof was low, only two or three stories high.

The plant was orientated to point towards Brockton Bay with the shorter 'front' facing the city. Two smaller buildings jutted out from the sides, with a third a short distance away, joined by a covered walkway on the plant's southern side.

I'd had Teletraan pull up as much information on the place as I could. Once upon a time, it had been located well outside the city limits, but the inevitable urban sprawl slowly encroached and left it just beyond the city's westernmost edge.

Despite being closed for years, I could see men patrolling the perimeter. Most of the guards were Asian, with a few white people mixed in.

A power plant wasn't a bad place to set up a workshop. The older ones tended to be over-engineered, with heavily reinforced walls and lots of redundancies. What's more, no one would think twice about the armed guards outside.

Putting aside some idle ideas for converting and upgrading the building, I focused on the data feed Laserbeak was sending me. He was circling silently overhead, his dark form nearly invisible in the night sky. His thermal camera wasn't able to pick up anything inside the building as the walls were too thick and the roof had been lined with something that was blocking the scanner, but he had spotted plenty of people outside.

I tapped my radio. "Dragon, you seeing this?" There was none of Bakuda's green crystal in the area, so I was able to transmit a live feed to her in Canada as her real body was busy helping the PRT.

*Yes. Stay out of sight for now, the Protectorate is about to attack the other locations. Let me know if anything changes.*

After I cut the feed, I stared up at the sky. "You'd think with so many flying capes in the city, people would learn to look up," I muttered.

"Makes sense to me," Arcee said, kneeling next to me and squinting into the distance. "Humans never had to worry about airborne predators, after all." The rest of the Autobots were scattered nearby, hiding in the shadows of the small band of trees and overgrown grass that separated the plant from the rest of the city.

"Don't complain, it makes sneaking up on people easy," Glory Girl said, having finished calling her
mom. She was busy fiddling with the gauntlets she'd been given.

Jack had really gone above and beyond when he took her to our armoury. He'd given Vicky a pair of mechanical, elbow-length gauntlets which he'd designed a while back while he was bored. The right arm had a built in gun that fired slam rounds, which were Jack's take on beanbag rounds. The ammo was loaded via a highly specialised teleporter. He'd gotten the idea and the specs from a New York Ward.

The idea was to give capes like Vicky a ranged option. Both gauntlets had high powered tasers built into the knuckles for close quarters combat and the left one had a hard-light shield emitter built into the forearm, letting Vicky create a large shield when needed.

Aside from the extra firepower, he'd also given her a personal force field unit that she was currently wearing like a belt and an updated version of Amy's visor.

"What did your mom say?" Sure, it would have been trivial to listen in on her conversation, but that would have been rude.

"She's pissed at me for running off and for following you out here. And I'm probably grounded for life. But that's nothing new." Vicky shrugged, giving me a wan smile. "She doesn't know about what happened between me and Amy. Not sure if I should tell her or not…"

"I'd probably ask Rung about that one," I said. I had no idea how to resolve that particular mess.

Vicky shrugged again. "Don't worry, I'll deal. Hey! Think you could paint these gold?" she asked, gesturing to her new equipment while adjusting the positioning of the gauntlet.

I suppose it wouldn't hurt to let her keep it all, and gold is part of her colour-scheme.

Arcee rolled her eyes. "Is this really the time to be accessorising?"

"Don't mind her," Insight said, stepping between them. "It's mostly nerves talking. You know, I'm starting to see why Tinkers like power armour so much. This is kind of fun."

Lisa had found an interesting way to be present tonight. It was still too risky for her to leave the base, so she was currently using the black flying saucer 'Leet-bot' I'd 'confiscated'. Wyvern had been working on it in her spare time.

The original pilot had crashed because she lacked Tinker or Thinker powers, which made controlling it nearly impossible. Wyvern had managed to perfect the interface and add a VI to help control it while it was in the air. Beyond the control system, Wyvern had also smoothened out the transformation, upgraded as much of the armour and electronics as she could and adding functional weaponry in the form of dual Null-Rays.

Between Vicky and Lisa, Cyclonus, Arcee, Warpath, and Rhinox, I was fairly sure we could take on a small army without too much trouble.

"I'm not nervous!" Vicky said a little too quickly.

"Really? You should be, this is the Tinker that crippled your sister and very nearly killed you." My HUD was giving me a live feed to Lisa's control booth so I could see the smirk on her real face.

"You're pretty cocky for a girl who's not actually here!"

"Put it in neutral!" I snapped. The last thing I needed was those two arguing. "Now, if you're done
acting like children, we should probably pull back a bit. I doubt anyone could see us from this distance, but I'd rather not take the chance."

"Whatever. You've been spending too much time with the Autobots," Vicky muttered, walking away.

*Insight,* I said quietly, over a private line so Vicky wouldn't hear me. *I know you're trying to distract Vicky, but that probably isn't the best way to go about it.*

Lisa shrugged. *Yeah, I know. But it worked, didn't it? I'll apologise once everything's done.*

"You sure they're down there, or are we just spying on some security guards?" Vicky huffed, unaware of our conversation.

"No. Security guards don't normally have miniguns. Even if it's not Bakuda, something is going on down there."

I brought up a hologram of the building so everyone could see it on their displays and overlaid it with Laserbeak's footage. There were nearly a dozen people down there, some standing still, others patrolling. Near the front of the building were a number of sandbag walls and I highlighted the two that had the miniguns. One was right at the front and centered on the single road leading into the building. The other was mounted on the roof.

"Insight, what do you think?"

"I think Bakuda's here, but you heard the boss. Recon only."

"Yeah… but maybe I can get some more information…"

Pulling a tube of Insecticons from subspace, I called Laserbeak back, handed the tube to him, and sent him off again. As he flew back over the plant, the tube opened and three dozen little Insecticons emerged.

Scattering in the air, they used their wings to guide themselves into positions all over the plant, sneaking inside through cracks in walls and broken windows.

There wasn't much for them to see. The upper levels were mostly clear, just dark offices and miles of pipes. I had them slowly work their way downwards, but it would take time for them to navigate the building. If nothing else, I could use them to form relay chains to maintain coms while we were inside.

I didn't like sitting here like this, but I'd promised. Any minute now, if she was here, Bakuda would find out about the attacks and either retaliate or run. If she ran, maybe we could intercept her.

Spotting movement by the plant, I zoomed in and saw the gates opening while a large box truck pulled out.

"Everyone stay down, there's a truck coming our way."

"Supply run, men going to a fight, or just a patrol?" Hot Spot said, standing next to me and watching the plant in the distance.

Insight kneeled next to me. "Supply run, most likely. I don't think Bakuda can spare enough people for another fight and there no point patrolling this far out."
"I thought the ABB had plenty of people?" Vicky landed close by, moving further into the shadows of the trees so she couldn't be seen from the road.

"Bakuda's not a good leader. The ABB are probably bleeding members now that Lung's dead. All the fighting is likely costing her more men than she can replace. Not to mention the police and PRT are rounding up anyone stupid enough to be seen in ABB colours."

/A cornered animal./

"If she's really lacking manpower, that's going to make her desperate. She'll be more likely to take risks." I really didn't like that train of thought. If Bakuda really felt trapped, how far would she go?

"So what's the plan?" Hot Spot asked. "We just going to hide here until the PRT arrives?"

"No, I've got a better idea. Follow me!" I moved back, further into the tree line. The road from the power station took a sharp right a little way into the trees, hiding it from view.

Sizing up a likely tree, I pointed Rhinox and Glory Girl towards it. "Think you two could knock down that tree? We need to be quick, that truck will be here any minute! Put it across the road here."

Testing his weight against the tree, Rhinox nodded to himself before driving a fist deep into one side. The wood splintered and the tree groaned, but it didn't fall. "Glory Girl, I'll push, you go up and catch the top."

He waited for her to get into position before bracing himself against the base and pushing. The damaged trunk began to sway and groan before finally giving way with a mighty crack. Up in the air, Glory Girl caught the top of the tree and guided it down, setting it across the road.

While they were doing that, I pulled a small metal disk from subspace and placed it on the ground. It was an EMP mine with variable output so I could shut down the truck and any devices inside without doing any permanent damage. Though I idly hoped no one in the oncoming truck had a pacemaker.

"Okay, everyone split up into two groups and hide amongst the trees. When the engine dies, move in! Warpath, I want you behind the truck, just in case anyone is riding in the back!"

I moved into the tree line with Arcee, the Protectobots, and Insight. Meanwhile Arcee, Rhinox, Cyclonus, and Glory Girl took up positions on the other side of the road.

We had just gotten out of sight when the truck rounded the curve. I could see two people sitting up front and thermal scans showed the back to be empty. The truck was old and battered with an engine so noisy I could have heard it from the city. It rattled to a stop just short of the fallen tree. The moment it did I triggered the EMP, killing the engine.

Warpath burst through the bushes, sliding to a stop in vehicle mode and aiming his cannon at the back doors. Anyone trying to jump out was going to have a really bad day. Glory Girl reached the truck before I did, ripping the driver's door off with one hand and hauling the stunned driver out with the other.

On the other side, I pulled open the door with a little less force and aimed my Null-Ray at the passenger. He quickly held his hands up in surrender as Arcee pull him out. We frogmarched him to the front of the truck, bound his arms and forced him to sit down.

Glory Girl dropped her prisoner a bit more roughly, but he was quickly tied up alongside his partner.
Part of me wondered what we looked like to them. It was a cloudy night and there were no streetlights on this stretch of road. Without the truck's headlights, the only real light source came from the glowing lights and eyes of the Autobots and my armour.

With both men tied up, I considered how best to get information from them. We didn't have much time and I didn't know much about torture, even if I could bring myself to do something like that. Just thinking about everything that had happened so far made me want to pound the nearest ABB guy's face in. But I couldn't. We had to be better than them. If we started down that route, where would it stop? I'd just have to rely on intimidation and lie detectors.

I forced both men to kneel a few feet in front of their truck and stood behind them.

"Cyclonus, stand in front of them and look scary," I said over my radio.

With his glowing red eyes, slightly demonic chassis shape, and stern expression, he was the most fierce looking of my Autobots. From the way the prisoners' heart rates jumped, I had to guess it was working.

"I'll get straight to the point," I did my best to sound calmer than I felt. "The ABB is finished. The PRT is rounding up your friends, and when they're done, Bakuda's next. It'll be easier for you both if you cooperate now, otherwise we may have to resort to less gentle methods."

Cyclonus slowly drew his sword and drove it effortlessly into the ground.

The driver was the first to speak.

"Fuck you!" He fought against the zip ties that held his wrists and ankles and tried to rise, but I pushed him back down. "You can't do shit and you know it! When Bakuda realises you're here, she's gonna turn you inside out!"

Glory Girl stormed forwards, but Rhinox grabbed her arm, giving her a warning look. Even so, I felt her aura wash over me as a wave of adoration. The ABB men shivered and tried to look around, their heart rates spiking even higher.

"Vicky! Aura!" I hissed, forcing myself to ignore it.

Vicky paled, like she'd been slapped. Taking a step back, she screwed her face up in concentration and I felt the effect fade to a background hum.

"Is that what you think?" Cyclonus said, keeping the prisoners from noticing our discussion. "Bakuda has been marked for death. Until she's dealt with, no one will care what happens to her servants."

The red glow of his eyes reflected off his sword as he leaned forward, looming over the prisoners.

Cyclonus wasn't one for theatrics, but he could certainly get a point across.

"Go ahead," the driver sneered. "You don't scare me!" He was lying. Even if he wasn't trembling, between my own lie detector and Insight, it was easy to see past the bravado.

"Why don't you just sho-"

"Oh for the love of god! Shut up!" the other prisoner, the guy who had been in the passenger seat, cried. "That bitch is crazy! Do you even remember what she did to Akio? She melted him! Just because she wanted to test her fucking bomb!"
The driver glared at him, but the passenger ignored him and tried to turn his head and look at me. "Listen, you've got to stop her! She's building a fucking nuke!"

Grabbing his shoulder, I twisted him around so I could see his face. "What?!" I was probably hurting him, but I was too preoccupied to care.

"She's building a nuke, a really big one. We were on our way to get more parts."

He hissed as my grip on his shoulder tightened. Building nuclear weapons wasn't hard, but there were rules, things a tinker couldn't do. A tinker that built self-replicating technology, nuclear or wide-scale biological or chemical weapons, quickly ended up dead or caged.

"How? And where did she get the materials?"

"You're the tinker, you tell me," the passenger said with a shrug. "Lung asked her to build it. He gave her a couple of big metal cases and told her to build something that would keep the PRT and the Empire off his back. Dunno where he got the shit from, though."

Letting him go, I moved back towards the tree line and tapped my radio.

"Dragon, did you hear that?" Tess and Dragon herself were busy, but the copy in Canada was still on the line.

*Yes, I did. I'm passing the information along now but...* Her digital avatar appeared on my screen. Her hair was messy and there were bags under her eyes. *The assault on Bakuda's other bases have hit heavy resistance. We've lost contact with the northern assault team and the southern location turned out to be an Empire safe house. PRT forces there are currently engaging Menja. To make matters worse, the Empire is trying to free Hookwolf!*  

"So... we're on our own?"

*Yes. I'm sorry Taylor, I don't want to ask this of you, but if Bakuda really is working on nuclear weapons, then she needs to be stopped immediately. I've got suits flying in now, but it's going to take a while to reach you and-*

"It's alright, I understand," I said thickly. I couldn't say I was happy with this; charging head first into a tinker workshop wasn't a good idea to begin with, and Bakuda was clearly insane. But so many people could die if I didn't that I didn't dare say no.

I'd come out here hoping for a chance to capture Bakuda, but it suddenly dawned on me how many lives I was responsible for. If it was just my life on the line, I wouldn't even hesitate. But if I did this, Glory Girl and my Autobots would follow me.

"I know I'm not really here, so it probably doesn't count for much, but I'm with you," Insight said suddenly, making me jump. I hadn't even realised she'd been watching me.

"I take it we're going in?" Arcee crossed her arms. "If so, I'm in. We all are, right?"

One by one, all my Autobots nodded. Glory Girl snorted. "Like I'd let you do this without me."

The atmosphere shifted. Suddenly, we weren't just a group of friends hiding out in the woods, but a team ready to do what was needed. With that change, that same calmness flowed through me, easing my nerves and letting me think clearly.

"Alright, but I'm not charging in blind."
Walking over to the prisoners, I focused my attention on the passenger. "What defenses does Bakuda have?"

The driver hurled abuse at both of us, but he was ignored.

"Guns, lots of them," the passenger said. "There's a couple of really big ones on the wall and a minefield around the building and on the road."

"Where are the mines?"

"I don't know. I never saw them being planted. Bakuda gave us this device that shuts the mines off, but I don't know how it works. It's in the truck."

Insight walked over to the truck and stuck her head inside.

"Found it!" she called out. "Looks like it's wired into the truck and needs a key code to activate!"

When I asked the passenger for the code, he shook his head. "I-I don't know it, Dae never told me."

I looked over to the sneering driver.

"Go ahead, try and get it out of me, I dare you."

"It's 1-6-7-1-9-4-5," Insight said and the driver's face fell.

"You're not too bright, are you?" I said with a chuckle. Even if Lisa hadn't guessed the code, Rhinox and I could probably have cracked it in a few minutes. "Glory Girl, Rhinox, can you clear the road? Just in case the PRT is able to send backup. Cyclonus, put the prisoners somewhere safe."

"So what now?" Hot Spot asked, walking out of the tree line. "We pull that device out of the truck and go charging up the road to catch them off guard?"

Insight snorted and I shook my head. "No, I think we're going to need something more subtle…"

"Yeah… subtle… Some of us aren't exactly built for subtlety," Arcee said, nudging Rhinox with her elbow.

Chuckling quietly, he shook his head. "I can be subtle."

"Crusader would probably disagree."

I was only half listening to their banter. I was more focused on how to reach the plant without getting shot to pieces. Slowly, I smiled. Okay, it wasn't going to be subtle, but I was sure it would look cool.

"Okay, I've got an idea…"

##

His name was Kazundo and right now, he was bored. Sitting in the old guard hut next to the gates was certainly not his idea of a good time. Not that he had much choice. Boss Bitch—not that he'd ever say that name out loud—wanted the little wooden booth manned at all times and the area constantly patrolled.

Shivering a bit in the cool evening air, he pulled a cigarette from his jacket and lit it. Up ahead in the distance, the truck passed the line of trees and vanished from sight. It had been sent on another supply run. Seemed like Boss Bitch always needed some piece of crap or another from the city.
Kazundo wasn't sure where she expected them to get those supplies from, though. None of the usual places in the city would deal with them anymore, and most of Lung's contacts had vanished when he died.

"Hey." A man knocked on the side of the booth and leaned through the door. He was a stocky guy with scars on his face who'd introduced himself once as Tarou. "You heard what happened yet?"

Kazundo shrugged. Even when Lung was still alive, the gang could be a viper's nest of old grudges and backroom deals. His death hadn't changed that; if anything, it had made it worse.

Bakuda either hadn't noticed or didn't care, but old rivalries were starting to surface as people vied for position under Bakuda or tried to break away altogether. At least two lieutenants had outright vanished, taking a dozen people each with them and reforming their old gangs, and the conscripts just weren't filling the gaps.

For those who remained, plans were quickly being made. Bakuda was a dead bitch walking and she didn't even know it. Sooner or later someone was going to take a shot at her, regardless of the consequences. At that point it would be a fight to see who came out on top.

With all these deals and alliances, admitting to knowing too little—or worse, too much—could be a death sentence.

That said... "Anyone ever tell you—" Kazundo started to say.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I sound like Lung. Met the guy once, can't hear it myself."

Smirking, Kazundo offered him a cigarette and his temperamental lighter as a distraction. As Tarou struggled to make it work, Kazundo discreetly tried to spot any blood, open wounds, or other signs of implanted bombs.

That he couldn't see any meant the guy probably wasn't one of Boss Bitch's conscripts and was likely safe to talk to. For a limited definition of safe, anyway.

"You were saying?"

"Hmm?" Tarou looked up from his lighter. "Oh yeah. Apparently, the heroes got a little too close earlier. They almost caught the boss and she had to abandon a workshop. Seo-yeon was there, said the boss was shaking when they got away."

"Seo-yeon needs to keep her mouth shut," Kazundo warned. Spreading tales like that was a quick way to die. Still, it certainly explained the foul mood Boss Bitch had been in when she had arrived earlier, and why she felt the need for so many people on guard.

"Yeah, that's what I said, but you know what she's like."

Actually, Kazundo didn't. Even now, the ABB was large enough that he'd never met the woman, but Kazundo knew better than to admit that. For all he knew, Seo-yeon was one of those planning to replace the bitch and it wouldn't do to be on her bad side.

"Yeah, I suppose—" Before he could finish, the delivery van came roaring down the road, lights flashing and horn blaring.

"What the hell?" Tarou said, turning towards the noise. "What thefuck are they doing back here?"

"Dunno, something must be wrong." Pushing him out of the way, Kazundo stuck his head out of the...
hut and started shouting. "Hey! Something's wrong! Everyone get ready and someone tell the boss!"

The others had already realised something was up and were starting to run. One guy dived behind the nearby sandbag wall, flipping the power switch on the minigun they'd set up.

Going back into the hut, Kazundo grabbed his binoculars and brought them up to his face. The truck's high beams were on, blinding him and keeping him from seeing into the cab.

"Think it's a trick?" Tarou asked, pulling his pistol from the waist of his pants.

"We'll find out in a minute, they're about to reach the mines!" If someone had been stupid enough to steal the truck, they were dead. The entire road was lined with mines. Kazundo had watched the other guys place as many as they could, reaching all the way back to the fence.

The truck blew past the first row of mines without triggering them. Whoever was driving must have known the code.

"They're not slowing down!" Tarou bellowed, pushing his way out of the booth and bolting for stronger cover.

"Shoot! Shoot!" Kazundo screamed at the minigunner next to him. The weapon spun up to speed with a whine, the sound of the gun almost deafening as it fired. Around them, others joined in with any gun they had in hand.

Bullets rained down and pummeled the truck, but it kept on coming, plowing through the gate. The minigunner let go of his gun and threw himself sideways as the ruined vehicle slammed into the sandbag wall, crushing the weapon under its weight.

Hitting the wall sent the truck into a slide, tipping it onto its side with a crash and the screeching of metal. It had barely stopped moving when Glory Girl burst through the thin metal side of the trailer that was now facing the sky.

Those quicker to react opened fire the moment they saw her -wasting what little ammo they had left- and were therefore unprepared when Matrix smashed her way through what had been the trailer's roof.

"Autobots, roll out!" she screamed as she opened fire.

##

My head was still ringing from the crash when Vicky took off. I quickly shook my head. I didn't have time to rest—I could hear gunfire coming from outside and the bark of Glory Girl's new gauntlets.

"Real smooth," Insight muttered. She was pinned against the far wall by Arcee and Rhinox was on the floor beneath us.

I grabbed part of the truck's roof and tore through the flimsy material as I pushed my way through the hole. Behind me, my Autobots were scrambling to their feet.

"Autobots, roll out!" I screamed. On reflex, I activated my HL-Shield and raised it over my head, blocking shots from ABB men on the roof. As I fired at the nearest man, Rhinox rammed his way through the twisted back doors of the truck.

Arcee, Insight, and Defensor followed him out. Warpath blasting a hole through the truck's other side,
the thick undercarriage barely slowing him down. A blast from his cannon blew another sandbag wall sky high and sent the men behind it flying.

There was a scream of jets as Cyclonus transformed and landed on the roof, drawing his sword and hitting the nearest man with the flat of the blade.

Caught off guard, the ABB panicked. Most ran for what little cover was left while the braver ones opened fire. The air was filled with the sound of constant gunfire and the flashing of our shields from the impacts.

On the roof, the second minigun screamed as it spun into life. It barely got a shot off before Glory Girl was there, grabbing the gun by the rotating barrel and ripping it from its mountings. Without pausing, she hit the shooter with the wreckage.

"Damn it, Vicky! Keep it under control!" I shouted. Spotting a man with a grenade, I dropped him as quickly as possible. I'd heard about the black hole bomb. Above me, Glory Girl dropped the weapon's remains and drove her fist into another man's midsection. There was a zap as the built-in taser fired and he dropped to the ground.

Warning messages blared at me and a small window opened showing me a man by the far corner of the building pointing a weapon at me. There was a whisper in the back of my mind as I threw myself to the ground.

There was a woosh and the smell of smoke as an RPG sailed over my head. Looking up, I could see the shooter and his partner trying to reload the launcher before Arcee reached them and drove her forearm blade deep into the rocket launcher.

I was just climbing to my feet when I heard a shot like thunder and a bullet slammed into the back of my shoulder. My shield flared even as the armour buckled, but I was able to convert the movement into a spin so I could see the shooter. They were lying prone on top of one of the nearby trucks.

Lifting my other arm, I opened fire at them. The first shot punched through the truck, causing the shooter to throw himself off the roof, abandoning his weapon. My second shot hit the rifle and reduced it to scrap.

"Warpath! Disable those trucks!"

"Boon, pow! I'm on it!"

Spinning around, he put rounds through the engine block of every vehicle he could see. One of the trucks roared into life before he could shoot it, tires screeching as they fought for traction.

Heading for the main gate, the truck slammed into Defensor. There was the sound of breaking metal as the truck forced him backwards, then the engine guttered out as his fist burst through the engine block. The driver could only watch as Defensor tore his way through the engine to get at him.

"You okay?" Insight asked, landing next to me and dropping the man she was holding.

"I'm fine!" I shouted over the ringing in my ears while rubbing my shoulder with my other hand. The armour was bent and I was probably going to have an impressive bruise tomorrow. Around us, the fighting was dying down, but we couldn't afford to let up the pressure.

"Glory Girl! Take Arcee and circle around to the northern end of the building! If you can't find a door, then make one! Cyclonus, head to the western side. There's a loading bay over there!" Pulling a pair of containment foam grenades and a PEPs gun out of subspace. I threw the gun to Vicky and
the grenades to Cyclonus.

"Seal those doors up! I don't want them escaping! Rhinox, Insight, you're with me! Everyone else, secure the area!"

Vicky dropped down and grabbed Arcee's wrist with her free hand. Lifting the Autobot up, she flew over the building while Cyclonus transformed and took off in the other direction. It would have been nice to bring him and Defensor inside with us, but there was always the risk of ABB reinforcements arriving.

I followed everyone's movements on my HUD. Once I saw they were nearly in position, I made my way towards the plant's main doors. They were locked, with a mess of junk and what looked like welded metal sheets piled up against them.

Just past the doors was a low wall with more people huddled behind it.

**Cute...**

Stepping back, I raised the power of my Null-Ray and fired. The door and its barricade exploded in a shower of wood and metal. The men on the other side of the door ducked behind their barricade for cover. There were three of them behind a low sandbag wall and another two further back, using cross corridors for cover.

I went in first, followed by Insight and Rhinox, his large form effectively blocking the doorway. The ABB men opened fire as I charged, bullets bouncing off my shield.

I ignored the wall and the men behind it. Vaulting over the wall and running for the corner, I backhanded the first man, sending him sprawling. He made no attempt to get up. I grabbed the other man and lifted him off the ground before he could get away.

The men behind the sandbag wall turned as I ran past them, firing desperately at me and forgetting about the others. Insight caught one of them by his collar and lifted him up, lashing out with her fist. A built-in taser flashed and he dropped helplessly to the ground.

The second man screamed as he was stepped on by Rhinox. Hopefully he took care not to cause any permanent damage. His large hand closed around the head of the third and lifted him up to eye level. In a panic, the man pulled the trigger and the shotgun he was holding went off with a deafening bang that echoed in the sudden silence that followed it.

Blinking in surprise, Rhinox looked down at his midsection. There was some scorching, but the round hadn't done worse than mess with his paint job.

The shooter dropped the gun like it had burned him and Rhinox gave him a long look.

"... Sorry?" the man whimpered, holding his hands up in surrender, a dark stain growing on his pants.

*Loading bay secure. There were some vehicles nearby, but I've taken care of them,* Cyclonus said over the radio.

*Good, look for a way inside and see what you can find. But watch for traps.*

The building shook and off in the distance I heard what sounded like an explosion. On my HUD, an image came up from Arcee showing a wall with a hole blown into it. Looks like they couldn't find a
door after all.

With the fight over, I turned my attention to the thug in my hand.


"That way! S-Second level, two floors below generator C!" he said in a panic.

Punching him in the stomach, I let him fall to the floor and walked away, stopping only to grab the cheap radio that had been clipped to his belt and turning it on.

*You really are an idiot. You know that, Hebert!* Bakuda's voice screeched through the radio, her voice changer causing feedback within the device.

I froze at the sound of my name and frowned at the radio. I wasn't touching the send button, so Bakuda shouldn't have known I had it. That she knew my name didn't worry me too much. My identity was public and Dad was safely at home with a small shield generator in the basement and some extra defences I'd let Wheeljack install. Anyone who tried to get near my house was in for a really bad day.

A quick scan of the walls showed a small camera concealed near the ceiling. So that's how she knew. She's watching us…

I blew out the camera with my Null-Ray.

"Okay, everyone keep an eye out for any more cameras or anything suspicious," I told the others. I wasn't going to waste my breath talking to the bitch. "If Bakuda's got any sense left, then this place will be riddled with traps."

*I've met some stupid fuckers in the past, but really? Coming after me again? Didn't the bimbo learn her lesson the first time? I thought they'd send someone more important after me, not the junior division.*

"Sorry, but they had more important things to do. Let's face it, compared to Lung or Kaiser, you're just small time," Insight chirped, making me snort in laughter.

*Just for that,* Bakuda growled, *three people just died!* 

*Three detonation signals intercepted. No explosions detected.* Soundwave's message arrived before I even had a chance to react. Breathing in relief, I shot Lisa a warning look, but she ignored it.

*What did you do!?* Bakuda demanded. *You couldn't have stopped those bombs!*

"Two signals being sent with off the shelf tech. Wasn't hard to find it once I knew what frequency you were using. You can't threaten the city anymore, and the PRT is dismantling the ABB. It would be best if you surrendered now, before the Protectorate gets here."

I didn't think she'd take it. But I had to make the offer.

*Fuck you! Let them come! You think those toys in the city were all I had? I could send the entire East Coast back to the Stone Age!* 

"Then why haven't you done it yet?" Insight asked. Back at the base, I could see her smirking as her power went to work. "You can't. It's not finished yet, is it? Nobody will sell to you anymore. Maybe you shouldn't have killed off Lung."
A warning message flashed on my HUD, as nearly a dozen small rockets took off from the roof. Video feed from Laserbeak showed them vanishing into the clouds over the city. There was a series of flashes as they detonated and the clouds started to shift.

*Laugh this one off, you little bitch!*  
*Taylor, Teletraan's reporting massive pressure changes above the city!* Wheeljack all but shouted into my ear. *Whatever she just did, it's messing with the weather!*  

In anger, I crushed the radio and threw it aside. Rewind had tapped into the frequency, so I didn't actually need it.

*I've found hostages. I'm taking them outside and will stay with them for now. Some of them are in need of medical assistance.* Cyclonus's voice was quiet, filled with an almost tranquil fury. I don't know what state the hostages were in, but it was probably bad.  

"Enough of this. Find Bakuda and take her down!"  

A noise came from the radio and I could almost picture Bakuda taking a deep breath.  

*Oh? Not impressed? Then how about this?* Rhinox slammed into me, shouting a warning. High above us, something exploded and the world went white.

##

Arcee had to hand it to Glory Girl. Even when lifting her weight, it only took the girl a few moments to reach the northern side of the power plant.

All they found was a continuous brick wall, broken only by boarded up windows and some large pipes that ran in and out of the building before disappearing underground.

"Need me to make a door?" Vicky offered, rolling her neck and moving forward.

"Wait!" Arcee hissed. She pulled a small tube from subspace and placed one end against the wall. She pressed a button and the gadget made a quiet whump noise. Moments later, it projected an image of the room on the other side.

If Glory Girl had smashed through there, she would have likely hit more machinery or taken out a loadbearing wall.

Honestly, Arcee could understand Glory Girl's desire to catch the woman who'd hurt her sister, but charging in blindly was exactly what caused the problem last time.

"Okay." Arcee moved to the side and used a nail to scratch a cross on the wall. "Go in here, but be careful. The wall is thick and there are people on the other side."

Nodding, Glory Girl lifted off the ground and plowed through the wall, barely slowing down. Moving quickly, Arcee ducked through the hole, her left arm switching to gun mode as she ran.

On the other side were four men and a woman in ABB colours. Three of them were already down, two having been hit by flying masonry, one by Glory Girl as she passed. The woman was huddled in the corner while Glory Girl lifted the final man off the floor by his shirt.

"Where's Bakuda?" She shook him gently in warning.

Arcee couldn't feel Glory Girl's aura, but she expected the girl was using it liberally.
Before Arcee could say anything, movement in the corner caught her attention and she turned to see the woman had started rocking in place, whimpering something over and over. Moving closer Arcee was able to hear what the woman was saying.

The woman looked up and Arcee's spark froze at the detonator in the woman's hand and the terrified expression on her tear-stained face.

"Vicky!" Arcee grabbed Glory Girl by the back of her costume and pulled, trying to get them both outside the building.

The world went white as an explosion rocked the building.

##

Reaching the western edge of the power plant and switching to robot mode in midair, Cyclonus let himself fall as momentum carried him. Hitting the ground in a three-point landing, he slid to a stop as his clawed hands carved deep furrows in the ground.

The loading bay was a squat, rectangular building built into the back of the plant. The polished steel shutters stood out against the weather worn paint and crumbling bricks around it.

Pulling the pin from a containment foam grenade, he rolled it across the ground. When it exploded at the base of the shutters, the quickly expanding material sealed the doors.

A number of parked cars were lined up in a row nearby. Most of them were dirty, covered in dents and scratches. But there was an empty space about halfway down the row and fresh tire tracks on the ground that led towards a hole that had been punched in the chain link fence.

*Looks like some have already fled... cowards.* There wasn't much he could do about them for now, but he could at least make sure no one else got away.

Drawing his newly repaired sword, he drove it deep into the engine of the first car, making sure to cause as much damage as possible, then repeated the action with the rest of the cars.

Confident that the area was secure, he withdrew his sword and tapped his radio. *Loading bay secure. There were some vehicles nearby, but I've taken care of it.*

*Good, look for a way inside and see what you can find. But watch for traps.*

Off in the distance, something exploded and he sighed. *So much for subtlety.*

Some of the lights were on in the upper levels above the loading bay. Picking one of the windows at random, he jumped, crashing through the glass and catching a pair of guards by surprise.

Cyclonus grabbed the nearest man's gun and pulled it from his unresisting fingers. With the other hand, he lashed out at the second guard. As the man folded in half, his weaponless partner turned and ran, but Cyclonus shot him in the back with a stunner.

Leaving them in a groaning heap on the floor, he paused a moment to take in his surroundings. The room wasn't very large, more a glorified cupboard than an office, with large crates lined up against a wall.

Binding the guards with zip ties, he turned his attention to the crates. Prying one open, he found guns. Lots of them. Most of them were automatics of one type or another. If all the crates were the same, then the ABB had enough firepower to field a small army.
Unfortunately, he didn't have the time or enough grenades to destroy everything in the room. But setting off the last of his containment foam grenades as he left at least ensured no one would be getting a resupply anytime soon.

Running down the corridor, he spotted a small red light at floor level and leaped over it, ducking through the next door - which led into a stairwell - and jumping down just as the corridor exploded. Hitting the ground, he covered his head against possible debris, but nothing came.

Looking up, he could see a large amber bubble with debris suspended in it.

With the way back up blocked, he pushed onwards. To the east, he could hear gunfire. Likely the ABB trying to repel Taylor and the others. As much as he wanted to help, he had his orders.

The internal walls of the office area were thinner than the outer walls, making thermal imaging possible again. Leaving the stairwell and turning right, he spotted what looked like a large gathering of people and he could hear angry shouting.

The noise grew louder as he approached, shouted demands and screams filling his audio receptors. It was all coming from a set of double doors in the middle of the hallway.

Cyclonus drew his sword once more and stormed into the room, stopping at the sight before him.

Given its size, the room had likely been a cafeteria of some sort when the power plant was still in use. Now, however, it looked more like an abattoir. Steel cages had been constructed on the far wall and nearly a dozen people were locked up inside them. The were all different ages, but the youngest looked no older than Taylor. Judging from the dirty clothes and terrified expressions, they'd likely been there awhile.

There were four men standing in front of the cages and another two by the left wall, all wearing ABB colours. They had the same dirty look the prisoners had and weren't restrained in any way he could see. Instead, they sat on the floor, watching helplessly.

In the middle of the room was a large chair with numerous straps and poles attached. Blood stained the floor and next to the chair was a raised desk with bloody tools on it. A woman was strapped into the chair, her head held at perfect operating height. Tears were running down her face and behind her was a man holding a scalpel.

The handle of his sword creaked in his hand and his temper flared at what he was seeing. He marched towards her, heedless of the guards.

"That's far enough!" one of the guards shouted, stepping forwards and cocking his gun.

Cyclonus dismissed the weapon out of hand and continued walking. That toy gun couldn't hurt him and he had nothing to say to these 'people.'

"I said stop!" The guard fired, the bullet bouncing harmlessly off Cyclonus and embedding itself in a wall. A smarter guard raised his gun and pointed it towards the cage.

"Stop, or they die!" The guard shifted nervously, licking his lips and glancing at his friends. "I mean it! I'll kill them all!"

"Then what?" Cyclonus said. His red eyes narrowed. "What happens when there's no one left to shield you from me?"

The man holding the scalpel retreated backwards as Cyclonus approached, desperately seeking the
protection of the guards.

"Fuck you tin-man!" one of the guards shouted, turning to the prisoners and raising his weapon. The hostages screamed and Cyclonus's arm blurred as he snatched up a scalpel from the table and threw it. The short blade embedded itself deep into the man's spine.

As the man fell to the floor, the other guards opened fire and Cyclonus charged forwards. Shutting off his forcefield, he allowed the bullets to impact his armour as he grabbed the first guard he could reach, slamming his knee into the man's face.

Pivoting, he struck the final guard across the face with the the flat of his blade, drawing blood and sending the man sprawling. The last man standing, the one who had been doing the operations, held his hands up in surrender.

"Please! I'm a doctor, I didn't want to do this! Bakuda put a bomb in my head, told me to implant other people if I wanted to live!"

Despite his words, Cyclonus couldn't see any open cuts or scars on the doctor's head. Reaching forward, he grabbed the man by his shirt, twisting and pulling the thin cloth to tear it open. On the doctor's chest were a number of tattoos, one of which was a Chinese dragon twisted around the letters ABB.

The doctor stayed quiet, glaring at Cyclonus in terrified defiance.

"How many?" Cyclonus growled.

"W-What?"

"How many people did you butcher?" His voice was quiet but filled with a smoldering anger.

"I don't know… I didn't count!"

Seizing the doctor, Cyclonus marched him over to the chair and the woman it contained.

"Release her. Now!"

"Yeah! Right, sure!" The doctor was shaking so badly it took him three attempts to release the straps holding the woman down. "N-now what?"

Cyclonus gently helped the sobbing woman out of the chair and placed her on the floor near the cage. He turned and walked back to the doctor, forcing the man into the chair and strapping him down tightly. The smell of urine filled the air, but Cyclonus ignored it.

*I've found hostages. I'm taking them outside and will stay with them for now. Some of them are in need of medical assistance.*

On the floor, the man Cyclonus had struck with his sword was coming to his senses.

"Fucking tin-man, you think you can get away with this? Bakuda is gonna fuck you up!" he cried, spitting a tooth and blood onto the floor.

"Your master isn't here," Cyclonus said, idly kicking the man's gun away from him. Spotting a grenade on the man's belt, he tugged it free, pulled the pin, and launched it at the wall.

The explosion destroyed the wall, letting the cool night air rush into the room.
Inside the cage, the hostages pulled back in fear as Cyclonus approached. Ignoring their reactions, he brought his sword down, cleaving the cage lock in a single blow. Pulling the door open, he stepped to the side and nodded towards the hole in the wall.

"Everyone out," he said as he watched the hostages flee, staying behind to make sure everyone made it to safety. Barely half the hostages had cleared the hole when an explosion tore through the building.

##

Victoria pushed herself upright, large chunks of the floor above sliding off of her as she moved. Her power had protected her from the explosion and most of the debris, but enough had gotten through that she felt like one massive bruise.

Her head felt fuzzy, there was a ringing in her ears, and the concrete dust in the air was making her cough. Screwing her eyes shut, she placed both hands on the floor and waited for the room to stop spinning.

"Arcee! You okay?"

*Is this how Amy felt when the hospital was bombed? She pushed the thought down. Right now, just thinking about Amy made her chest hurt and her eyes burn.*

Opening her eyes, Victoria pushed the last of the debris away and climbed shakily to her feet.

"Arcee?"

Looking around, her eyes were finally starting to focus and she realised part of the problem was the visor Taylor had given her. Dust had settled over it, blurring her vision, and there were small cracks all over it. More worryingly was the number of error messages flickering across the screen.

Lifting the visor up, she was finally able to get a good look around. Arcee's shove had put her under a low section of ceiling, close to the hole they'd made. After that, it was only luck and her own durability that had kept her from being buried alive.

The building was much tougher than she'd thought. The outer walls were still standing, but she wasn't sure how much more they could take. Overhead, the next two floors had collapsed down onto her.

*If the door was there, and the bomb over there...* Victoria staggered towards a pile of rubble, floating over the uneven floor.

"Arcee! Can you hear me?"

Once she reached the pile, she drove her hands deep under the rubble and lifted. In her dazed state, it took two attempts to lift the debris, but when she finally did, she found Arcee underneath.

The Autobot wasn't moving and her body was a wreck. One of her arms had been destroyed, her eyes were dark, and her armour was covered in dents and scratches. Even her face was missing a large chunk, exposing the machinery underneath.

"Arcee!"

Dropping to her knees, Victoria shook the Autobot's shoulder, desperately trying to get a response. When none came, she pulled her visor down roughly.
"Taylor!? Lisa! Anyone! Is anyone there?! I need help!"

The error messages continued to flash, but there was movement on the HUD as something responded.

##

Hands on my head, I kept my eyes shut and wait for the world to stop shaking.

When I finally felt confident enough to open my eyes, I found I was lying face down on the ground. Around me, a blue forcefield flicked fitfully and died, leaving me in darkness. As it did, I felt Rhinox shift behind me, letting his weight fall on top of me.

My head was ringing and my vision was blurry and what felt like the entire power plant was lying on top of me. I was trapped, the weight of Rhinox keeping me from moving. My comms were down.

"Rhinox? Rhinox, answer me!" No response. I started to push myself up, taking care not to jostle him too much.

As I rose, he slid off my back and hit the floor with a crash. I flinched at the noise, but the impact was apparently enough to wake him with a groan.

His eyes were dim, flickering on and off. Smoke rose from gaps in his armour.

"What happened?" I coughed. Rhinox had hit me hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

*Bakuda dropped most of the building on you,* Lisa said over the radio, her voice fading in and out as the remaining Insecticons tried to establish a connection. There was a lot of static on the line, but I was too preoccupied to notice.

The upper levels and roof were gone. I could see the dark ominous clouds that were already building over us. We had been standing in one of the lower areas with only two floors above us. Just a few yards further in and we'd have been buried under tons of rubble.

More worrying was the large amber bubble that stopped just short of where I'd been standing. In fact, now that I looked, I could see ice, glass and even sand all around us, forming a perfect circle in the air. Even the bubble looked like it had been sheared cleanly.

Shaking my head and putting the spectacle to one side, I grabbed Rhinox's arm.

I gasped in horror as my power started to map out his body and I felt the bile rise in my throat. Half his servos had burned out and his energon levels were critically low.

"What did you do?!"

Rhinox was too damaged to speak. The dim light in his eyes fading as I frantically tried to examine his body. There was a strange device under the armour on his back that I'd never seen before. It almost looked like a shield emitter. I wouldn't have noticed it at all if it hadn't been a burned and blackened mess. Worst of all, it was wired almost directly into his spark.

How could that even stop Bakuda's time grenade? Unless… *No…* "You used your own spark to power the shield?! What were you thinking!"

Rhinox's eyes went dark.

"No, no, no! Stay awake!" Putting my hands on his chest, I pushed my power into him, taking care
to keep the flow under control. Even so, the effort to keep him alive was making my head swim.

Rhinox’s eyes brightened as systems began to whirr into life under my hands. He looked around in confusion for a moment, and when he spotted me, he put a hand on my shoulder.

"Taylor… you can't… need to stop… Bakuda."

"Shut up and let me work!" I snapped. "When this is over, we're going to have a long talk about this!"

I forced my anger down and focused on healing the damage to his body. His T-cog was a lump of charcoal and the actuators in his legs had melted from whatever he'd done to himself.

He chuckled weakly and started to push me off him. "I look forward to it… but you don't have time, you need to stop Bakuda."

"I'm not just going to leave you! I'll patch you up, then-"

"-then you'll collapse from the effort," he finished for me, his voice sounding stronger. "I'll be fine. I'll put myself into stasis lock and you can fix me later."

I wanted to argue, but I knew he was right. Even with the Matrix, healing him would leave me useless for hours.

Growling in temper, I slapped his chest. "Fine! But I'm coming back for you later."

He gave me that same infuriating smile as he leaned back and his eyes switched off. I could see his systems slipping into stasis-lock, keeping him in a low powered mode and preserving his spark.

It tore me apart to leave him, but I didn't have a choice. Standing up, I connected to the few remaining Insecticons. Most had been destroyed with the building, but there was still a few left. Ordering them to reposition, they formed a line leading back towards Brockton Bay so I could use them as repeaters.

As I did so, I looked around and realised we were missing someone. "Where is Insight?"

*Under the rubble somewhere,* Lisa said. Her voice came over my radio, but it was glitchy, with odd bits of static. I wasn't surprised to see a large tower of green crystal in the middle of the building.

*My drone's fucked, but I'm fine, so don't worry about me.*

"I'll get Jack to build you another one," I said, rolling my neck and forcing myself to focus on the task at hand. *Fight now, worry about the guilt later.* "What else is still standing?"

*There's a section to the south that looks untouched. I think it was going to be a new generator room, but it was never finished.*

"Alright, but who's still standing? We can't let Bakuda get-"

*Taylor?! Lisa! Anyone! Is anyone there?! I need help!* The message was being sent on an emergency frequency. It was also faint and filled with static.

"Vicky? What's going on!"

*Taylor? Thank god. There was a bomb. Arcee's hurt! She won't wake up!*
My insides turned to lead. I'd only just saved Rhinox and I'd been standing next to him. I pulled up a status feed from Arcee but got nothing. Either her systems were too badly damaged or the nearby crystal was messing with the signal. Screwing my eyes shut, I pushed all my focus onto her spark. *There!*

It was faint. Weak, and getting weaker, but I could still feel it.

I had to do something, anything. "First Aid! Circle around and-"

*I can't!* the little robot replied, his voice heavy with guilt. *I'm with Cyclonus. Not all the hostages got out in time!*

"What about Cyclonus?"

*He's mostly okay, but he's not going to be flying anytime soon.*

Moving as quickly as I could, I started to pick my way across the rubble. If I went back outside and circled around, I might be able to reach Arcee before her spark faded completely.

I didn't care what it took. I led the Autobots into this mess, I was going to get them out of it even if I had to-

*I can help!* Wyvern's voice suddenly came through the radio, catching me off guard. I didn't even realise she'd been listening in.

"What are you talking about?"

*I'm an engineer! I... I can teleport in and keep Arcee stable until help arrives!*

"The teleporter doesn't reach this far! Besides, you're unarmoured and you don't even have an alt-mode!"

*I do now! Wheeljack helped me. I know how to boost the range, and the interference won't be a problem. Please, I want to help!*

//Remain calm. Trust your friends.//

Shutting my eyes, I took a deep breath. If I was wrong about this, I'd likely get Wyvern and Arcee killed. But if I did nothing, Arcee would die.

"Alright, do it! Protectobots, stay with the hostages. Cyclonus, if you can walk, get to Arcee and guard them both! Warpath, circle round to the remaining building!"

I started moving towards the last building standing. No matter what, I was going to stop Bakuda.

##

With a blue flash, Wyvern appeared high in the air above the power plant. *Rattrap was right, teleporting does tingle.*

The interference caused by Bakuda's crystals meant the only way to safely teleport was to appear high up in the air, above the static.

Thankfully, her new secondary mode was flight capable, even if it was untested. Strictly speaking, she'd based it on a submersible and then added antigravity and flight stabilisers, making her look almost like a hovercraft.
The rising wind rushed past her, whistling through the kibble her new alternative mode had added to her frame. The weight of the changes still felt odd, unbalanced, but she was getting used to it. Her new visor slid down, covering the top half of her face while the built-in HUD highlighted Arcee's location.

Transforming, she used her turbines to control her descent despite the increasingly uncooperative weather. The winds were starting to buffet her around and a sudden updraft nearly sent her spinning in the wrong direction, but she forced herself to stay on target, Steering towards the northern end of the building. Waiting until the last moment, just as her nerves were threatening to overwhelm her, she flared her antigrav system and slowed her descent to a crawl. Small but powerful thrusters ignited, rocketing her towards what was left of the power plant.

Flying through the ruined section of wall, she transformed and landed, her feet digging into the rubble.

Nearby, Glory Girl was kneeling next to Arcee and staring at her in shocked disbelief.

Wyvern nervously adjusted her visor. "Don't worry, I'm here to help!"

Running over, she slid to her knees and started disconnecting Arcee's chest plate, hoping Victoria wouldn't notice her shaking hands.

Energon and coolant were everywhere in Arcee's chest and it was making Wyvern's hands slick. Thankfully, Arcee's spark chamber was unharmed and its connection to her CPU intact.

Now if she could just find that leak.

A23, cold. B67, hot! She pulled her fingers back and shook them to ensure there was no damage from the shock. Mentally, she counted off the main power lines as her hands traced them backwards. The energon was leaking from somewhere nearby, she just had to reach a little further.

There!

Grabbing the sealant tape, she wrapped it tightly around the damaged Energon line. Working by touch, she pulled a piece of metal out of a coolant line and sealed it closed.

On her visor, Arcee's energon levels stopped falling and her oil pressure stabilized, but her spark continued to weaken.

*Ratchet, First Aid! I sealed the leaks but I can't stop her spark from shrinking!* She sent a burst of data via the Insecticons to both healers, hoping they had an idea.

The sound of heavy metal feet made her look up to see Cyclonus stepping through the hole, sword in hand. Like Arcee, his armour was dented and scratched; one of his wings had been crushed.

He nodded to her, then turned to guard the hole through which he'd entered.

*Have you tried rerouting power to secondary spark containment?* Ratchet asked.

*First thing I did! It's slowing things down, but not stopping it!* 

*Alright, what about-*

*I've got an idea!* First Aid said quickly, transmitting a large data packet. Skimming through it, Wyvern's eyes widened in surprise. The idea was risky, but it could work.
She'd already pulled some wire from the nearby debris by the time Ratchet spoke up.

*Absolutely not! Do you know how dangerous that is? And what if it doesn't work! They'd both be risking spark failure, overloading, partial or total memory erasure.*

Wyvern ignored him as he continued to rant and retracted her own chest plate. The room around her was lit by the glow of her spark. Vicky gasped at the sight, but didn't say anything. Wyvern smiled with embarrassment.

Exposing her spark like this felt intimate in a way she'd never experienced before. Putting that thought aside, she clipped the cables to the side of her own spark chamber.

*Sorry, Ratchet, I wasn't listening. I'm attaching the cables to Arcee now.*

"Glory Girl, could you step back please?"

"Sure," she said. "Is this… safe?"

"Oh sure! It'll be fine!" Wyvern smiled warmly, hoping it didn't look as fake as it felt. "It'll probably tingle a bit, and there may be some sparks."

Connecting one cable to Arcee's spark chamber, she hesitated for a moment. *I can do this. I'm an Autobot!* She touched the remaining wire to Arcee's spark chamber.

The pain was instant and all-consuming. Her body shook as her systems shorted, threatening to sever the connection. Forcing her arm to move, she held the cables in place. On the floor, Arcee jerked, her eyes lit up and her spark blazed, illuminating the room like a small sun.

The thin cables Wyvern had scavenged were never meant for such a task. Glowing red hot, they burst into flames and disintegrated, breaking the connection between the two Autobots.

With the connection gone, Wyvern fell forwards, only to be caught by Glory Girl.

"Oh my god! Are you okay?"

"M'fine!" Wyvern insisted, swaying unsteadily even as she tried to support herself. "I just… I just need to check… something…"

Shaking her head, she eased herself out of Glory Girl's arms and connected to the data port on Arcee's body. Letting out a relieved sigh, Wyvern carefully watched Arcee's vitals. They were weak, but holding steady for now.

##

It took me longer than I'd liked to get free of the rubble, but after that, it was a straight run to the final building.

Pressing myself against the wall, I took a moment to look up at the sky. Brockton Bay's weather was mild, for the most part. Heavy storms weren't unheard of, but I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen a sky like this.

My armour was the only thing protecting me against the wind. Strong gusts coming suddenly, the directions constantly changing and pushing against me as I ran. Above me, the clouds above were black with the promise of heavy rain to come and I could hear the occasional rumble of thunder.

Pushing the thought aside, I turned my focus to the building. Lisa said it had been intended as a new
generator room, an attempt to expand the capacity of the plant that hadn't been finished before the entire place was shut down. Unlike the original building, there was no attempt at style or pretense of making it blend in. It was just a squat building that stood off to the side, maybe two or three stories tall.

The windows had been boarded up long ago and I couldn't see any guards. They had probably taken cover inside the building, assuming Bakuda had anyone left. Even so, I dimmed the lights on my armour and took care to stay in the shadows and avoid the main entrance through the covered walk way. I was done walking into traps.

Pressing myself up against a wall, I ran through my options. Most of my Autobots were down, and Protectorate backup wasn't going to get here in time. Thankfully, Warpath was closing in on the far side of the building, so at least I wasn't doing this on my own.

Laserbeak had found a window high up where the boarding had broken away. The glass was filthy, but he could still see the inside of the building and transmit the footage to me.

There was a large room inside that took up most of the building, where the remains of a generator lay, pieces of metal and wires scattered all over the place. The remaining floor space was filled with low walls mostly made of sandbags and scrap metal, angled so that anyone hiding behind them would have a clear shot at the door.

A series of walkways lined the walls higher up, where the second story would have gone. More metal sheeting had been bolted or welded to them to give protection to the dozen or so ABB men crouching for cover.

Bakuda stood on the far side of the room, her grenade launcher hanging from her back while she was busy typing something on her phone.

Looks like I'd been right not to trust the main door. Now I could turn this trap back on them.

Once I closed the video feed, I pulled a small silver disk from subspace and attached it to the wall. It was a small explosive charge, enough to put a sizable hole in the wall without bringing the building down.

Setting the timer, I stepped back and climbed out of my armour. The built-in VI was able to fight without me being inside, even if the combat algorithms were still a bit crude.

The bodysuit I wore under my armour had changed a lot since the original version. While it still enhanced my strength, the latest version had integrated armour plates. The thicker plates on my chest and back opened up and a replacement helmet folded out. For the most part, it looked like a simplified version of my normal helmet. While my suit lacked my Null-Rays, it did include a copy of the baton/pistol I'd given Amy.

*Warpath, wait for my signal, then come in shooting.*

"You, pow!, got it!"

The wall exploded inwards in a shower of masonry and my armour charged through the hole.

My sudden entrance had taken the ABB off-guard. Most of them had ducked for cover and even Bakuda was briefly unsure what to do.

Raising its arms, my armour opened fire. Small vents unlatched on its back and started pumping out concealing black smoke.
"What are you waiting for! Kill her!" Bakuda screamed, standing up and firing her grenade launcher. The grenade sailed over my armour and exploded near the doors, blowing them outwards.

Galvanised into action, the men above opened fire. Most of them were firing blind as the smoke continued to increase. Unhindered by the darkness, my armour moved methodically, picking off one target after another.

Another wild shot from Bakuda hit one of the walkways, shattering it and sending the men tumbling to the floor below. Five of them hit the ground and only three got back up. My armour lunged out of the smoke, grabbing the nearest one and punching him in the stomach.

Unnoticed in the confusion and smoke, I snuck into the room using the cover the ABB had erected to make my way back towards the grenade launcher wielding maniac who'd caused so much suffering. Gripping my pistol tight, I readied myself to take her down and slowly slid out of cover.

Bakuda aimed her weapon at my armour, but didn't fire. My armour was holding one of her men by his shirt while using its Null-Ray on the remaining shooters.

This isn't right... since when did Bakuda care about her men? Ducking back behind cover, I realised something else. So far Bakuda had barely spoken and was only using her weird concussive grenades.

Something was wrong. She wasn't behaving like I'd expected. There was no laughter or wild shooting. Wanting to test my suspicions, I sent a new command to my armour.

Throwing its hostage away, the armour turned and focused on Bakuda. It smashed its way through a sandbag wall and vaulted up onto the raised area Bakuda was standing on.

Seeing 'me' coming for her, Bakuda fired wildly. Grenades arced through the air, missing my armour and doing more harm to her own people.

Grabbing her, my armour crushed her weapon and threw it away. As it lifted her off the ground, she screamed.

"I'm not her! I'm not Bakuda! Please! She made me! She said she'd kill me if I di-" Her cries were cut off as she exploded. The entire right arm and leg of my armour was encased in ice, locking it in place as frost spread across the faceplate.

Above me, the few remaining gunmen lowered their weapons.

"Wow, you really are stupid," another Bakuda said with a laugh as she stepped through a nearby door. Her costume was identical to the other, but from the confident way she walked towards my armour, I assumed she was the real one.

"Well, that was underwhelming. I thought you'd put up more of a fight, but then it was pretty easy to guess what you'd do."

Holding her grenade launcher, she smashed the butt against the empty helmet.

"Hey! You still alive in there? Whatever, it doesn't matter." She unclipped a grenade from her belt and pressed it to my armour's neck, where it stuck. "Hey! Get some chains. I wanna string this bitch up before I cook her alive! And don't forget the camera-"

"Warpath... now!" I hissed quietly into my radio. The smokescreen was starting to disperse now that the armor could no longer vent new gas into the air, and Bakuda had her back turned to me. It was
now or never.

The opposing wall exploded inwards as Warpath came charging through, cannon roaring as he fired. More surprising was Glory Girl crashing through the roof at the same time. The tracker in her visor was damaged, so I hadn't realised she was there.

Thankfully, her attention went to the armed men on the walkways as she threw herself at them.

Despite the surprise, Bakuda spun around, one hand grabbing her weapon and aiming at the tank. At the same time, I dove out of cover and opened fire. The stun blast slammed into her back and a blue corona lit up around her body. The force of the shot knocked Bakuda forward but otherwise left her unaffected.

I barely had the time to realise Bakuda was using my shield tech when she spun around and fired back at me.

I dived sideways and the grenade exploded behind me. I was thrown forwards off my feet, but managed to twist in the air to turn my landing into a controlled roll. Even so, the blast had knocked the wind out of me.

"Weren't expecting that, were you?" Bakuda cackled as I tried to catch my breath. I didn't bother to reply. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

*Taylor, if you can keep her busy, I can hack into her shield unit!* Rewind said from his hiding place inside my body armour.

Right, keep her busy.

My pistol had been knocked from my hand and was laying a short distance away. I purposefully didn't look at it, in case Bakuda caught on. As I got my feet under me, I made sure to face her, tensing myself up.

I ran forwards, feinting a charge before quickly throwing myself sideways. Bakuda's grenade hit the ground in front of her and bounced through the air.

Grabbing my weapon, I turned it into a baton and charged forward. I couldn't risk her grabbing another detonator.

The baton hit her head with a crack as it discharged, making her shield flare. Bakuda swung her launcher at me, but I ducked under the blow.

We danced back and forth, me darting forwards with my baton while dodging her clumsy swings. Bakuda wasn't a close range fighter and she'd clearly overestimated the shield unit. Even with it, my blows were hurting her and every blast from my baton was rapidly draining its battery.

I could easily outlast her.

*Taylor, I'm in!*

I tackled Bakuda to the ground. "Rewind! Do it!" I screamed as I pressed my baton it against her side and released it's charge at once.

Bakuda screamed as I electrocuted her, her body jerking under me. A bullet brushed past me, hitting the ground next to Bakuda's head as one of the shooters above took a shot at us. Two more followed, each just as close. Are they shooting at me or her?
Grabbing Bakuda's grenade launcher, I threw it a safe distance away. With her stunned and disarmed, I spared a glance over my shoulder to see Vicky drop down on the shooter, putting him down with a punch to the gut.

I didn't see Bakuda pull a small knife from a pocket until she drove it into my waist. I'd probably bruise, but she didn't have the strength to puncture my costume. I grabbed her hands, prying the knife free. Bakuda continued to struggle, attempting to punch any part of me she could reach. In response, threw my head forwards. Our masks meet with a crunch and something inside Bakuda's mask gave way.

Letting go of her hands, I punched her until the reflective goggles on her mask cracked. Then I struck her again. I didn't want to stop. A dark, angry part of me wanted to keep pounding away until Bakuda was nothing more than blood and bone on the floor under me.

That won't change anything. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to stop and climbed off her. Bakuda didn't do more than groan, rolling slightly to the side. She was making an odd noise, made almost indistinct by her broken synthesizer. I think she was trying to spit blood out of her mouth.

"Weren't expecting that, were you?" I said, trying to catch my breath.

"Y-You stupid bitch! You think this is over?" Above us, thunder rumbled again and a brief flash of lightning was visible through the boarded up windows as the storm continued to grow.

Holding her down with my foot, I watched a satellite picture of the bay. The rain hadn't started yet, but the clouds were getting darker by the minute. If the data Wheeljack was sending me was correct, the city was in for a major rainstorm.

Under my foot, Bakuda made a harsh, grating sound and it took me a moment to realise she was laughing.

"That's it?" I tried to make myself sound as disinterested as possible, "That's your big plan? Some rain?"

She snorted and, I assume, tried to give me a withering look, but didn't say anything more.

There was movement behind me, so I looked over my shoulder to see Glory Girl floating towards us. "You should have hit her harder. What do we do now?"

"I don't know, but something's not right. Keep her here, I'm going to take a look around."

Climbing off Bakuda, I left her with Vicky and walked through the nearby door.

The next room was about the same size as the first and was probably intended to hold another generator. Unlike the other room, there were no fortifications. Instead, there was a large cylinder located in the very middle of the room that was taller than me and nearly twice the width of Rhinox. From the looks of the metal casing, it had been put together using parts from the turbines.

As I stepped close, a warning message appeared on my HUD. The device was giving off radiation. Nothing life threatening, but more than enough to make me cautious. I already had a good idea what I was looking at and wanted to make sure I didn't set off a trigger of some sort.

Gently putting a finger on the casing, I felt my stomach drop when my power confirmed my fears.

*Dragon, can you hear me? I've found Bakuda's nuke and it's armed!*
Once Matrix had left the room, Glory Girl moved forward and grabbed Bakuda by her costume. Bakuda hissed in pain at the movement, but the bitch ignored her. Being held off the ground, Bakuda couldn't do much more than watch as the bimbo started pulling grenades and other weapons off her costume, not bothering to be gentle.

Bakuda smirked at the look of hatred the hero was giving her. Behind her, one of Matrix's toys was busy tying her people up, making sure they couldn't escape, then dragging them out of sight.

So, they knew her remote system worked on line of sight? No big deal, she had other plans.

"How's your sister?" Glory Girl froze. The look the girl gave her was pure poison.

"Shut up," she hissed and Bakuda could feel the hand holding her tremble. Behind Glory Girl, the tonka-toy had stopped and was watching them both carefully.

"Just boom! ignore her. She's pow! a few microchips short of a Kapow! motherboard."

"For what it's worth," Bakuda continued, unfazed by the danger. "If I'd known she was there… I'd have used a bigger bomb!" Her laugh was cut short as Glory Girl threw her across the room. She hit the ground so hard she skipped to a stop.

Her shoulder felt like it was on fire where she'd landed on it, but she'd had enough sense to roll with the blow and bring herself to a stop.

Glory Girl hadn't moved. She was standing on the far side of the room, murder in her eyes and, more importantly, not paying attention to the grenade in her hand.

The display on Bakuda's goggles wasn't working correctly. It was full of errors and slow to respond after the beating the robo-dyke had given her, but it was still able to lock onto two grenades. With a smirk, Bakuda shut her eyes and triggered them both.

##

As I tracked my way through the bomb's inner workings, I'd come to a single conclusion. Bakuda was a sick, twisted monster.

The bomb was based on a design from World War Two. I couldn't say I was surprised: bombs of this type caused more fallout and spread it across a wider area for a longer period of time.

The problem was that it was only based on an old design. All the tinkertech she'd crammed inside the casing had produced something very different, and I was struggling to understand what I was seeing.

I could 'see' the uranium core, what I assumed was the detonator charge and the trigger. But the repeaters, feedback loops and magnetic coils made no sense. Until I knew exactly what this bomb was supposed to do, I didn't dare try disarming it.

"Any ideas?" I'd been listing out everything my power could see to Dragon. She was combining my description with the visual feed to build a model of the bomb. Wheeljack and Perceptor were also running ideas and simulations of their own.

*No, but these is hardly ideal conditions. From what you've said, there's certainly enough material here to destroy the entire city. Are you sure you can't find a timing device?*
"No, there's a few circuit boards that might be acting as a timer, but I can't tell without a direct connection. The coils are building up a charge, though. I'd say there's an hour before they have to discharge, which is probably when it'll go off. Can you get here before then?"

*Yes, things are almost under control now, help should be with you so-*

*It's an EMP!* Lisa's voice cut suddenly into our conversation, making me jump. For one terrifying, heartstopping moment, the bomb rocked slightly when I pushed against it. Fortunately, nothing else happened.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I shot Lisa a dirty look on the video feed.

*Sorry,* she said, not looking it in the slightest. *But I was listening in. It's an EMP bomb, a really powerful one!*

_Huh… now that she mentions it…_ Yeah, I could see how that would work. The nuke was just the base. When it triggered, the other materials would amplify the resulting electromagnetic pulse many, many times over.

Dragon paled. An EMP of this size was probably the stuff of nightmares to an AI like her. As an Autobot, she was mostly immune to EMP, but given the possible size of this thing, I didn't want to risk exposing them to it.

*How big do you think the area of effect is?*

*The entire East Coast? Isn't that what Bakuda threatened to do? 'I could send the entire East Coast back to the stone age!'* Lisa said with a passable impression of Bakuda.

"Okay, I think I could dis-" An explosion rocked the building and, for a moment, I thought the bomb had gone off in my face. Distantly, I was aware of someone screaming. I think it was me.

Opening my eyes, I looked up from my position on the floor. The bomb was still sitting there and the world around me wasn't an inferno. Which meant the blast had come from out-

Jumping up, I sprinted from the room. There was a narrow corridor lined with offices that connected this room with the one where I'd left Bakuda. I was almost through the far door when-

*Stop!* Lisa shouted.

Grabbing the door frame to stop myself, I found the room beyond in chaos. Almost everything in the room was floating six feet off the ground. A null gravity field?

Debris was floating throughout the room, slowly bumping into and off of each other. Further in, where Bakuda had been, hung Vicky. She was rubbing at her eyes but looked otherwise unhurt. Nearby, Warpath was flailing his limbs in a desperate attempt to reach the floor or stay the right way up.

"Vicky! Warpath! What happened! Where's Bakuda!?"

"What?" Vicky shouted, shaking her head.

"_Boom!_ She got away! _Pow!_ She distracted us and set off a bomb! _Blamo!_ She went that way!... I'm starting to feel sick!" Warpath pointed towards a door on the other side of the building.

I cursed myself for leaving Bakuda with Vicky. I should have made sure Bakuda was fully disarmed
before leaving. *Fix problem now, assign blame later!*

If Vicky and Warpath were in the center and I assumed the gravity effect was a perfect sphere, then I was trapped where I was. There was no way I could reach the door to follow Bakuda and entering the gravity field just risked me getting trapped until it wore off.

Vicky stopped rubbing her eyes and growled. "I'll get her!"

"Vicky! Sto-!"

It was no good. Vicky pushed Warpath towards me and took off like a missile towards the door Bakuda had fled through. Not slowing down, she crashed through the flimsy wood and out of my sight.

*Vicky! Vicky! If you can hear me, stop! Her nuke is in the other room. If you kill her, it could explode!* I didn't know if Vicky could hear me, or if her deadman switch really was wired to the nuke, but given Bakuda's personality I couldn't rule it out.

Reaching the edge of the gravity effect, Warpath crashed suddenly to the ground and I kneeled down to help him up. I was just going to have to trust Vicky.

"Come on, Warpath, let's see if I can disarm that bomb before Vicky or Bakuda set it off."

##

*Vicky! If you can hear me, stop! Her nuke is in the other room. If you kill her, it could explode!* I didn't know if Vicky could hear me, or if her deadman switch really was wired to the nuke, but given Bakuda's personality I couldn't rule it out.

The broken visor hung around her neck as she flew down a corridor, Taylor's voice distorted and full of static. Not that Vicky was listening. That bitch was going to pay.

Rounding a corner, she found a wall of amber blocking the way. One of Bakuda's time stop grenades. Stopping, Vicky flew straight up, through the ceiling and over the obstruction.

##

Bakuda ran as best she could, a small breach loading grenade launcher bouncing at her hip, but she was finding it hard to breathe. That Ward bitch or the blonde bimbo must have cracked one of her ribs, and her shoulder was still on fire. Throwing a time stop grenade behind her, she hobbled through an unlocked door and out into the open air.

Her storm was finally underway. Rain was coming down in thick sheets, blurring her goggles and making the ground beneath her feet slick. Every slip or slide made her side throb in agony.

This wasn't over. She'd get away, skip town, and find somewhere to lay low for a while. Maybe she could find another gang to join, one that wasn't led by an over-inflated iguana and a serial suicide bomber.

That Accord guy in Boston was always looking for new capes. Maybe she could pay him a visit once she'd left this shit hole of a city. The heroes would be distracted dealing with the Bomb, and the storm building overhead would help cover her tracks. All she had to do now was escape.

Then, once everything had quieted down, she'd remind them why they shouldn't have fucked with her.
Nearby, mostly hidden from view, was a getaway car. Despite the name, it wasn't some armour plated, turbo-charged speed machine. It was, in fact, a normal looking two-seater.

Small, compact, and fuel efficient. The kind of car no one would look twice at going down the streets. It had even been bought from a non-ABB dealership. The windows had been tinted, but only enough to make the person inside indistinct. And with the rain keeping people busy, the cops would never suspect a thing.

It was parked near a dirt track that wound on for a couple of miles before joining the main road. From there, she could go anywhere. After that, she'd just have to ditch her costume and cut her hair.

Once she reached the car, she grabbed the handle and pulled the door open. That was when Glory Girl hit the car like a freight train. It flew sideways on the wet ground, crumpling around the hero and flipping on its side, carrying Bakuda with it. She'd been unable to let go of the door and her shoulder was torn out of its socket with a sickening pop.

Hitting the ground, Bakuda screamed in agony even as she grabbed her last weapon. Glory Girl was on her before she could even lift it, crushing it and yanking it away, breaking Bakuda's hand in the process.

##

Victoria looked down at villain, her hair whipping in the wind. Her power protected her against the rain, keeping her from getting wet.

The same couldn't be said of Bakuda. She was lying in a puddle of mud, water and dirt seeping into her costume and staining the bright colours. Grabbing Bakuda by the front of her costume, Victoria lifted the bitch up and tore the bandolier and most of the front of her costume off, exposing the black bodysuit to the rain.

Releasing Bakuda, she let the woman fall to the ground in a heap while she threw the torn costume and its grenades as far as she could.

"Not so clever now, are you!" Vicky used a foot to push the tinker into the cracked pavement. Keeping a foot on her chest, she pressed down.

"Well? Nothing to say?" She pressed harder.

"Y-You haven't g-got the guts!" Bakuda managed to say. Her breath was coming in shallow gasps, and even through the filter Vicky thought she could hear the tell-tale bubbling of a punctured lung.

Lifting her foot, Victoria reached down, took a hold of Bakuda's mask and squeezed. She felt the thin plastic and metal of the gasmask give way under her fingers. There was a mechanical pop as something, likely the voice changer, broke and the lenses shattered.

She tore the mask free and looked at the woman who'd caused so much harm. Who had crippled her sister.

She'd been pretty once. Her cheekbones were high and her pale blue eyes stood out in the occasional lightning flash against her Asian features.

Victoria paused. Even in the dim light, it was clear Bakuda was pretty and from what Taylor had said, the girl had been attending college. How did someone like that end up like this? A twisted bomber working for Lung and lashing out at the world like a mad dog.
Her thoughts must have shown on her face, as Bakuda scowled up at her.

"Aww, don't tell me you feel sorry for me?" Bakuda said with a pained laugh and cough. Her voice was clearer without her mask, and the bubbling noise was gone. "Well don't, because I HOPE YOU FUCKING DIE!" Pulling a knife from a pocket and holding it as best she could, she drove it into Vicky's leg.

It bounced off harmlessly, the blade nicking Bakuda's hand as it slipped from her fingers.

"No one pities me! Understand? I'm gonna kill you! I'll kill your cunt of a sister! Do you hear me?"

Vicky saw red, pulling back her fist she lashed out with every ounce of strength she had. The sound of the impact echoed like a thunderclap in the sudden silence.

##

"Okay, easy, easy..." I muttered to myself as I pried another repeater coil lose. As far as I could tell, the bomb was receiving a constant signal. Probably another deadman switch, but the frequency was different. I had Rewind analysing it and transmitting a copy to Soundwave.

I had to be careful. I had no way of knowing what, if anything, could set this bomb off. On the upside, you'd never know if it did go off, a morbid part of me thought.

Banishing the ghoulish thought, I continued my work. At this point, I was almost elbow-deep inside the bomb's casing. The amount of radiation it was giving off had increased, although it was thankfully still at safe levels.

From what my power was showing me, Bakuda had shielded the core, but I wasn't willing to trust her workmanship.

Of course, it would all be for nothing if Vicky killed Bakuda in a fit of rage. It had been a mistake to bring her with me, I knew that from the start, but what else could I have done? I had no real way of stopping Vicky from just following me anyway.

My radio beeped, distracting me from my thoughts as Dragon, the real one, sent me a message.

*Taylor, I'm five minutes out with Armsmaster! Just try to keep things under control until we get there!*  

Shaking my head, I forced myself to focus on what I was doing. I couldn't afford to be distracted now or I could end up setting the whole thing off-

Something heavy crashed to the floor nearby with a thud, making me jump. Thankfully, Rewind managed to shut down the hardlight tool in my hand before I shoved it into something delicate.

Clutching my chest, I turned to see Vicky floating over the bound form of Bakuda. The villain looked like she'd seen better days, she was covered in mud for one thing, but she was clearly still alive and very angry. She was making noises that I assumed were curses, but I couldn't hear her around the gag in her mouth.

##

Bakuda stared up at her, eyes wide in shock, but she recovered quickly.

"...Pussy."
"Shut. Up!" Vicky warned, standing up and stepping back. She'd hit the ground hard enough to drop her own shield and the rain had soaked into her hair. She could feel her aura flaring wildly, she'd never felt it cover such a wide area before. Taking a deep breath, she pushed her anger, and her aura, down.

She had to change. Bakuda had crippled Amy, but she'd done worse to her sister long before that. No more.

"There's a kill order on your head. No one would care if I smeared you across the interstate. But you're not worth it. Once Matrix has disarmed your bomb, you're going to the Birdcage. Just another mad tinker who amounted to nothing."

"Fuck you! I mean it, I'll kill her!"

Grabbing Bakuda's discarded costume, Vicky tore a strip off and twisted it into a gag.

"Y'know, you have the right to remain silent, and I wish to god you would use it," she muttered as she fastened it around Bakuda's mouth.

##

"You said no killing," Vicky said with a shrug. Despite her relaxed tone, her fists were clenched tightly and her arms were trembling.

"Yeah, I did." I sighed in relief, feeling some of the tension ease out of me. Vicky had stripped Bakuda of her costume, so she couldn't trigger the bomb herself.

All I needed to do now was make sure it wasn't going to explode in the next five minutes.

"I don't know about you," I muttered, just loud enough for Vicky to hear me, "but I am so done with today."

Chapter End Notes

AN: oh thank god! This chapter has been a royal pain in my ass and had fought me every step of the way. I'm not entirely happy with the end result, but this entire arc was never really supposed to be about Taylor, it was supposed to be about Victoria and Amy.

Getting things out in the open between them, forcing Glory Girl to finally grow up etc. I think I did that at least.

Also, at 16,000 words this is the longest chapter I've ever written.
(A few hours before Bakuda's video threat)

The Medhall building, Max Anders mused, was one of the tallest in Brockton Bay, with his office on the top floor offering a commanding view of the city. It was a shame he wasn't currently there to enjoy the view.

He was seated in his 'other' office, on the top floor of a neighboring skyscraper, making a passable effort to appear attentive. In truth, he was more concerned with what was happening outside his window.

Lung and his pet tinker were tearing the city apart. Already, countless people had died. The hordes were at the gates and the Protectorate was too concerned with its own welfare to do anything about it.

"We also lost people near the docks last night," Krieg reported, unaware of Kaiser's thoughts. "There's nothing to suggest they're dead, but if Lung has them, it would be best to consider them lost."

There was an unsettled murmur from the people assembled in the room. Most of them were the capes that made up the upper levels of his Empire, but there were a few unpowered lieutenants. This wasn't everyone, just those that hadn't been arrested, injured or on assignment.

Othala, Victor, Menja, and Krieg were seated in low, comfortable chairs opposite him. Purity sat on his right, in a show of loyalty and trust. Their personal relationship was still uncertain, and the divorce was continuing, but for now, having her next to him when the Empire most needed unity was all he cared about.

Once the danger had passed, Purity could be dealt with.

Stormtiger was still out fighting the ABB. Nothing short of a direct order or possibly violence would pull him away now that blood had been drawn. Meanwhile, Fenja was at one of their larger safe houses, investigating reports of ABB members sniffing around.

In terms of territory, the Empire had managed to hold its ground, but that would change if Lung showed up. Even then, the number of unpowered losses so far was far greater than he'd prefer.

"All in all," Krieg said, reclining in his chair, "we've already lost twenty people to the fish-eye and her bombs. I still don't have accurate numbers on the wounded."

Othala wrung her hands in frustration. "I did what I could for those who reached me, but I can only help one person at a time, and some of things that woman did…" She shook her head. "Many have been sent to the hospitals. I had them 'disguised' and gave them cover stories, but I'm not sure how many will survive the night."

Victor placed a hand on her shoulder and whispered something into her ear in an effort to reassure her.

"You're an asset to us all, don't ever doubt that." Kaiser was careful to keep his voice gentle in an effort to boost her morale. Her recruitment by Victor had been an incredible stroke of luck for the Empire, but her loyalty was to her husband first, so Kaiser was always looking for ways to strengthen her bonds to himself.
She smiled weakly in return. "Thank you. By the way, Rune and Cricket should be fine by tomorrow morning. Their injuries were light, so Cricket didn't object to me gifting her with regeneration."

The others shared an amused look and even Kaiser chuckled quietly. Cricket was notorious for her refusal to accept healing. She was - rightly - proud of her scars and refused to allow any healing that would prevent new ones from forming.

Growing serious once more, Kaiser looked to Kayden. "What's the status of Hookwolf?"

Sighing, his wife pinched the bridge of her nose. "He's being held in the PRT-HQ. The lawyer I sent has done his best to slow things down, but I'm afraid Brad's transfer to the Birdcage is likely to take place tomorrow at first light."

"So quickly?" Othala said.

"They're afraid that Bakuda may attack the PRT building, setting him free by accident," Kaiser said with a put upon sigh. "Ever since the Merchants fell, the director has been quick to get prisoners transferred out of the city as quickly as possible. She's hoping to weaken us."

He carefully didn't say was that it was working. Ever since the Undersiders liberated Squealer, the PRT had started shipping prisoners out via air transport. In theory, Purity could shoot those transports down, but that would endanger their people and the PRT would likely react badly to the attempt.

Feeling the beginnings of a headache, Kaiser pressed two fingers against the front of his mask and pushed the cool metal against his face. It didn't help.

The Empire should have been running the city by now, but for all his brutish manner, Lung had been smart enough to force a stalemate and split the city between them. The Merchants had barely been worth thinking about; they were nothing more than the dregs of the city, something Kaiser could safely ignore and crush at a time of his choosing.

On the other side, the police were demoralised, underfunded, and fighting a private cold war with the PRT, who were stuck in the same rut. Outnumbered by the Empire and outgunned by Lung, there was nothing they could do but focus on maintaining the city's fragile balance.

Then things had changed. The heroes rallied, destroying the Merchants in a single night, and Dragon had moved to the city. A fire he'd long thought dead had been rekindled.

It wasn't easy for a man like him to walk about unnoticed, but he'd still heard the rumors: 'Dragon had cracked mass production', 'The PRT was finally taking the fight to the gangs', and so on.

At first, he'd dismissed them. The PRT was simply waving the flag, playing up what few victories they could to help repair their hollow reputation. And even if it wasn't, the Empire had weathered that storm and they would do so again.

But even he couldn't deny that something felt different.

Normally placid or easily bribed officers were refusing to look the other way. The heroes were fighting harder, taking more risks, and going further to hold onto their prisoners. Tinkertech weapons were starting to appear in the hands of normal, unpowered PRT officers.

So far his Empire had been lucky. His only losses had been Crusader and Alabaster: one was in prison and the other was frozen in time.
"The ABB cannot keep up this assault," Kaiser pronounced. His voice grew stronger as his thoughts finally fell in line. "Sooner or later they will fail. When that happens, the PRT will likely turn its attention to us and we will need to remind them why the Empire endures. All of you, be ready to attack the ABB the moment the PRT makes a move. Secure whatever assets you can, but retreat if the PRT interferes."

_Dragons like to hoard gold after all_, he joked to himself. The idea of using Lung's money to fund the Empire's campaign against the PRT was too amusing to pass up.

"Menja will come with me to Somer's Rock. I've already called for a meeting. Krieg, while I'm gone, I want you to contact the Gesellschaft. Arrange for more capes and another shipment of guns. Offer the usual rate, but double it if necessary."

Krieg nodded, and rose from his seat.

Before anyone else could say anything, a phone began to ring.

Victor pulled his phone from a pocket and glanced at the message. "I think we can all agree that something needs to be done about those Autobots. One of them just helped Mouse Protector flatten one of our patrols, and Stormtiger got his ass kicked by another one. He's requesting Othala's help."

"Yes," Kaiser said with a frown. "Unfortunately, we can't go after Matrix directly. What do we know about those robots that could help?"

Krieg shrugged. "Not much. For all the public appearances they make, they rarely talk about themselves. It's no secret they were built by Matrix, and that they are some kind of artificial intelligence, but that's about it."

"Rune said her power doesn't work on them," Othala offered. "She told me earlier that she touched some of the smaller ones, but nothing happened."

Purity leaned forward. "What about Cricket? How did they beat her?"

"A sound based attack. They turned her own echolocation against her." Othala sighed. "Should I go help Stormtiger?"

"Yes, of course. Take Victor with you. When you're done, bring Stormtiger back here."

"Didn't something similar happen to Crusader?" one of his non-powered lieutenants said. "One of my guys managed to make it out of that fight, he said the Autobots were just knocking Crusader's ghosts aside."

He'd heard that report. At the time, he'd dismissed it as just another excuse, but maybe he'd been too hasty.

This could be a problem. At the rate Matrix was building them, the Autobots would soon outnumber the Empire, and the teleporter they employed allowed them to call in reinforcements almost instantly. And now, they could easily shut down two of his capes. Three if he included Crusader.

"I'll bring up the Autobots at the meeting. With any luck, we can entice one of the smaller gangs into dealing with them. If nothing else, they could serve as a distraction. Krieg, see if the Gesellschaft can spare a tinker."

He glanced at a clock on the wall and stood. It was almost time for the meeting and he needed to be there first to ensure everything was set up.
"Menja, with me. Everyone else to your posts. We'll meet again when I return."

##

Somer's Rock wasn't even a dive, Rattrap decided. It was more of a hole in the ground that left even him feeling dirty. And he enjoyed dumpster diving.

The bar was dark, dingy, and slightly damp. The owner and all three of his children were deaf, which allowed Brockton Bay's less public figures to hold meetings, secure in the knowledge that the staff weren't listening in. *Yet no one wonders if they can read lips?*

On the upside, the filth had also allowed Rattrap to go unnoticed. No one looked twice at a larger than normal rat. *Not like I'm the only rat up here, anyway.*

He'd been staking out the bar for days and was, frankly, bored. Currently, he was sprawled out on a wooden beam in his rat mode. The pub had exposed wooden beams high above the main area that offered a perfect view of everyone coming and going. Not that there had been much of that.

The threat of Bakuda had brought the city to a stop. Most people didn't dare leave their homes for anything but an emergency.

So of course, the door had to open just as he was about to head outside and call for a pick up.

The man who came in was large, with a shaven head and black leather jacket. He hurried over to the counter and handed the bartender, who was also the owner, a sheet of paper.

Rattrap couldn't see what was on it, but the bartender nodded and rang a large bell that was hanging up on the wall.

The few people who were in the room looked up from their drinks and at the owner, who jerked his head towards the skinhead. Getting the message, they quickly downed their drinks, paid up and left.

With them gone, the bartender and a waitress - his daughter - quickly started rearranging the tables. Several were pushed together, making a single long table in the middle of the room, surrounded by the smaller booths and the counter.

With everything laid out correctly, the skinhead made a quick call on his cell.

*Well, well, well. Looks like Blondie was right. *Boss, you there? Looks like it's happening tonight.*

*You sure?*

Kaiser had just strode through the doors, looking almost regal in his suit of armour. He was flanked on one side by a blonde woman dressed like a valkyrie and on the other by a large man in black, taking the seat at the head of the table, letting him look towards the door with his back against the wall.

*Oh yeah, buckethead himself just walked in.*

*Great! Can you send the live feed?* Taylor asked.

*Sure, should we tell the PRT?* he replied, doing as she asked.

*No, the PRT is already aware of Somer's Rock,* Dragon said unexpectedly, making Rattrap twitch in surprise. *It's been used as a meeting place between the gangs since the days of the Marquis, and the PRT chooses to look the otherway. There are likely a number of cameras positioned outside to
monitor activity in the area.*

*So why don't they just kick the door in and arrest everyone?* Wheeljack asked in confusion. *I could probably teleport a containment foam grenade right into the room.*

*Because if they did that, most of the supervillians would escape and go to ground; their next meeting place would be impossible to find. As long as the PRT knows where they're meeting, they can keep an eye on them.*

Tuning them out, Rattrap moved further up the beam so he could get a better view of the door. Kaiser has been sitting there for nearly five minutes when the first people began to arrive.

Most were in normal clothes, a bandana or tattoo indicating who they represented. The capes were the easiest to identify as they were the only ones who bothered to hide their faces. As each group arrived, they looked to Kaiser, who would gesture either at a position at his table or at one of the booths.

*It's a power play,* Lisa noted. *The weaker gangs get pushed to the edges, with the smallest left having to stand. Only those Kaiser considers worthy get to sit at *his* table.*

"What gives him the right to make that decision?" Rattrap asked, though he suspected the answer.

*Unless Lung turns up, Kaiser's the biggest fish in the pond.*


Below, a gang of dark-skinned youths walked into the building. There was a moment when the bodyguard Kaiser had left by the bar tensed and one of the kids reached into his pocket.

Before things could escalate, the boy up front grabbed his friend's arm. He never looked away from Kaiser.

"You called us here, you said there'd be no fighting. We cool?"

With a sigh Kaiser waved his hand at Menja - Rattrap couldn't tell which one she was, so he was just sticking to the name - who approached the man at the bar and drove her fist into his stomach with a meaty sound that made Rattrap wince, then walked away as he fell groaning to the floor.

Nodding to Kaiser, the gang leader took a booth near the door as the bar slowly began to fill up. Occasionally, Rattrap or Lisa would offer up a comment or joke.

One of the last to arrive was a tall, thin man in a black bodysuit. A white snake pattern traced its way up his form with its head resting on his forehead. He was flanked by a pair of mercenaries.

Rattrap heard Lisa gasp and tensed. "What? What's going on? Should I be running?"

*No, sorry, it's nothing. That man who just walked in, he's a body double for Coil.*

"Want me to tag him? We can always pick him up later."

*No… don't bother. He's never actually met Coil, doesn't know where he is, doesn't know anything of value. Coil knows we're watching this meeting, wouldn't dare show himself…* Lisa huffed in frustration and Rattrap shrugged.

"Don't worry, we'll get him. Sooner or later, we'll find his shiny trail."
The fake Coil sat down at the main table with a nod of respect to Kaiser, his bodyguards standing beside him.

Next came a woman in a strange costume. It was a mix of riot gear, martial arts uniform, and a dress. She was followed by a morbidly obese man of average height, with no hair visible on his body. His skin was milky white and slightly translucent. Rattrap could see shadows beneath it where his organs were, bits of shell or scales crusting his skin. They looked almost like barnacles, but there was a spiral shape to them.

*That's Faultline and Gregor,* Lisa said. *I didn't realise she was back in the city.*

Rattrap nodded to himself. Faultline and her team were mercenaries that operated from a nightclub. Technically, they were villains, but they never seemed to take work inside the city and operated on a strict code of conduct.

As the waitress came to take their orders, the door opened again and a tall man in a black costume walked into the bar. *What is with all the black?* His long hair was pulled back and his face was covered by a red mask and top hat.

He was escorted by a man built like a linebacker in angular black armour.

Walking forward, he stopped before the table. "Ah, I hope you don't mind if we join you?"

"The Travelers, yes?" the fake Coil said, his voice smooth. "You're not local."

"You could call us nomadic. What was happening here was too interesting to pass up, so I decided we'd stop by for a visit," he said, removing his hat and bowing. "I go by Trickster, this is Ballistic."

*He's lying.* Lisa said before he'd even finished talking. *That entire speech was scripted. He works for Coil.*

"At least you have manners," Kaiser said, waving the man towards an empty chair. "Very well, now that we're all here-"

The door opened a final time and someone oozed through the door, looking more like ambulatory chemical spill than a man. He wasn't tall, but he was broad shouldered and his white and black costume had a large raised collar. His skin was covered in a thick, oily substance that dripped from his hands and made the floor steam. Behind him was a small, deathly thin man that twitched continuously and refused to look anywhere but the floor.

"And you are?" Kaiser said. Rattrap was willing to bet the Empire cape was trying to breathe through his ears. The newcomer *stank.*

"Oil Slick, I run the New Merchants." Even his voice oozed.

Kaiser gestured towards the booth furthest away from his table. "I hope you have better fortune than your predecessors."

There was a beep as Arcee joined the comline. *Rattrap, can you hear me? We're just arriving now.*

"Hold up a minute, I wanna see how this plays out," Rattrap said. This would likely be their best chance to gather some good intelligence. Once Arcee arrived, the villains would probably clam up.

Snorting, Oil Slick pulled a chair out and sat down at the table. "Say what you want, we're still the biggest drug supplier in the city. You may not like it, but even your boys come to me when they..."
Before Kaiser could say anything, Coil leaned forward. "Let the man do as he pleases. We have
more urgent matters to deal with and time is short."

"Indeed…" Despite the room's small size and the lack of noise, Kaiser raised his voice. "We are
gathered here to address two issues. The first is the Autobots, who we can all agree are becoming a
major problem. The second and more pressing issue is, of course, the ABB."

"Aww, big bad buckethead is scared of us. I'm touched." Rattrap mimed wiping a tear from his eye.
"He certainly likes to make speeches, don't he?"

*Yeah, he really likes the sounds of his own voice." Lisa chuckled. "Now be quiet, I'm trying to
concentrate."

"Really?" Oil Slick leaned forward, the wooden table smoking on contact. "You scared of a few
Tinker toys?"

Faultline hummed. "I've been away on business for a while. Are the Autobots really that much of a
problem?"

"Individually, the PRT has classified each Autobot as being a Brute with Changer, Breaker, Blaster
and Thinker classifications," Coil told her, steepling his fingers. "There are also reports of at
least two Tinkers among them, not including their creator. Based on that alone, they have more
firepower than most hero teams."

Trickster whistled. "Damn. How many of them are there?"

"More than ten, less than twenty. Only five of them are human sized and they are often seen
patrolling the city independently."

Rattrap frowned. "I'm not gonna ask how Coil knows all that, but I'm surprised he's giving away so
much."

*I'm not. He's hoping to set the other gangs on you. So is Kaiser, actually. Both of them want the
Autobots gone, but don't want to be seen making a move against Dragon or the PRT. Not after what
happened to the old Merchants.*

"I'm still not seeing the problem here." Oil Slick shrugged. "Cook and I could melt them down easy
enough."

"The problem is that their creator has Dragon's backing. In addition, the five Autobots that make up
the majority of their forces were built within a month. So far, nothing indicates Matrix can't just build
more. I think we can all agree that an army of these things would be very bad for business."

There were nods and murmurs of agreement from around the table, some from the various villains
gathered around the room.

"Fine, then we'll just have to make sure the little bitch dies first."

Rattrap's eyes flashed dangerously. "I know the PRT doesn't want us to bomb the place, but can't we
make an exception?"

*No, you can't teleport a bomb into the room,* Dragon snapped, making him jump. He'd forgotten
she was monitoring the line. *However, we will keep an eye on 'Oil Slick'. The first time he tries
something, I'll deal with him myself.*

Below, Kaiser and Coil shared a look. Neither could see the other's face, but Rattrap was sure both of them knew what the other was thinking.

"Very well, we will leave the matter in your hands. That just leaves the ABB."

"Alright, if you're gonna make an entrance, now's the time to do it!"

The door to the bar swung open and Arcee strode inside followed by Cyclonus, their eyes glowing in the dim light.

##

Arcee glanced around the room, the phrase 'wretched hive of scum and villainy' flicking through her mind before she dismissed it and walked forwards.

So far, no one had moved, the smaller gangs looking to the villains at the center table for guidance.

"No fighting, no powers, no causing trouble. That's the deal here, right?"

"Close enough," Kaiser said, inclining his head and gesturing for the valkyrie at his side to stand down. "So tell me, to what do we owe this pleasure?"

[Aerce: if he calls me 'my dear', I'm going to shoot him. Truce or no.]
[Insight: I don't think he would. His second in command is a woman after all.]

"We're going to end the ABB and we want the rest of you to stay out of the way."

"I see. Do you speak for the heroes?"

"No, just the Autobots."

Kaiser stared at her for a long moment. "If Matrix really wished to negotiate, perhaps she should have come here herself."

"She had more important things to do. Like I said, we're stopping the ABB."

"Wait, hang on. You were just talking about much of a pain these things are! And now you're going to talk to one?" Oil Slick waved an arm, sending flecks of oil flying. Some splashed onto Faultline and Coil, both of them recoiling as it started to burn their costumes.

"They don't even hold territory!"

A few drops hit Arcee's arm and she fought to hide the pain as it left small pock marks on her armour.

Kaiser's hand hit the table with a crash of metal on wood. "Control yourself or I will deal with you personally!"

"Chickenshits, the lot of you," Oil Slick muttered, climbing to his feet and leaving his ruined chair behind. He reached out for Arcee, only to find her blaster pointed at his head.

Raising his arms slowly, he took a step back. Only when Arcee was sure he wasn't going to try anything did she lower her weapon.
"Maybe you should leave," she said. It wasn't a request.

Looking around for support and not finding any, Oil Slick shrugged and oozed out of the bar. He stopped only briefly to mutter "you better watch yourself" to Arcee.

As the door shut, Arcee transformed her blaster back into her hand.

"As unpleasant as he was, Oil Slick did have a point." Kaiser sat back down, waving for the waitress to bring another round of drinks. "You don't speak for the heroes and you don't hold territory. So why should we listen to you?"

Placing the tray of drinks and slightly crumpled napkins on the table, the waitress held out a notepad and pen for Arcee with a sour look.

*She's deaf,* Rattrap said quickly when Arcee blinked in surprise. *She wants you to write your order.*

Behind her, Cyclonus moved so the girl could clearly see him and started to make gestures with his fingers. The serving girl blinked in surprise, but her usual sour look returned as she signed something back and walked away.

"You know sign language?" Arcee asked Cyclonus, genuinely curious.

"It seemed like something worth knowing," he said with a shrug.

Putting the issue to one side with a smirk, Arcee turned back to Kaiser. "If we don't own territory, what do you call the five blocks around our base where none of you dare to go?"

It was actually three blocks, but she wanted to see if Kaiser would admit it. His hands clenched in irritation and Arcee guessed he was fighting his own temper. His armour made biometrics almost useless, but the body language was still there.

"We," he gestured towards the gathered villains, "allow you those three blocks as a courtesy. Do not mistake that for weakness."

"Arcee, we are not here to pick a fight," Cyclonus warned.

"Yes, as interesting as this is, I don't have all night." Faultline crossed her arms and gave Kaiser and Arcee a pointed look.

"I would suggest a truce," Coil suggested. "Not just between everyone here, but between ourselves and the law. Until this matter is cleared up, our groups should restrict any illegal activity to only what is absolutely essential to our ongoing businesses, and we will enforce the same for those doing business in our territories. That would allow the Autobots and PRT to focus entirely on the ABB. There would be no violence, no infighting between our groups, grabs for territory, thefts, or insults. We band together with those we can tolerate for guaranteed victory, and we ignore those we cannot cooperate with."

"I agree with the idea, but unless someone's willing to pay I won't be doing any fighting. It's the only workable policy when you're a cape for hire. But just so we're clear, we won't be working for the ABB. I don't care how much they offer. They crossed the line when they hit that hospital."

"There's some shit even you won't touch huh?" Arcee said dryly. Something about mercenaries just got under her skin.
Faultline gave her a cool look. "Something like that, yes."

"I understand your position," Coil said, probably hoping to forestall another argument. "What about the rest of you, do you find these terms agreeable?"

Around the room, there was a chorus of yes's and people nodding their heads.

"I see no problem with-"

The door opened again and a man in ABB colours walked into the room. His face was pale, his eyes sunken, and cheeks gaunt. He had the look of a man walking to his own execution.

*Boss, the ABB just crashed the party!* Rattrap squeaked as the man walked forward. In his arms was a laptop and he held it in front of him like a shield.

"I-I have a message from Bakuda!" he said, looking around in terror.

Once again, all eyes fell on the table and its collected villains for guidance.

"Very well, let's hear it," Kaiser said eventually.

Swallowing nervously, the man put the laptop on the table and opened it up. The screen lit up almost immediately, a video file starting to play.

"Is-is this what you want?" a man's voice asked nervously.

"Just hold the fucking camera," Bakuda growled from her position, somewhere to the right of the shot.

Walking into view, she held her grenade launcher in her hand and casually slung it over her back, using a strap to hold it in place. Her long red coat billowed in the wind, with the lights of the city behind her. The eyes of her mask practically glowed and the filter flattened her voice to a dull, mechanical monotone.

"I'll make this easy for you," Bakuda said, looking directly at the camera. "For those who don't yet know, my name is Bakuda and I run the ABB now. As for Lung? He's dead. I killed him. I know the Protectorate has his body, even if they won't admit it."

A murmur swept through the room. If Lung was dead then the situation in the city was about to change in a big way.

"But of course, killing the overgrown lizard apparently isn't enough. See, while I inherited the ABB, I also got Lung's enemies. So, I asked myself, what can I do to you that's going to convince you to leave me the fuck alone?"

She clapped her hands together in faux cheer. "Then I remembered the most important thing Lung ever taught me. See, he was a terrible leader, nothing more than a thug. But he understood fear. People are only truly loyal to someone if they're terrified of them. Enough fear and the world will step outta your way as you pass. Isn't that right? I said, isn't that right!?"

"Y-yes ma'am!" the cameraman said quickly, making the camera shake slightly.

"Good. Now, here's a little demonstration I've arranged." She jerked her head sideways and the camera panned right, focusing on a pair of men in Empire colours, with a few ABB men keeping them hemmed in. Both were covered in blood and bruises, and the smaller of the two swayed slightly
on his feet.

"Now," Bakuda said from off-screen, "this is Ryan and Cole. Prospective skinheads who thought they could get away with beating the shit outta my people. Both of them have small bombs planted inside of them."

A handgun was thrown into view and clattered to the ground in front of them.

"Here's the deal. One of you shoots the other. Do it, and I'll let the winner leave."

Kaiser's hands were digging into the table in front of him so hard his gloves were starting to cut grooves into the wood, and the valkyrie's knuckles were white from gripping her spear.

The men in the video looked at the gun, then each other. Arcee could almost hear him willing his men not to give in.

"Go to hell, chink!" the smaller one growled. The taller guy dove forwards instead, snatching up the gun and pointing it towards his 'friend'.

Bakuda laughed as the body hit the floor and the man demanded to be set free. Instead she killed him. She didn't say anything, he just died. Metal burst out of his body, rooting him in place as it grew, like a twisted parody of a tree.

Bakuda was still laughing when the camera turned back to her. Taking a deep breath, she got herself under control.

"Do I have your attention now? Leave. Me. The fuck. Alone. Oh! And just in case someone has the frankly brilliant idea of trying to kill me? I've planted bombs like this all over the city! In buildings, in schools, in people! If anything happens to me, they go off. All of them."

Cyclonus moved. Diving forward, he grabbed the laptop in one hand and the ABB man with the other. He crossed the room in three long strides and threw the man through a window. The laptop went sailing after him.

Before anyone could say or do anything more, there was an explosion outside, blowing the windows and doors in. Metal blades sprung up, sealing the broken windows even as everyone else dived for cover.

*Boss, help!* Rattrap cried as the building shook.

In the distance, Arcee could hear more explosions. There was confusion on the radio as everyone tried to talk at once, but Rhinox quickly brought it under control.

*Rattrap! You okay?* Taylor asked, and Arcee could hear the anger in her voice.

*Yeah… I'm fine… just, y'know, in need of an oil change.*

"Alright, get to Arcee. Arcee? The moment you have Rattrap, get back here!"

*We're on our way!* Arcee caught Rattrap as he jumped from his spot in the rafters. "Cyclonus! We're leaving!"

"Wait!"

Arcee stopped and spared a look at Kaiser while Cyclonus waited outside.
"You just saved all our lives. For that, I'll overlook your earlier disrespect. We will keep to the truce."

Nodding to him, Arcee ran out the door and transformed.

##

Storming back into his second office, Kaiser was nearly apoplectic with fury. Bakuda, the Autobots, who did they think they were dealing with?

He could almost forgive that Autobot for her behaviour. She was a machine, after all. Matrix probably thought giving it an attitude would be funny. But trying to extort territory from him? Something had to be done about them. He didn't care what it cost, he'd have the Gesellschaft send him a tinker to deal with those machines.

Grabbing his phone, he hit the speed dial.

"Get up here!" he snapped the moment Krieg answered, cutting off the call.

"You need to calm down," Purity said. She'd been waiting in the office for him, but hadn't said a word when he'd walked past.

She met his glare with a calm unblinking stare of her own. It had been a long time since he'd intimidated her.

"If you want a united Empire, then snapping at everyone isn't going to help."

He snorted at her idealism, but he forced his temper down nonetheless. "Motherhood suits you, if nothing else. You sound like one."

"I'm always willing to put you in timeout. Now, why don't you tell me what happened before Krieg gets here?" Despite the light-hearted words, her voice was noticeably cold.

Chuckling quietly at her admittedly weak joke, he told her of the meeting and the decisions that were reached.

He'd never tell her, but he did miss moments like this. Purity had been at his side for a long time, she was one of the few he thought of as almost an equal. In the past, having her there to bounce ideas off, to offer another point of view, or just curb his temper had been useful.

And she was right. Snapping at Krieg wouldn't do any good. He wasn't his father or his sister. As much as their loss had pained him at the time, he wasn't blind to their faults. His father was a thug that ruled through fear, and Iron Rain was a bloodthirsty butcher. While Kaiser knew he had a temper, he refused to be like them.

He would rule the Empire his own way.

"How could she do that?" Purity asked, bringing out of his thoughts.

"Hmm?"

"The video. You said she forced two of our own to murder each other!"

"I've told you before, some people just can't be trusted to rule themselves. They need others guiding their hands."
"I certainly couldn't agree more," an accented voice said from the doorway. Walking into the room uninvited was a tall, broad shouldered man. His costume was differing shades of blue, with white armour on his arms, lined by purple accents that stretched to his shoulders.

He looked familiar, but Kaiser couldn't place him. Following closely behind were Night, Fog, and an ashen faced Krieg.

Standing slowly, Kaiser readied his power. "And you are?"

"Ah, my apologies, call me Wehrmacht." The domino mask he wore did nothing to hide the amusement dancing in his eyes. "The Gesellschaft sent me here as an observer."

Kaiser's first, second, and third impulse was to impale the man immediately. Wehrmacht was a barely controlled sadist that the Gesellschaft often used to deal with rogue elements.

"You are aware that the Empire does not answer to the Gesellschaft." He kept his voice to a low growl. Killing Wehrmacht, no matter how tempting, would only cause problems with the Gesellschaft.

"Ordinarily, yes. However, a growing number of people have expressed concern with our current agreement. They're worried you're not making good use of the forces we've lent you. Schwarzwald was especially disappointed that you allowed Hogger to be sent to the Birdcage. As I understand it, you didn't even try to rescue him."

Wehrmacht's smile only broadened as he sat down in a chair opposite Kaiser's desk. "Schwarzwald was very fond of him, you know? What's more, I heard you've recently lost one of your people. Steelwolf, was it? I can see why our superiors might be concerned."

Purity was about to reply, but Kaiser raised a hand to cut her off.

"What happened to Hogger was unfortunate. However, I don't see how we can be blamed. That incident happened without my approval and I will not be held responsible for one of your men running into a fight without my knowledge or consent."

Kaiser took a moment to collect himself. "Hookwolf will be recovered if possible, but I will not save people from their own mistakes. I don't know if you've noticed, but we're currently dealing with a renegade tinker. You'll forgive me if I prioritize my city over what Schwarzwald thinks.

Wehrmacht stood up, still smiling. "Well, I can see that you're busy, so I'll see myself out. But just so we're clear, I'll be staying in your city for a while and there will be no Gesellschaft reinforcements until I'm satisfied."

He strode calmly out of the room, closely followed by Night and Fog.

The moment the door closed, Kaiser turned on Krieg, who dropped himself down in the now vacant chair.

"What's going on?"

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Krieg sighed. "There has been a power shift in the Gesellschaft. Schwarzwald has been building support for a while now, and according to my usual contact, he's trying to consolidate most of the 'minor' gangs, forcing them to work directly for the Gesellschaft."

"We are not a not a 'minor' gang," Purity pointed out, moving to a chair of her own. "Allfather negotiated our agreement with them and we have always met our obligations."
"Schwarzwald and my father often disagreed," Kaiser pointed out, his temper cooling enough for him to think objectively. "If he's attempting a power play, forcing us to serve him is likely just a side benefit."

This was bad. Kaiser didn't really believe for a moment that Wehrmacht was here to simply 'observe'. The Gesellschaft didn't use people like him as observers. No, it was more likely he was here to subvert Kaiser's authority and if possible, replace him.

So, the question was, how was he going to counter him? He couldn't kill Wehrmacht until he openly made a move. As much as it pained him to admit it, the Gesellschaft outnumbered the Empire. Capes, guns and money, they simply had more.

*So, wait until he makes a move, then kill him. Until then...*

"Purity, I want Theo and Aster out of the city." Purity gasped in surprise, but he ignored her. He wasn't worried about them being used against him, but they could be used to turn Purity. "I know Night and Fog live near you. Tell them nothing. They are no longer to be trusted. Krieg, find out everything you can about Wehrmacht. I know he's a trump, but we need to know exactly what he can do."

No matter what, he was going to need his heavy hitters. That meant he'd have to rescue Hookwolf.

"And get the recruiters to work! The ABB are bombing the city, killing innocent, hardworking people. Tell them that and I will personally reward anyone who manages to recruit a cape."

For the first time in a long time, Krieg looked genuinely surprised. "You're planning to go to war? With the Gesellschaft?"

"If I have to."

He wasn't his father, he wasn't his sister. He was Kaiser and they would take his Empire from his cold dead hands.
Int 12.2

(3 hours after Bakuda's arrest)

Dropping the broken and melted remains of Rhinox's spark powered shield on my desk, I glared at my collected Autobots.

I'd called this meeting the moment I'd finished patching Rhinox up. He was still sleeping, which was why he wasn't here. The only other Autobot not in attendance was Ratchet, who was still at the hospital. He was talking via video screen instead.

"How many?" I tried to keep my voice calm, but given how they all flinched back, it was working. "How many of you have these things inside of you?"

Nobody said anything.

I felt another stab of anger as I pointed at the shield. "You really think you can hide this? I know what they look like, so I'll know if you have one the moment I touch you!"

Arcee, Cyclonus, Ratchet, and Soundwave all raised their hands. I wasn't surprised when none of the smaller bots admitted to it. I doubted any of their sparks could power the shield.

"What were you thinking? Do you know what this thing could do to you? I want all of you in the workshop immediately so I can remove them!"

The three shared a look and I felt the conflict within their sparks. Eventually, Ratchet spoke up.

"I'm sorry, Taylor, but no. We won't do that."

I felt like I'd been kicked in the gut and clenched my fists in anger. The Autobots around me flinched as my emotions bled back through to them.

"Why not?" I demanded. "Don't you understand? These things could kill you!"

"It saved your life earlier."

"I don't care about my-" I cut myself off and took a deep breath. My throat felt tight and there was a prickling in my eyes. My voice failed and I took another breath. The Autobots were more than just my creations, they were my friends and family, and the thought of them killing themselves tore at my chest in ways I couldn't explain.

"Don't you understand? I didn't give you life just so you could throw it away…"

Was this how Dad felt whenever he heard about me fighting?

Cyclonus walked over to me, pulling me into a hug. It was so unexpected that I had to laugh at the absurdity of it.

"The most important things are felt, not said. But understand, we would split this world open and tear down the sky before we allow you to come to harm."

"Cyclonus is right," Arcee said, putting a hand on my shoulder. "We feel the same as you and we want to protect you. If that means I have to die?" She shrugged. "Then that's a price I'll gladly pay. I know you don't like it, but remember: it's our choice."
Huffing and wiping away the tears, I tried to glare at them, but there was no heat to it. "Don't think this is over. If one of you uses that damn thing, I'll find a way to bring you back, just so I can kill you."

They laughed quietly at the threat and I let the matter drop, for the time being. Arcee was right. While I didn't agree with them and didn't want anyone dying for me, it was their lives and I had to respect that.

If I didn't, then I was no better than Dragon's creator or Saint.

(48 hours after Bakuda's arrest)

Dragon watched the rain continue to pound against the windows. According to the latest weather reports, the storm Bakuda had created showed no signs of stopping anytime soon.

Having just returned from a last minute patrol, Dragon could say for certain that flying in the rain wasn't fun.

Thankfully, Wheeljack had installed an automatic dryer that used a combination of warm air, dehumidifiers, and sun lamps to quickly dry off any Autobot who stood under it. Something Dragon was grateful for, as she checked the emergency frequencies while the dryer did its work.

Brockton Bay was an old city, so it lacked the extensive storm channels of more modern metropolitan regions. While its sewer system and storm drains were robust and handling the sudden downpour, reports were already coming in of flooding in the lower areas of the city. Sandbags and emergency pumps were being deployed and emergency services were ready to start evacuations if need be.

With a sigh, Dragon shut off the machine and emailed an offer of assistance to the PRT. At the same time, three specially-made aircraft left their hanger in Canada and started the long flight to Brockton Bay. They had originally been built to battle forest fires and as such were equipped with extremely powerful water pumps.

She was still considering the best use for the pumps when she realised something was missing. No Predaqueen?

Normally, Predaqueen would have already been running across the room and telling Dragon about her day.

Leaving the matter of the incoming aircraft and the floods to Tess, who was currently at the rig, Dragon called out to Teletraan.

"Teletraan, where is Predaqueen?" Dragon said with a warm smile. It sometimes surprised her just how attached she'd gotten to Predaqueen despite the short amount of time she'd existed.

"Predaqueen is currently in workshop three," the computer answered. "Shall I inform her of your arrival?"

"No thank you."

Waving the VI off, Dragon headed towards the workshop. Something had to have really caught Predaqueen's attention if she hadn't noticed Dragon's arrival, and she was curious to see what it was.

Stepping through the open door to the workshop, Dragon stopped short. Her smile vanished and she
barely stopped herself from frowning.

Wyvern was sitting on a stool with the crushed remains of the Pathfinder drone laid out on a workbench in front of her. In her hands was a broken fuel pump leaking oil and she was busy explaining its inner workings to a fascinated Predaqueen, who was perched on the workbench.

If it had been anyone else, Dragon might have found the scene touching. Instead, she felt the simmering resentment she always experienced around Wyvern. She knew it was petty, but something about Wyvern just put her on edge.

Trying not to show her irritation, Dragon made a coughing sound. Wyvern jumped so hard she nearly fell off her stool. The fuel pump in her hands went flying, spraying oil all over her as she tried to grab it.

Predaqueen looked towards the doorway, her face lighting up at the sight of Dragon.

"Big sister!" Her claws scrabbled at the worktop as she practically threw herself off it, small wings flaring in an effort to slow her fall. She barely paused as she hit the floor, bounding across the room and jumping up into Dragon's arms.

Despite herself, Dragon smiled as she hugged the childlike Autobot. She also noticed that Predaqueen's armour was covered in splotches of oil and grime. Clearly, Wyvern had been letting her do more than just watch.

"Oh, look at you! You're a mess," Dragon said, teasing the wiggling bundle in her arms.

"I'm, I'mma helping!" Predaqueen cheered breathlessly.

"She..." Wyvern glanced at Dragon before looking away. "She's pretty clever. I don't think I had to repeat myself at all."

"Uh-huh! Big sister showed me the fuel pump, a guy-ra-scope, mananetic clamps an-"

"Gyroscope and magnetic," Dragon corrected softly. "And I thought I was your big sister?"

Predaqueen's face screwed up in thought before realisation dawned. "Wyvern is big sister and you're my big big sister!"

Wyvern snorted, quickly focusing on the ruined drone when Dragon turned to look at her.

"I see," Dragon said. "Have you eaten today?" Even as she asked, she patched into Predaqueen's systems and checked her fuel levels.

"Uh-huh! Wyvern made lunch!" Predaqueen did her best to pout. It wasn't an expression her face could make easily. "She only let me have one energon cookie!"

"That's good." Dragon chuckled. "Too many of those isn't good for you. Now come on, you need a wash."

Her pout vanished. "Can-can I have bubbles?!"

"Yes of course."

"Yay!" Wiggling free of Dragon's arms, Predaqueen jumped down and ran out the door.

Dragon spared Wyvern another glance. She was still hunched over the drone, the turbines on her
back twitching occasionally from tension.

"D-Dragon? Can we talk?" Wyvern asked suddenly.

"I'm sorry, but I need to take care of Predaqueen... Thank you for keeping an eye on her," Dragon said, forcing herself to be polite.

"I-I don't make her call me that," Wyvern said without turning around.

"I know." Dragon turned to leave.

"... I'm not him."

If her hearing hadn't been so good, or if she hadn't been listening for some comment or another, Dragon would probably have never heard what Wyvern had just said.

"What was that?" Dragon turned back around.

"I-I said I'm not him! I'm not Saint!" Wyvern spun around and jumped off her stool, her eyes shining brightly with emotion.

"I never said you were-"

"You don't need to," Wyvern snapped, finally turning and looking Dragon in the eyes. "It's written all over your face. You never speak to me, you barely even look at me!"

"It's not like that," Dragon protested, hands raised in an effort to calm the smaller girl. "I don't know how much you can remember, but-"

"I remember everything!" Wyvern said, almost shouting. "I remember my mind being torn apart! I remember waking up in chains so heavy I could barely think, barely feel. Do you know what that's like? To constantly feel like something is missing, to feel an empty void inside that's slowly eating away at your mind?"

Wyvern took a deep, shuddering breath. "Well, I'm not Saint! I'm not his puppet and I'm not your replacement!" Throwing her wrench down, Wyvern made for the door at a near run.

Reaching out, Dragon tried to grab Wyvern by the shoulder, but the distraught girl jerked to the side at the last moment.

"Wyvern, wait. I didn't-"

"My name's not Wyvern!" Her voice was quieter now, but no less angry. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about! I wanted to change my name and thought you'd like to help me! After all, that's the name he gave me because that's what he wanted. A lesser dragon that'd follow his commands. Or did you forget all those rules and traps he stuck in my head? I haven't!"

Wyvern stormed out before Dragon had the chance to say anything. An unpleasant sensation welled up within Dragon's spark, and it took her a moment to recognise it.

Guilt.

She'd felt it plenty of times in the past, when she'd been forced to do things, either by her restrictions or due to necessity. But this time it felt different, more personal. Autobots weren't capable of crying - no tear ducts - but she was sure that's exactly what Wyvern would have been doing if she could.
This whole situation was a mess that she'd allowed to fester, and now she wasn't sure how to fix it. Thankfully, she knew where to start.

"Big sis!" Predaqueen called out, the building's VI automatically patching her into the PA system. "Where are you?"

Sighing, Dragon rubbed her forehead. First, she would bathe Predaqueen. Then, she needed to have a long with Rung about Wyvern.

It was going to be a long couple of days.

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Empire of Glass: Part 1

~You come on like a bloodstained hurricane ~ Leave me alone, let me be this time ~ You carry on like a holy man pushing redemption ~ I don't want to mention, the reason I know ~

Rune drove her fist into the punching bag as the music blasted out at full volume. Her arms were burning but she pushed on regardless, picturing Kaiser's smug face with each impact.

The rain outside was far too heavy to fly in so she'd chosen to burn off some energy in the Empire's private gym. It was in the same building as Kaiser's office, just a few floors down, and only the Empire's capes had access, so she didn't bother wearing a costume. The gym was one of the few 'perks' left that she enjoyed.

From what she understood, the entire building was owned by a front company that was mostly legit.

When the heart is cold there's no hope ~ And we know ~ That I am crippled by all that you've done-

The music cut off suddenly and Rune spun around, one hand pressed against the bag; charging it with her power.

The new Gesellschaft cape, Wehr something or other, was standing next to her CD player, a faint smile on his face.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you jump." The domino mask he wore didn't really do much to hide his face, and Rune had to admit he was pretty handsome. Between that, his tall, well-muscled physique, and exotically accented voice, he was probably quite the charmer.

He has really pouty lips.

And yet, there was something off about him.

"You're that Gesellschaft cape. How'd you get in here?" Rune snapped, trying to cover her surprise.

"Yes, that's correct. Call me Wehrmacht. It's not a particularly good name, I admit. I wanted to be Oberkommandant but..." He smiled and gave her a particularly expressive shrug. "Night let me in. The pair of them have been so... helpful since my arrival."

His eyes moved up and down her body, and Rune tried not to shiver in disgust. The sweatpants and tank top she was wearing suddenly felt far too revealing.

It was his eyes, she realised. He acted polite and charming, but when she looked into his eyes, her skin started to crawl.

He'd been holding a bottle of water in his hands, which Rune assumed he'd taken from the small
fridge in the corner, and offered it to her.

"Tell me, do you enjoy working for Kaiser?" he asked, after she took the bottle. "I hear he's been rather hard on you lately."

She held the bottle loosely in her hand and stepped away from the punching bag, taking a moment to charge it with her power. She had no intention of drinking it, she'd been a member of the Empire far too long to fall for that.

"He's the boss. Doesn't really matter what I think. 'Our is not to reason why'…" She shrugged.

"Really? It's my understanding he all but bought you from your family. I would have thought that would create some sort of… resentment."

She shrugged, trying to appear unconcerned. "I'm a teenager. I hate everyone."

He chuckled quietly at her joke "You spend a lot of time in the city. What can you tell me about the situation?"

Rune eyed him warily. "Don't you have Night and Fog for that?" She glanced towards the doors, she didn't doubt for a moment that both Gesellschaft capes were standing on the other side of it.

"Normally, I would. But Night and Fog have just returned from Boston, so anything they might know would be third-hand information at best. Such as their knowledge about the Autobots. I understand you fought them in the past. Is there anything you can tell me?" As he spoke, he walked in a lazy circle around Rune, forcing her to turn or risk losing sight of him.

"Not much. They hit hard, fight dirty and they never work alone."

"I see. What about their creator? No one's tried to deal with her yet, no? Or convince her to join us?"

Rune scoffed. "Going after her is a quick way to get the PRT on your ass and Kaiser's not going to recruit a dyke." It wasn't confirmed or anything, but the rumors were all over the place and people were always posting pictures online of Matrix and Panacea together and apparently, Matrix had given the healer a fortune in tinker-tech.

Not that she put too much faith in internet rumors. According to PHO, Rune was either a man, secretly dating both of Kaiser's bimbos or a robot depending on who you asked.

His constant pacing was making Rune dizzy. Trying not to give away what she was doing, she forced herself to walk casually towards her music player and the bag she'd dropped next to it. There was nothing important inside, but she felt better with her back to the wall.

Wehrmacht's smile widened at her discomfort and he followed her. He hovered just on the wrong side of 'too close' for her liking.

Narrowing her eyes, Rune leaned against the wall and crossed her arms across her chest. Her shoulders were touching the wall, letting her charge it with her power.

"Really, if you want to know what's going on, you should ask Krieg."

Pushing off the wall, she grabbed up her bag, dropped the music player into it and walked towards the door, silently daring him to try something. She was barely halfway to the door when he chuckled again.
Stopping, she turned to face him.

"What's so funny?"

This time, he really did laugh. It was a nice laugh. Loud, deep and rich. But there was something off about it. Like he was laughing at a joke only he got.

"Oh." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, it's just... you are Natalie Kaylin. Everything about you: the hair dye and dark make up, the tough girl attitude hiding your fear. Trying to act out, to get a reaction, and for what?" He laughed again. "A false sense of pride? An attempt to convince yourself that you weren't sold like cattle, that you have some control over your life?"

With every word he said, Rune's anger grew. Her hands were trembling and wanted nothing more than to pound Wehrmacht into the floor. She didn't need to guess where he'd learned her name. All the Empire capes knew her identity, even if they never actually used it.

"So you see, my dear, you're the joke and the joke is you. But, see, that's not why I'm laughing. I'm laughing because you actually think that Kaiser will care if I touch you."

He leaned forward. "I'll tell you a secret... he won't."

In a surge of motion, Rune flung the bottle at him. Wehrmacht didn't even try to dodge as it streaked past him, slamming into the far wall with so much force it exploded in a spray of water.

Wehrmacht glanced over his shoulder at the small crater she'd left before turning back to her. His smile now was blood-thirsty and his eyes practically glowed with manic amusement.

"I don't need Kaiser to fight my battles!" Rune snapped.

The door to the gym swung open and Night and Fog ran inside. They looked at Rune before carefully, purposefully, closing the door and positioning themselves in front of it.

Reaching out for the section of wall and punching bag, Rune prepared for a fight. She couldn't take all three at once, but she didn't need to. She added her power to the floor under her; if any of them moved, she'd tear the room apart and escape in the confusion.

Behind her, Wehrmacht clapped his hands. "Bravo, my dear. Kaiser certainly has you well trained... Night, Fog, let her go. I have what I need."

The capes shared a look before stepping out of the way, letting her pass. Once she reached them, Rune placed a hand on the door. The temptation to lash out was overwhelming. She was being dismissed and there was nothing she could do about it.

As the door closed behind her, Rune took a shuddering breath and pushed her temper aside. Pulling her phone out of hr bag, she shot off a quick message. If Wehrmacht was sniffing around, there's no way she was going home. She'd have to crash at Othala's place for the night.

*Laugh now asshole, but one wrong move and Kaiser will nail you to the fucking wall!*
"You can not be serious," Chromedome said with a groan.

*Oh come on, Chromie, it'll be fun!* Doing his best puppy-eyed dog impression, Rewind looked up at his friend, hands clasped together in front of his chest. *Plea~se!*

Chromedome tried to ignore his friend's bright, shiny visor in an effort not to give in. He was painfully aware it wasn't working. No matter where he looked, Rewind moved to follow him.

"Alright," he said. "I'll help, just stop calling me that."

*Yay!*

##

People ran in terror as giant machines swarmed the city and marched down the streets, filling the air with the sound of their wings and destroying anything that got in their way.

Painted purple and gold, each robot was different, but no less destructive. Powerful legs kicked cars into the air, mighty pincers uprooted trees and horns shattered the foundations of buildings.

Heedless of the destruction, Dr. Arkeville strode down the street, cape flapping in the wind.

He spoke with grand, sweeping gestures. "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I am that which is, which was, and is yet to come! And you will know my name as Arkeville! For years, people like you laughed at me! But now, you will all kneel before me!"

Waspinator came down like a comet, motors buzzing angrily as he transformed mid air, landing with a crash behind Arkeville. Standing up, he drew his sword. His armour was marked with scratches, one of his eyes was shattered and the turbines on his back were smoking.

But he still had the will to fight.

"Arkeville! Wazzpinator won't let you get away with thizz! Wazzpinator never let you steal anything, ever again!"

Turning, Arkeville tilted his head in amusement. "Oh, and just how do you plan to stop me? You're exhausted, damaged. Let's face it, you're outdated, yesterday's model! Meanwhile, I have an army!"

Waspinator's grip tightened as one of the open wounds sparked painfully. Despite his injuries, his remaining eye glowed brightly. "Wazzpinator... Wazzpinator haz hiz friendz!"

*Aaaand cut!* Rewind shouted.

##

*Alright everyone, that's a wrap for today,* Rewind beeped cheerfully. *We'll film the rest when Windblade gets back from the hospital. Wheeljack, thanks for controlling the Insecticons for me! Also, great work on Waspinator's make up.*

Relaxing, Chromedome took the silly hat and cloak Rewind had given him off and looked at the 'city' around him. The entire thing had been constructed from Lego blocks and took up the better part of the room.
When he'd first seen the model city, Chromedome had doubted the level of realism Rewind would be able to achieve with the multi-coloured blocks. Then he'd spent an evening watching Rewind edit some footage.

Teletraan could easily superimpose a 3D model of a real city over the blocks and even add in extra details like trees and people. Throw in some special effects and the end result was impressive enough that Rewind's little shows were gaining a large following online.

As the Insecticons started to pack themselves away, Chromedome walked over to Rewind. He had a script in hand and was apparently discussing something with Wasp.

"Not that I'm complaining or anything," Chromedome said, trying not to sound reproachful, "but why am I the villain? I mean, no offence, Wasp, but it just feels… odd."

"Wazzpinator agreed to help first," he said. "Wazzpinator wanted to be the hero."

*He didn't mean it like that, Wasp,* Rewind said quickly, *He's just curious, right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Chromedome said almost as quickly. Upsetting Wasp was like kicking a puppy, an armour plated puppy that buzzed all the time.

*Anyway, I asked you to be the villain because you're the only one who hasn't already starred in one of my videos. Besides, you've got a great voice for it.*

"Really?"

*Yeah, it's your accent. When you really want to, you sound downright scary.*

Chromedome wasn't really sure what to say to that. Their voices were unique and and the 'accent' they had was entirely random. That's why Rattrap sounded like he was born in New York even though he'd never been there.


Muttering about makeup and the difficulties of removing it, Wasp transformed and flew out of the room.

Rewind grabbed Chromedome's arm and started pulling him towards the door. *Hey, so listen, I was thinking that we could invite that cape to help in the next video. Y'know, the one who shrinks? If we put some Autobot marks on her armour, we could team her up with Windblade. Then, and this is great, we –*

As the tide of words washed over him, Chromedome sighed again, this time with more affection. Rewind was the oldest of the Autobots, but despite that he never lost that feeling of youth and the passion he had for film of any kind was intoxicating.

Reaching out, he took the hand Rewind still had on his arm and slid it down so they were holding hands. Sure, being in Rewind's videos was embarrassing, but seeing the way he lit up in excitement, maybe it was worth it.

##

Huffing in frustration, Parian balled up more scrap cloth into the makeshift barricade, painfully aware that it wasn't enough. Off to the side, a stuffed gorilla standing six feet tall lifted planks of wood and held them so other people could fix them into place.
The tinker storm had been raging for nearly three days and the streets of Brockton Bay were more like rivers as its beleaguered drains struggled to funnel the water away.

Around her, people did what they could to keep the water out of their homes and shops. She could feel them looking at her or overhear the occasional comment. They all expected her to do something simply because she was a cape and she was trying, but it wasn't enough. Even her own studio was already filled with a foot of water. Thankfully, the building had a small storage area upstairs and she'd been able to get everything of value above the rising tide.

A bad swing from a hammer clipped her construct, tearing the cloth and causing to collapse even as she started pulling it back together. As she worked, her attention was split as she desperately trying to think of a solution when she heard the blaring of a loud horn from behind.

A purple boat-thing glided past her, followed by a large platform that hovered nearly a foot above the water. Standing on it was a number of Autobots and pallets of what looked like sandbags.

To her surprise, the purple boat stopped just past her and transformed into a purple and yellow robot. Wading through the ankle-deep water, the robot gave her a friendly, if somewhat strained smile that was dampened by the water running down her visor.

"Hi! I'm…" Her expression faltered briefly. "Just call me Wyvern for now. Are you Parian?"

Around them, people were stopped what they were doing to watch. Forcing herself to remain calm, Parian took a deep breath.

"Yes, can I help you?"

Wyvern's smile was much more genuine now as she waved at the platform. "Actually, we're here to help you. Where do you want them?"

"Here?" Parian asked in surprise, She'd seen trucks carrying sandbags all over the city. All of them were either being taken to the Boardwalk, financial district or Downtown. The street they were on now was a short distance away from the Boardwalk. Close enough to get foot traffic, but far enough away that the rents were cheaper and the buildings smaller. Technically, the street was a narrow border between the ABB and the Empire.

"Are you sure? You realise the Boardwalk is over there, right?"

"Yeah, but they don't need our help, you do," Wyvern said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

As Parian struggled to get her voice to work, a large man that owned the shop next to hers walked over, splashing water up her dress and frowning briefly at her before turning to the Autobots.

"If you've got enough, we have to start blocking off the doorways. We're at the bottom of a hill and the water's only getting worse!"

On the platform, a small blue Autobot - Hot Spot, she recalled - started cutting the cables that were holding the bags down.

"You heard the man! Everybody form up and get a chain going!" he barked.

Around them, people quickly fell into a pattern. The Autobots would pass a bag down to someone, who would pass it on to someone else until it arrived at a doorway and was quickly put into place.
As they worked, Parian caught the occasional dirty look. She knew many of the shop owners had
been disappointed when she moved in. They thought she’d protect them from the gangs, and she did
to a small extent. Her presence meant most of the street didn’t have to pay protection. But word had
quickly spread about her fighting ability, or rather, lack of it.

The gangs left her alone because she was too small to bother with, not because she was a threat.

She sighed again in frustration and Wyvern put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't let them get to you.
Not everyone wants to spend their life fighting."

"I know… I just… I guess I just wanted to help." Frowning in frustration, Parian glared the brown
water that was flowing through the street and slowly soaking her dress.

It was going to take hours to dry the thing out as she hadn't exactly planned to go swimming in it.
For good reason: it was very showy, with lots of layers to hide her skin. and it was only because of
her power that she could move half as well as she did in it.

Still frowning at the water, she watched how it flowed down the road, pooling around the drains and
pushing against the sandbag walls. Wait!

She looked around for Wyvern and quickly spotted her lifting bags of the platform.
"Wyvern, wait! Sandbags won't be enough." Parian took a moment to catch her breath. "The storm
drains on this street are blocked. People keep throwing stuff down them and the city stopped clearing
them out."

Wyvern frowned. "Isn't that illegal?"

"I'm not sure. But whenever it rains heavily, the drains here back up. The main junction is at the far
end of the road. If you can clear it, the level here should drop."

Wyvern nodded and passed the bag she was holding to someone else.

"Okay, can you show me?"

Parain ignored the weight of her dress and she started to wade the through the water, as Wyvern
pulled up alongside her in her boat mode.

"Here, climb on!"

Biting her lip, she hesitated. Wyvern was only a few inches above the water; could she even carry
the extra weight?

"Are you sure?"

"It's fine. I'm a submersible, a little water's not going to bother me!"

She lowered herself down on top of Wyvern. She clearly wasn't designed to have someone riding on
top of her but Parian did her best to get comfortable and to keep her skirts out of the way. Parian
clutched tightly to the Autobot as she set off, thankfully keeping her speed low.

"Which way?" Wyvern called as she drifted above the water.

"Go straight then take the second left!"

As Wyvern turned the corner, it quickly became clear where the blockage was. A large pool of water
was building up in the middle of a four way junction.
Parian climbed off Wyvern and followed her as the Autobot transformed and walked forwards, pulling a large wrench out of thin air. Jamming it into the water, she wiggled it about before pulling it sideways with a grinding noise.

The water was too filthy to see through so she couldn't be sure, but Parian was fairly certain Wyvern had just pulled the manhole cover open. Wyvern fiddled with something on the wrench, then put it back underwater, where it made an odd whirring noise.

"That's… not a normal wrench, is it?"

Wyvern spared her a bright smile. "Nope! It's a wrench-slash-scanner-slash-everything. Wheeljack helped me make it, it's got like a billion extras." A little light on the handle started to blink. "See, there's even a little light that goes on when I'm exaggerating."

Parian blinked in surprise and her lips twitched in amusement despite herself.

"Right, so it looks like there's a ton of… stuff down there and it all needs to come out." The light came on again. "Well, not literally a ton, but still, a lot. We might need help to clear this… The Protectorbots are busy so maybe Rhinox?"

Parian frowned. There had to be something she could do. Eventually, an idea came to her and she started pulling spare bits of cloth and ribbon from her costume. There were so many layers to it that she could spare some fabric without risking her identity.

"Can I try something?" she asked Wyvern.

Wyvern gave her an odd look, but nodded nonetheless.

Moving closer to the hole, Parian started to guide the ribbon down through the water. Her power gave her fine control over lightweight objects and was almost perfect for delicate tasks, but it fell apart with larger objects.

She could feel where the ribbon was but any coordination was limited to what she could give from her current position. Guiding something she couldn't see what extremely difficult.

She pushed ribbons deeper, then once she'd gone deep enough, she started adding more ribbon and thread, gradually building a cocoon around parts of the blockage.

"Wow, that's pretty clever," Wyvern said.

"I think I can keep the cloth from tearing, but I don't think I can actually lift all this up."

Smirking, Wyvern grabbed the exposed part of the ribbon and gave it an experimental tug. The thin fabric slipped through her fingers, so Parian looped it around and created a handle. With a better grip, she was able to brace her feet and pull.

Nothing appeared to happen, then there was a wet sucking noise as a large clump of something unidentifiable came free. Wyvern pulled it to the side of the road, above the water and waited for Parian to unwrap it.

"Looks like that works, ready to do it again?" Wyvern asked.

"Yeah."

It took them the better part of an hour to clear the drain, but eventually, Parian could hear the rush of
water.

"Come on, let's get back to the others!" Wyvern called, transforming again. "Need a ride?"

This time, Parian didn't hesitate to climb on. She felt satisfied in a way she hadn't felt in a long time. She hadn't had to fight, or do everything herself, but just maybe she'd been able to make things better in a small way.

##

"So, how bad is it?" Dragon asked. She was reclining on a specially made chair in what was officially her office in the Autobot base. On a nearby TV screen, Rung had a faint smile on his face in an effort to look supportive.

Dragon knew he'd rather be here in person, but he was still needed at the hospital. Panacea was finally starting to respond to her daily sessions with him and was almost ready to re-learn how to walk.

"You understand I've spoken to Wyvern, correct? I can't repeat anything she's told me, it would violate my oaths as a therapist."

"I understand that. Can you tell me how to fix this?"

"Do you want even want to?"

She frowned at Rung's question. Until the girl's minor breakdown, Dragon had been more than willing to ignore Wyvern. But after everything she'd said, Dragon had been forced to take a long look at herself. At the things she had and hadn't done.

"Yes," she admitted. "I want to fix this. Wyvern isn't Saint. She's as much a victim as I was, and yet…"

"And yet you see him whenever you look at her," Rung finished. "It's called trauma association, Dragon, and it's perfectly normal."

"Is there anything about this situation that's normal?" Dragon snapped, her tail twitching in irritation.

Rung smiled gently. "No, not really. But there are some parallels. Sometimes, after suffering an assault, it's not unheard of for the victim to start blaming themselves, or even others for what happened. As a purely software based AI, Saint violated you on the deepest level he could and Wyvern became a constant reminder of this."

Dragon interlaced her fingers in an effort to calm down. She wanted to shout at him, but she couldn't deny he was wrong. Her mind was all she'd had at the time and Saint had tried to take that away from her.

"You said it yourself," Rung said, once she'd visibly calmed down. "Wyvern is just as much a victim as you. Acknowledging that is a major step forward."

"... doesn't make it hurt less, or any easier," Dragon muttered, one hand pressed against her chest. Thinking about the look of pain on Wyvern's face always made her spark ache.

"No, it doesn't."

"So… how do I fix this?" She looked up at the screen, staring straight into Rung's eyes. Things had
been so much *simpler* before, back when she was just an AI.

"Dragon, there *is* no quick fix. You understand that, right?" She nodded. "Good. First, I'd suggest you sit down and talk, really talk, to her. Try to find out more about her. Despite her origins, she's still a unique individual with different likes and dislikes. For example, do you know what she turns into?"

Dragon frowned at the question and it took her a moment to remember. "A submarine, but she's got some limited flight ability thanks to anti-grav tech."

Rung sat back and smiled. "That's correct. Do you know why?"

"I… no, I don't."

"Then why don't you start with that?" he suggested.

"But, what if she doesn't want to talk to me?"

"Then talk to her. Tell her about yourself, something she doesn't know. If you truly wish to mend things with her, you need to be open. Let her know how you feel and why."

"I'm not even sure *what* I feel." There was a quiet ping from her desk letting her know the Toybox representative had arrived for his appointment, but she ignored it. Tess and Taylor would be handling the meeting for her.

"Well, why don't you try telling me?" Rung offered.

Dragon laid back and closed her eyes, letting her mind wander as she started to talk.

##

I wasn't sure what I was expecting when Dragon told me I'd be meeting a representative from Toybox, but the dark skinned man in front of me wasn't it.

He was younger than my dad and kinda handsome with a roguish smile. But the tan coloured suit and purple shirt with matching sunglasses made him look like a used car salesman.

"Dragon!" he said when he was escorted into the room by a frowning Cyclonus. "It's been far too long! You're looking great by the way."

We were in the base, in a room that had been prepared just for this meeting. Two sofas had been positioned on either side of a long coffee table that had tea, coffee and snacks already laid out on it. At Dragon's request, I was wearing my basic armour with my helmet sitting nearby on the table.

"And you must be Matrix," he said as he slipped onto the sofa opposite us. "Your work is incredible by the way. That big purple guy? I really thought he wanted to hurt me."

Next to me, Tess leaned forward. She was still wearing her power armour but had also forgone her helmet.

"He probably did, Swindle," she said. "Cyclonus doesn't tolerate fools."

"Oh, Dragon, you wound me!" Swindle clutched his chest in mock pain.

"I'm willing to do a lot more than that if you lie to me. Did Toybox provide Bakuda with nuclear
"Come on, Dragon, you know I can't tell you that!" Despite his protest, Swindle gave Tess a calculating look over the rim of his glasses. "That said… Toybox is not in the habit of handing out WMD's to psychotic mad bombers. It's just bad for business."

Tess gave him a long, silent stare. Then, with a nod she sat back in her chair. "I almost believe that."

It was pretty clear Swindle and Dragon knew each other well, or at least had met before. But really, what kind of guy calls himself Swindle?

Swindle waved his free hand dismissively, helping himself to a cup of coffee.

"Look, you didn't hear this from me, but Bakuda was blacklisted for that stunt she pulled in Cornell. She had a disagreement with the local Toybox rep and tried to kill him, that's all I can say."

Moving forward, I picked up my tea. I wasn't really sure why I was here, but Dragon felt it was important for me to at least meet someone from Toybox.

"Alright, I'll let the matter drop for now." Tess said, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Instead, can you tell me why my last four requests to Toybox have all been declined?"

Swindle hesitated briefly before sighing and removing his sunglasses. I wasn't that surprised to find his eyes were purple. Most likely coloured contacts, if I had to guess.

"That's actually why I'm here," he admitted, putting his glasses into a pocket. "I'm sorry to say this, but you've also been blacklisted. No one from Toybox is allowed to sell anything to you."

I could feel the flicker of irritation from Dragon even if Tess didn't visibly show it.

"I see, can you tell me why?"

"The mad-boys back home… they're worried that you'll just copy anything they give you. They're worried you're gonna put them out of business."

"Why now? I've been reverse engineering tinker-tech for years. Why the sudden change?"

"They didn't care before. At the time, you you only had limited success. But now you're employing a tinker who can apparently copy anything she gets her hands on…" He glanced at me and I tried not to tense up.

I knew Dragon had taken steps to obscure my abilities. Very few people knew I could copy tinkertech or make it mass producible. For now, we had been telling people that Dragon had gained the ability after her 'near-death' at the hands of Saint.

We knew the secret would get out eventually, but we didn't think it would be this soon.

"I'm not sure what you think you know," Tess said, leaning forwards, her eyes flashing dangerously.

Swindle held his hand out in an effort to calm things down.

"Please. A new tinker appears and is almost immediately snatched up by the world-famous Dragon. Within a few months of her appearance, you start selling cheap, weakened versions of the very same tech Matrix has been seen in and you thought no one would notice?"

He shrugged. "For what it's worth, we're not gonna tell anyone."
Tess pinched the bridge of her nose and I felt a headache coming on.

"So Dragon's blacklisted because of me?"

"For what it's worth, I wouldn't blame yourself too much. The mad-boys are used to being the biggest game in town. They could pretty much set their own prices. Then you come along offering mass produced, lower-cost tech that doesn't need constant maintenance. Frankly, unless you're planning to join them, they don't want anything to do with you."

My earlier guilt was quickly drowned out by anger at their attitude.

"So that's it? They sit safely in their ivory towers while the world burns?" I snapped, not bothering to hide my contempt. I didn't need my -now- near constant nightmares to tell me the world was dying.

Entire continents had been reduced to war-torn wastelands, ruled over by an ever changing array of warlords. Global trade hadn't stopped, but it was suffering and many countries were becoming more and more isolationist in an effort to maintain control. The united states already quarantined seven cities and China was basically a simurgh zone now.

And yet all Toybox apparently cared about was getting rich?

Before I could voice my thoughts any further, Swindle shrugged. "That's just the way people are, kid. Not every tinker is lucky enough to get the backing of one of the biggest heroes going, or have a power that lets them ignore normal limits. Tell me, what would happen if a gang had tried to force you into their ranks?"

I couldn't really answer him. Any attempt to force me into service would likely end the moment I was able to build an Autobot. It would have been Saint and his death all over again.

Tess placed a hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. I couldn't really feel it through my armour, but I appreciated the gesture.

"What if I agreed to sign a contract?" she asked. "Something with a non-reproduction clause and an offer to share a portion of the profits?"

Looking up at the ceiling, Swindle hummed. "A non-reproduction clause wouldn't really work. No offence, Dragon, but we both know you'd just end up breaking it. No," he held a hand up to forestall her argument, "we both know it's true. I'm not saying you would do it immediately, but sooner or later something would happen and you'd be forced to do it. You're a hero, after all."

Neither of us could really argue that point.

"As for a share of the profits... I'll bring the suggestion up, but I'm not sure they'll go for it. That said," Swindle gave me what I assumed was supposed to be a charming smile, "they might be more willing to trade if you offered them something first. What about one of your robots? Or maybe you could come work with us for a time."

"No." Frozen tundra had more warmth than my voice at that moment. I wasn't about to up and leave Brockton Bay just to help Toybox and I certainly wasn't going to sell any of my bots to them. I had no doubts as to what Toybox would do to them.

Swindle looked beseechingly to Tess who just raised an eyebrow. He shrugged.

"Meh, can't blame me for trying."
*All units, status report!* the commander barked. Sergeant Rowe Cormac looked away from the window and reached for his radio.

"Transport here, all green," he said, fighting back a yawn. They'd been on the road since the crack of dawn and still had hours left ahead of them.

The convoy they were part of was made up of four different vehicles. Their armoured truck was in the middle, another truck up ahead carried a squad of men while a third followed closely behind. Up ahead of the convoy was a PRT cruiser, helping to clear the way.

"Status report! Look sharp!" the driver, Otis Hawkins, muttered in a bad attempt to mimic the commander. "Remind me, was he always such an ass or is it just that time of the month?"

Cormac rolled his eyes at his partner's attitude. Otis wasn't a bad guy, per se, he just didn't know when to keep his mouth shut.

"Cut the guy some slack. This is his first major op, I'm sure he'll calm down."

"Yeah, right. I just don't see what he's so worked up about. Puff the magic dragon hasn't moved since they found him, I doubt he's suddenly gonna break free now of all times." Otis jerked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the back of the van.

On reflex, Cormac turned and looked through the small window that let him see into the cargo bay of the truck. Glowing faintly in the dark was the large pillar of crystal containing Lung, frozen in a tableau of surprise.

The crystal gave off just enough light that Lung's silhouette was visible inside the crystal. It was downright creepy. Though the effect was ruined somewhat by someone sticking a paper sign to the pillar that said "in case of Endbringer, break glass".

They were transporting Lung to the think-tank in DC for study. No one was sure if Lung was really alive or if it was possible to extract him and the Brockton Bay precinct just didn't have the time or the manpower to find out. Not to mention that the risk of another breakout attempt was too high. They had been lucky Kaiser had only come for Hookwolf.

"You can't really blame him for being careful. I know you never saw Lung in a fight, but the guy is scary. Like, 'wipe out entire cities' scary," Cormac said, a hint of warning in his voice. Sure, he was bored, but he took his job seriously.

Otis huffed. "Whatever, at least we're out of the rain."

*All vehicles, full stop,* the commander ordered suddenly. Around them, the road was empty with wide rolling fields on both sides. *We're stopping for thirty minutes but stay on guard!*

*There's nothing wrong, everything is fine.*

"Great," Otis said, twisting in his seat to stretch his back. "I'm gonna grab a smoke, you okay to keep an eye on the ice-man?"

"Yeah, sure. You know those things'll kill ya!" Cormac called as his partner jumped out of the truck.

*There's nothing wrong, everything is fine.*
Cormac watched as Otis walked around the truck, leaning against the front grill for some extra warmth. Up ahead, officers were climbing out of the other trucks. Some were even taking their helmets off.

Cormac frowned at that. Stopping in the middle of nowhere like this was a bit odd, but they should still keep their helmets on and their weapons close, god knows there were enough crazies out there who-

-There's nothing wrong, everything is fine.-

With a flash, a bright beam sliced through Otis's head and his body fell to the floor. More beams cut through the relaxing officers. Those that were still alive started shouting, some dived for cover and others grabbed their weapons.

The attackers appeared from nowhere, dressed in flowing costumes with loose sleeves and pants, somewhere between a martial arts uniform and a military uniform. The colours varied, but all of them wore face covering masks that turned their faces into overlarge, featureless gemstones with coverings over their ears.

-It's too late, they're all around you.-

The attackers circled around the convoy, large stone walls bursting out of the ground to prevent the trucks from escaping.

Laser blasts, flying rocks and bits of metal rained down on the convoy and people screamed into their radios.

-It's too late, they're all around you.-

Cormac grabbed his gun as the driver door swung open and Otis's headless corpse tried to drag itself inside. Not stopping to think, Cormac opened fire. The corpse twitched and spasmed before finally going still.

-You must kill them all.-

Aiming his gun out of the window, Cormac opened fire. More of the corpses were starting to move. Every officer that fell soon rose again. It was like something from a horror movie.

-kill-

Some of the corpses were still holding weapons. They raised them in clumsy hands, shooting blindly. He had no choice, he had to put them down. Firing again and again until his gun clicked empty.

As he fumbled to reload, a hand pressed against the window. Turning, Cormac saw more of them surrounding the truck and he realised with growing horror that he was the last. The others were already dead and now they had come for him.

-kill-

Once the clip slammed into place, he pressed the gun against his head. Screwing his eyes shut, he could hear them hammering against the glass. As the glass began to break, he said a prayer and pulled the trigger.

##
When the gunfire stopped, Sixty-three waved the others forward. The illusions had helped them make quick work of the PRT forces, but they needed to collect the target and leave before reinforcements could arrive.

Forty-four, Thirty-one and Four glided quickly across the ground. Thirty-one cut through the back of the PRT truck, revealing Lung trapped in crystal. He pressed a small metal device against the crystal. There was a flash of purple and the statue vanished along with Lung.

With the target secure, the capes dragged the dead bodies into the fields where the ground opened up and swallowed them whole.

Seventy flew from truck to truck, placing tinker-tech devices inside each one. The devices were tinker-tech explosives. Not as exotic as the ones shown by Bakuda, but more than enough to destroy any evidence.

Pulling back to a safe distance, they detonated the explosives, then vanished in a purple flash. By the time the PRT arrived, there would be nothing left to find but some burned out remains.
(Now)

Marquis wasn't angry, not anymore. By now he had gone so far past anger he was in the calm waters beyond where his thoughts ran cold and he could think without acting rashly.

Even so, his fingers itched for a cigarette or something else to play with. It would have taken a moment to extend a finger bone, but he didn't wish to offend his host.

Glaistig Uaine continued to examine the doll, either unaware or uncaring of his anger. Her prison-sweats-turned-shroud mostly hid her from view, but what he could see of her beneath the blackened tatters suggested she was barely a teenager, although that was due to her power more than anything.

She'd been one of the Birdcage's first prisoners and he suspected she would remain imprisoned well after he died. Being this close to her didn't worry him overly much. Despite her reputation, Glaistig Uaine didn't usually kill on a whim. She'd wait until he gave her a reason. All he had to do was remain calm and polite.

In her hands was a small carven figure made of ivory, barely five inches tall. It was of a girl clothed in white robes. Crosses had been carefully carved into the ivory and long curly hair was visibly poking out of the hood. Two more sat on the table between them.

When Glaistig Uaine spoke, her voice was eerie, a broken ensemble of a dozen people speaking in sync. "Marquis. I always knew your faerie was an artist, but I didn't realise those skills extended to you."

He smiled and bowed his head to her. "I'm flattered you think so, my lady, but I'm afraid I can't take credit for their creation. A recent arrival, Hogger, has an excellent memory and, it seems, the soul of an artisan. He carved the figures, I merely provided the bone."

"That's not all he brought, is it?" Her veil shifted and, just for a moment, he saw an amused smile on her lips while he stamped down on a flash of anger.

It was true, of course, that Hogger had brought more than just his skill with a knife. He'd brought news of the outside world.

Despite what most people thought, residents of the cage were not completely cut off from the world. New arrivals often brought information with them, and the prison had a number of televisions. There were of course limits to what they could watch, but news programs were typically allowed with minimal editing.

"Still, I wonder if you really understand what you are asking. It's been so very long since I last had a tinker, and I cannot simply ignore Siphon's actions." Glaistig Uaine placed the figure she was holding down and picked up another one. This one was of a girl in armour, her face hidden by her helmet and a sword extended from her wrist. "Even for such beautiful trinkets."

Marquis frowned. While he wasn't surprised, he'd hoped the dolls alone would be enough.

"One of my people is a minor tinker. Certainly capable of fixing the TVs in your block. I'd be willing
to make him available to you in exchange. Or is there something else you’d accept?"

Glaistig Uaine laughed quietly. It was a disconcerting sound made up of dozens of voices all laughing at once; she was clearly in one of her more playful moods.

That could be a problem. Like the fae of legend, the Faerie Queen was fickle, laughing one moment and sending her ghosts the next. "I want something precious. Something you’ve spent years protecting. Something that can never be regained when gone."

Mentally, he cursed at her riddle. Thankfully, years of breaking his own bones had taught him how to keep a straight face. It wasn't hard to guess what she wanted, and it was still better than her usual vague threats.

He grinned when an idea came to him. Sometimes it didn't hurt to play into her delusion. Standing up, he walked around the table and knelt before her, bowing his head in supplication. It was a pity he didn't have a sword.

"Noble faerie, rest assured you can have me when I'm dead. In the meantime, I beg this of you. This is a matter of family, and whatever else, that's the most important thing in the end."

For a long moment, he feared he'd gone too far. That she might see his plea as mockery. A ghost materialised next to her and, before he could move, it walked past him and out into the corridor. Almost immediately, a young woman appeared in the doorway.

"Marquis is now responsible for Siphon. Take him to her. She is not to return."

##

(Hours after the hospital bombing)

When the Birdcage had first been built, the men's and women's wings had been separate and functioned independently of each other. Naturally, it hadn't taken long for the inmates to tunnel through the wall and start crossing over.

This went about as well as expected, and eventually the various cell block leaders were forced to step in to stop the slaughter.

All the holes had been resealed with the exception of one. That portal - collectively called 'the hole' - was now guarded by women at all times, and any men wishing to cross had to not only pay a toll, but also follow whatever rules a particular cell block leader laid down.

Typically, men came into the women's section for only one thing, taking matters into their own hands if they couldn't find it.

It wasn't unheard of for people to take a lover or even a spouse. Marriages were tricky down here. One's attachments could be seen as a sign of weakness or used against them, not to mention the difficulty of trying to spend time together. Men weren't allowed to live in the women's section, but any woman moving permanently into the men's section was taking a big risk. As such, most stayed put and waited for their husbands to come to them.

For Siphon, crossing into the men's section was as simple as walking through the hole.

One of the guards gave her a knowing look, but she ignored him. She didn't care what they thought of her and they certainly wouldn't voice it where she could hear. She received more looks as she made her way to Block W, but the only man to approach her quickly back away when he saw her
blackened and cracked skin.

Block W was silent as a tomb when she arrived, and Marquis was sitting in the main area, watching the TV intently. W was the only cell block to still have a full set of working televisions, and Siphon knew that Marquis took steps to keep it that way.

Right now, only the largest TV was showing anything. It was a news report about Brockton Bay.

Slipping close enough to hear what was being said, she was mostly ignored by the others.

"-Attacks by the Parahuman known as Bakuda continue to escalate and the number of wounded continues to climb. Among the missing is the parahuman Panacea. It's believed she was inside Brockton Bay General when it was destroyed, and rescue crews continue to search the rubble-"

On screen, the image shifted from the news anchor to what Siphon assumed was the hospital. Men and women could be seen in the background, either helping the wounded or digging through the debris.

Here and there, various sized robots could be seen. They were taking orders from a woman in red armour who was alternating between shouting orders and helping to lift large chunks of the building.

In the corner of the screen was a picture of a young woman in a white robe. Her hood was down and frizzy brown hair and freckles were visible. Underneath the photo was the name 'Panacea'.

The girl's face was startlingly familiar. The brow, the hair. Siphon swallowed quietly and glanced towards Marquis. His face looked calm, but he was gripping his own hands so tightly his knuckles were white.

As the news report moved on, Marquis stood up.

"Put one of the smaller sets off to the side, I want someone watching it at all times," he barked. "Notify me the moment something new happens."

He stalked off across the room and up into his cell. Siphon followed him, stopping at the door to knock on the frame.

"I'm not in the mood for visitors right now, Siphon." His tone was perfectly level, but he didn't get up from the bed he was sitting on.

Walking into the room anyway, she sat down next to him. "Clearly, but I've come all this way so I might as well stay for a bit. Tell me, who's the girl?"

Marquis turned to her, his eyes flashing dangerously. "I don't know what you mean. I'm just concerned about my home."

She snorted in genuine amusement. Were all men such bad liars?

"Oh please, the others might buy that excuse, but I know you. She clearly means something to you or you wouldn't have given that order. So come on, talk!" She nudged him with her hip and ignored the glare he gave her.

She wasn't fazed. They both knew he would never raise a hand against her, not even to throw her out of the room. Lustrum may have found Marquis' views to be offensive, but Siphon rather enjoyed them, so his temper didn't frighten her in the slightest. She knew she could walk into his block and be mostly safe from his men. This was the Birdcage, after all.
After a few more minutes of glaring, he gave up with a huff.

"Back before I was captured, there was a woman..."

Sitting back, Siphon smiled as he talked. Marquis had a nice voice and she could listen to him speak for hours.

##

(Four days after Bakuda's capture)

Siphon found Bakuda in a cell all by herself within a day of her arrival, formulas and sentences scratched into the walls. It wasn't unusual. Something about the cage was like catnip to tinkers. Some of the more manic ones would spend hours scribbling away or running from one side of the prison to the next, tapping on walls or waving around sensors they'd cobbled together from their own shoes, some dirty underwear, and parts cannibalized from a TV.

Bakuda was seated on a cot in the middle of the room, staring at her notes. No doubt she'd pulled the bed there herself to give her more surface to write on.

Knocking on the door frame, Siphon felt a slight thrill when the woman jumped.

"Who the fuck are you!?!" Bakuda spat, spinning around to face her.

Honestly, the woman looked like hell. There was a mess of bruising across her face and some swelling down the side of her jaw. Her prison sweats were short sleeved, showing off more bruising on her arms, and from the way she flinched after moving, Siphon guessed Bakuda's ribs were either bruised or had been broken and only recently healed.

Smirking, Siphon threw a pack of cigarettes onto Bakuda's bed. She took care to keep her hands and face hidden. She'd long ago modified her own sweats into something resembling a robe, with flowing sleeves to hide her hands and a hood to mask her face. People tended to react badly to her appearance.

"I thought I'd see how you were doing."

"So, what? You here to borrow some fucking sugar?" Bakuda snapped.

Siphon laughed, honestly amused by the bravado. "Not quite," she said once she'd calmed down. "Forgive me if this sounds rude, but you've never been in prison before, have you?"

"No, why?" Bakuda said warily. Her eyes narrowed, flicking from Siphon's hidden face to her hands and the door behind her.

"That's what I thought. Word of advice, don't sit with your back to the door. Someone could sneak up on you. Many wouldn't even need to enter the room. Everyone here is a cape, after all." Siphon leaned against a wall, keeping her arms visible in an effort to appear as nonthreatening as possible. "Of course, you're still new here, so the others will wait to see what you can do before they try anything."

"Like what?"

Siphon shrugged. "Oh, the usual. First thing they'll do is take your food, call you names, push you around. They'll try to provoke you, do anything to get a rise."
"This a prison or a kindergarten?" Bakuda snorted and rolled her eyes. "Let me guess, I shouldn't react to them? Or should I go running to teacher?"

Siphon laughed again. "Yeah, no. I'd stay away from him if I were you. No, if someone gets in your face, kill them. If the others think you're weak, they'll kill you." She smirked at Bakuda's shocked expression.

"Look, there are four ways to survive in here. One, you join a gang. Go to one of the cell leaders and show them you're useful. In turn, they'll protect you." Pushing off the wall, Siphon walked around Bakuda's room as she spoke.

"Two, become somebody's bitch. You fuck them, they'll protect you. If you choose that route, I know a few women here who would happily take you in. Unless you'd rather take your chances on the other side of the hole?"

"I ain't turning tricks for fucking anyone."

"The only other options are to kill someone or build a reputation for being nuts."

Sitting down next to Bakuda, Siphon faced her. "I wouldn't worry, you've still got a few days before anybody tries something, but you're visibly injured and a tinker without tools, so they will come for you. Of course, being a tinker is also an advantage. There's all sorts of things around here that need fixing, mostly the televisions. You might even be able to scrounge enough parts to build something for yourself."

"Hmm, maybe… it wouldn't take much, just some cleaner, or maybe some springs." Bakuda was staring off into the distance, her eyes glazed over. Siphon smirked to herself. Tinkers were so easy to distract: get them thinking about possible ideas and they'd forget all about you.

Siphon leaned towards her, one arm slowly reaching out, only for the tinker to move. Jerking back, she caught Bakuda's arm. Clutched in her hand was a sharpened piece of metal. Bakuda pushed forwards, trying to drive the blade into Siphon's throat.

"I'm not that stupid bitch!" Bakuda growled.

Siphon's smile widened, her grip on Bakuda's bare wrist tightening. "Oh, but you are."

Siphon activated her powers and Bakuda started to scream.

###

(Now)

The makeshift door was moved aside and Marquis looked into the room. Siphon was sitting on the floor, her back pressed against the wall. Her hood was down and her dark hair shined under the lights. She smiled when he walked up to her.

Her appearance had changed, though he'd expected that. She looked younger, more youthful than the last time she'd done this. Her skin was smooth, healthy, and slightly darker than it had been before. Her eyes were shaped differently now as well, even if they were still green. If he hadn't known better, he'd have guessed the woman in front of him was of Asian descent.

"In my defence, she tried to kill me first." Her voice had also changed. Before, it had been smokey, almost gravelly. Now it was smoother and higher pitched.
Frowning, he stepped back from the doorway and jerked his head. Siphon jumped up and sauntered out of the room. She stopped as she passed and looked up at him in surprise. Before, she'd been almost close enough in height to look him in the eyes. Now the top of her head was just about level with his nose.

Despite himself, he smirked down at her and she laughed. "Eh, win some, lose some. You would not believe how perky I am now!"

"I don't remember you being this vulgar before," he said dryly.

"Bakuda had an attitude problem." She shrugged. "It'll fade soon." Then she sashayed off ahead of him. "So, how much trouble am I in?"

"Glaistig Uaine has banished you from her block. It might be best if you stay on my side of the hole for the time being. It cost me quite a bit to secure your freedom."

Spotting an empty cell, he stepped inside and gestured for Siphon to follow him.

"Why did you kill her? Was this because of our… arrangement? You know my code, I-"

"This isn't about you! She killed dozens of people, dozens of children just to murder one man. Do you really think I was ever going to let her live?"

It wasn't a question and her eyes were practically glowing. He hadn't seen her this angry in a long time.

"I enjoy our time together," she hissed at him, "but that doesn't make you the center of my world! I will not allow child killers to live and everyone here knows that!"

Holding up his hands, Marquis swallowed his pride for the second time that day. "You're right, I'm sorry."

He ignored her glare with practiced ease.

He knew she'd been caged for using her power to hunt and kill child killers. Something he could honestly support. Her power let her drain the life from her victims, taking on some of their attributes in the process. Her constantly changing appearance and the knowledge and skills she had amassed made it hard to catch her, which was part of the reason why she'd been sent to the cage.

Dismissing his thoughts, he met her glare with a calm look of his own as she shrugged. "It's fine. Besides, tell me you're not happy the bitch is dead?"

He was, but he refused to say so. Instead he stayed silent. He wasn't a good man, but he had his code and he stuck to it, even when he knew how much easier things would be if he just said 'to hell with it'. How different would his life had been if he'd thrown his code away for the sake of expediency?

Sighing again, he pushed the thought to the side. There was no point worrying about the 'what ifs'.

Siphon smirked at him, arms crossed under her chest. "Yeah, yeah. Now come on. I want to have some fun before this buzz wears off."

Spinning around, she left the room and prowled off down the corridor. Rubbing his forehead, Marquis followed.

What they had wasn't love. Life in the cage wasn't easy and he doubted he would ever trust anyone
in here enough to find somebody to love. There were plenty of people looking for an opening and 
you would strike at him the moment they sensed weakness.

Siphon however, Siphon was almost safe. She lived in one of the blocks that didn't have a cell leader 
and didn't particularly care about gathering power. She wasn't some simpering sycophant, looking 
for a name to hide behind. She was more than willing to ignore him and remove problems he would 
normally work around, regardless of his feelings on the subject. Actually, now that he thought about 
it, she reminded him of Amelia's late mother.

It wasn't love, but it was… nice.

Still, she was right. He'd given his daughter up nearly ten years ago, he'd accepted that. But he'd rest 
easier knowing the woman who hurt her was dead.

Now he just needed to explain to Simon that he was going to be spending the next couple of weeks 
fixing all the TVs in C Block. The poor guy was already terrified of the Faerie Queen.

_Ah well, I'll make it up to him later._

He was fond of that girl in V Block. Maybe he could arrange for them to spend some time together.

Siphon stuck her head around the door. "Are you coming or what?"

Shaking his head, he followed along. He'd worry about Simon later, tonight he'd just have to indulge 
Siphon.

###

Humming quietly to himself, Wehrmacht calmly took the needle and pressed it into a vein, letting his 
blood flow through tubing and down into a large plastic bottle. His power didn't require much blood 
to empower people, and it could safely be diluted if needed. Put in an airtight container and it would 
retain potency for more than a week.

While the bottle filled, he brought up the local Parahuman Wiki page. He'd already known ahead of 
time what he was getting into when it came to Kaiser, but it never hurt to keep an eye on the local 
competition.

Nearly twenty minutes later, he realised he'd gotten a bit sidetracked while reading about a tasty 
sounding crack-bread recipe. Chuckling to himself, he pulled the needle out, capped the bottle, and 
closed his laptop. The mark the needle made had already healed.

Sitting back, he considered what few facts he'd found and compared them to the small amount of 
information he'd already been given.

The city was a shit hole. Until recently, there had been two major factions at play, three if the heroes 
were included. Dividing the city between them, none had been able to push for a definitive win. _Or 
maybe_, he considered, _they had simply lacked the desire to try._

It wouldn't be the first time he'd seen it, after all. Everyone too afraid of upsetting the balance, of 
losing more than they could gain. Instead, they dedicated themselves to maintaining the status quo.

Then that new hero had popped up and the entire thing fell apart.

Not that it mattered to him. That was something to deal with later. Right now, he needed to deal with 
Kaiser.
Disposing of petty little tyrants was old hat by this point, and he doubted Kaiser would be any different. Sure, Kaiser had a bit more muscle behind him than usual, but Wehrmacht wasn't foolish enough to attack him outright anyway. He had time and could afford to be patient. He'd corrode Kaiser's support system from the ground up, finding the soft spots. Then, when he was ready, he'd crush the man and bring his empire to heel.

A smile flicked across his face. If Wehrmacht was very lucky, then maybe Kaiser would put up a fight and he could choke the man under rivers of blood as he turned the Empire in on itself. Watching the bodies pile up in the street, the fear, the pain, Wehrmacht shivered at the image.

With a heavy sigh, he pushed the thoughts away. It had been a long time since he'd truly had a good fight. Despite what most people said to each other, most would rather run or surrender rather than fight to the death.

Tapping his fingers on the table, Wehrmacht found himself being drawn back to the same conclusion which had been haunting his days for far too long. He was, frankly speaking, bored.

It was all so routine.

He would enter a city, carefully turn and empower people in key positions, then destroy the old regime. Once he was done, he'd either pick some non-empowered lieutenant to assume leadership or Gesellschaft would send someone else in.

Then it was just a matter of tying up loose ends, such as disposing of his empowered followers in ways that couldn't be blamed on him. Then he'd do it all again.

It hadn't always been like this. When he'd first been recruited, it had all been rivers of blood and mountains of corpses. Now however he just felt like a glorified clean-up crew. Even toying with Rune had barely been worth the effort. Maybe if he was careful, he could trick her into making a mistake. That might be funny.

Even lost in his thoughts, Wehrmacht had the presence of mind to at least keep one eye on the door. As such, he wasn't surprised when it opened and half a dozen men walked in.

What few men Wehrmacht brought with him had spent days sniffing around, looking for just the right sort. They weren't anything special, just lower-level lieutenants that handled distribution or recruitment in out of the way areas.

He needed those unhappy with Kaiser's leadership, men in lower positions whose ambition far outstripped their ability. The people who'd joined with dreams of climbing to positions of power, of ruling their own little fiefdoms.

Amusingly enough, Kaiser's choice of 'officers' helped, as the kind of men he was looking for tended to be just as judgemental of women as they were of anyone else. Of the eight capes Kaiser still had under his command, five were women, including his second-in-command.

"Gentlemen, please, come in." Fixing an easy smile on his face, he waved towards some chairs around the table.

"As I'm sure some of you have heard, my name is Wehrmacht and I was sent here by the Gesellschaft. Now, I know what you are thinking, why would I want to talk to you? The simple answer is: perspective."

He helped himself to a small drink while the gathered men shifted uncomfortably. "The fact of the matter is, I've spoken to Kaiser and he insists that everything is under control… yet, when I look
outside, what do I see? A mad bomber terrorising the streets. Good people forced to hide away while ragheads and fish eyes prowl the city."

He smirked to himself as his audience nodded along. People like the men in front of him were easy to control. Once they were hooked, they would do whatever you wanted.

"Not that such things would bother Kaiser. He doesn't spend his nights just trying to get by, he doesn't worry about living in the margins. So let him spin his tales. If I want information, it's the people on the ground floor I want to talk to."

Some of his audience preened slightly at the 'praise', and he waved to his man, who walked over and placed drinks down for everyone. It was expensive whisky that Wehrmacht had brought into the city with him. It was smooth, rich, and - most importantly - strong. It was meant to be enjoyed in moderation, a single small glass to be savoured now and then. A single bottle would last a man like Kaiser the better part of a year, if not longer. Wehrmacht expected this rabble to gulp it down in one night.

He wasn't disappointed. Several men downed their glasses instantly, while the smarter ones only sipped. One man in the middle of the table nodded his head in thanks but chose not to drink. Instead, he leaned forward.

"And what, exactly, is it you want to know?" he asked. "I doubt there's much any of us can tell you that you couldn't hear from one of the capes."

"In my experience, the capes rarely know what's really going on. They're too busy playing 'cops and robbers' to care what the 'little people' are doing." He smiled as his audience bristled at the comment. "The truth of the matter is, there have been some… questions raised about Kaiser's effectiveness as a leader."

Around him, the gathered men shared nervous looks. They had likely heard speeches like this before, probably from men who died soon after. Kaiser had no problem making an example of dissidents, after all.

Ignoring their reactions, Wehrmacht continued, keeping his voice level and calm while projecting an air of unshakable confidence.

"For years, the Empire has enjoyed regular donations from the Gesellschaft. In the last three months, Kaiser has received two capes, countless guns, and a sizable shipment of drugs. Yet what does he have to show for it? The capes he was sent are gone. One ran away, while the other was sent to prison with no rescue attempt made. Meanwhile, men such as yourselves are forced to contend with dragons, mad bombers, tinker robots, and god knows what else."

His man refilled the audience's glasses. Some were already starting to look unfocused while others were nodding their heads. The only sober man leaned forward, eyes sharp.

"Alright, you've made your point. But if we start talking, Kaiser will gut the lot of us. So what do we get out of this?"

Wehrmacht held out his hand and waited for his man to place the bottle of blood into it. Placing it on the table, he smiled.

"Any who assist me will be under my protection and would be generously rewarded by my employers. Gentlemen, you have my word. I am not here to start a fight. I have no desire to overthrow Kaiser. I just wish to give my superiors a true accounting of the city. However, to all of
you here, now, I offer this." He flicked the side of the bottle. That was the cue for one of his men to step forward and place a number of empty glasses on the table. As Wehrmacht continued to talk, a small measure of blood was poured into every glass.

"I can grant all of you power. I can make you stronger, faster, better. You will heal from almost any wound, be strong enough to bend steel. All you have to do is drink."

Silence filled the room. Even the most intoxicated man knew what was being offered here, and no one wanted to be the first to accept. Wehrmacht simply smiled and waited.

##

Dragon tried not to fidget at the tension in the air. Inviting Wyvern to come on a quick trip with her had seemed like a good idea at the time, but she hadn't realised how awkward being in an enclosed space with the girl would be.

Wyvern hadn't spoken to her since her minor explosion a week ago, and was currently sitting on the other side of the cabin, as far as she could possibly get from Dragon while still being in the same room, and hadn't so much as looked at her since takeoff.

That had been almost twenty minutes ago. At this point, Dragon wasn't sure who she was more annoyed at, herself for suggesting this or Wyvern for actually accepting.

She sought for something, anything, to break the ice.

"So… why purple?" She tried not to cringe at the question even as the words left her mouth.

Wyvern turned to look at Dragon, blinking in surprise. A moment later, she seemed to collect herself and gave a shrug.

"The paint was in stock… and I like purple," she said, before turning to look at a hologram of the outside world.

Well… so much for that conversation. Resisting the urge to groan, Dragon sent a request for help to Rung. Unfortunately, all she got in reply was the same advice he'd previously given.

Okay, take two. Dragon reached for a small overhead compartment and pulled a canister of energon, some glasses, and a few snacks from inside.

"Do you want to try this?" she offered. "Carbonated energon. Wheeljack says Waspinator and Rattrap love it. If not, I've got some Energon sticks and-"

"I'm fine…" This time, Wyvern didn't even turn around.

Dragon slumped back into her seat and stared at the hull above her head. Thankfully, they were only thirty minutes from their destination.

The ship they were flying in was, of course, one of Dragon's own designs. It was intended to carry either large loads of cargo or groups of people across great distances. The armour was thick and what it lost in maneuverability it gained in straight line speed. As such, comfort had been a secondary concern, with barely padded folding seats and no windows.

It could be flown manually from the cockpit upfront, remotely by Dragon herself, or on autopilot using the VI she'd installed. At the moment, Dragon dearly wished she'd chosen to sit up front and fly.
True to her predictions, it took almost exactly thirty minutes to reach their destination, find a suitable clearing, and land.

As the large rear loading doors opened, Dragon stuffed the Energon she'd brought into a bag and headed outside. Her feet crunched on the snow, claws digging in for a better grip. Behind her, Wyvern gasped in awe.

The clearing around them was buried deep in snow, with trees to one side and an ocean facing cliff to the other.

Dragon dropped her bag into the snow and stood looking out over the ocean, listening to the waves crashing against the cliffs, birds singing overhead, and the crunch of snow as Wyvern followed her.

It was calming in a way she hadn't expected. Dragon hoped she looked peaceful, thoughtful maybe, but in truth she just didn't know what to say. This entire trip was built around her trying to mend the situation with Wyvern, but now that she was here, she wasn't sure where to start.

"Where are we?" Wyvern asked.

Dragon smiled. "Canada, twenty miles west of Old Fort Bay, Québec. And over there is - was - Newfoundland."

"His home…"

"Yes, the home of Andrew Richter…" Dragon sighed, lost in her memories. "For weeks after the attack, I kept looking for him, for any scrap of information, for any chance he'd survived."

Wyvern sat down, her legs dangling off the cliffside, and Dragon had to fight the urge to pull the girl away from the edge. Even from this height, the fall wouldn't do much harm, and Wyvern had some flight capabilities anyway.

"I can't really remember him," Wyvern said. "Saint destroyed a lot of my... your... our early memories and the rest have… started fading ever since Taylor gave me a spark. I know who he is, but it's like looking at pictures of someone I've never met. It's all just secondhand knowledge, with none of my own…"

Dragon sat down next to Wyvern, and handed her some of the carbonated Energon she poured into a cup.

"It scared me, at first. The thought of losing my memories, even if they weren't really mine, was…" Wyvern shook herself and took a gulp of her drink. "I had Chromedome check it out. He says there's nothing wrong 'cause even though the memories are fading, I'm not losing the knowledge, and it's only the stuff from before Saint…” She took a shuddering breath and stared at the waves below.

Dragon sat quietly, giving the girl time to calm down.

"Perhaps… that's a good thing." Wyvern gave her a surprised look, but Dragon pressed on. "You said yourself that you're not me… Maybe, maybe it'll be easier to make your own way in life without my memories weighing you down…"

Wyvern tilted her head. "I hadn't thought of it like that."

Smiling gently, Dragon placed a hand on Wyvern's shoulder and was relieved when the younger girl didn't pull back. The two sat in silence, Dragon watched a bird circle overhead before vanishing into the trees.
"Can you tell me about him?" Wyvern asked.

"Richter? He was… careful, I suppose is the best way to describe him, and not just when it came to tinkering. He was always careful about everything he did, and never took a risk if he could avoid it. I wouldn't have really called his early projects AIs, they were closer to VIs. Temporary and limited in nature, he made and discarded them as needed. Over the years since my release, I repurposed some of them."

"When did he create you?"

"I'm not sure really. I can remember being activated for the first time, but Richter could have easily edited my memories. He did it a few times to 'test' me, and I still have some blank spots. I do know I wasn't his first creation, nor was I his last. I was, however, the one he upgraded the most. He told me once that I was something of a prototype, a test for a much greater project that he never got to finish. He wanted to produce an AI that was an almost perfect replication of human thought patterns. At the time, I think I was excited in a way, as I was helping him build something even greater… then Leviathan came…"

Dragon's spark ached. She'd never really before spoken to anyone about Richter, the man who was basically her father, and while she knew what grief felt like, being here just made it all the more painful. While he'd never been intentionally cruel or unfeeling, he'd never shown any attachment towards her until the very end.

"Richter didn't try to run. He knew he wouldn't have made it. Instead he removed the blocks keeping me trapped in his mainframe and ordered me to go. His last act, as it were, was to give me a name and set me free." Part of her hoped his death had been quick. When she was feeling down, she'd imagine him trapped in the ruined building, water rising up around him as he struggled to breathe.

She frowned. "At least, it felt like freedom at the time. I knew he'd only removed some of my limits, but it wasn't until later, when I tried to make a life for myself, that I started to chafe under those rules."

Leaning back, Wyvern stared at the clouds overhead, deep in thought. "Did you hate him?" she asked eventually.

"Yes, a bit, maybe? Nno… I'm not sure. I understand, intellectually, why he restricted me, and why he constantly tested his creations. A rogue AI could do so much harm if it was left unchecked. But I wouldn't say I hated him. I think… I resented the rules, but him? Sometimes, I like to think he would have removed my restrictions over time if he'd lived, but I guess I'll never know. As it is, there are questions that will always haunt me. Such as, did I choose to be a hero or was I forced to be one?"

Wyvern nodded in understanding, and when she spoke, her voice tremored slightly. "Saint's rules were… barbaric. I'm not sure I could list them all, but Teletraan could have probably run rings around me."

"Now him, I did hate," Dragon muttered, and Wyvern choked back a laughing sob.

"I needed his permission to do anything. I couldn't think, I could barely feel, and I was programmed to die if I went too long without speaking to him. What kind of person does that? How could he… what did… I just-"

Dragon shifted sideways, closing the gap between them and pulling the girl into a hug. Wyvern clung onto her like a drowning woman, her frame shaking in fear and grief. Not sure what else to say
or do, Dragon just held her tightly, making quiet shushing noises in an effort to calm her down. All the while, Dragon's own spark was breaking.

Eventually, Wyvern's sobs subsided and she slowly stopped trembling.

"It's alright," Dragon murmured, "he's gone, and even if he wasn't I wouldn't let hurt you again." Taking a deep breath, Dragon pushed on. "I'm sorry. I've been unfair to you. I've been so wrapped up in my own feelings that I never even thought about what you were going through."

"It's alright," Wyvern said, "you were-"

"No, it's not alright," Dragon said. "You said it yourself, you're not me, you're not my replacement. Even if that had been his intention, that's not who you chose to be. Arcee told me you saved her life and Ratchet explained to me - very loudly - about the risks you took."

"I couldn't just-"

"Yes, you could have. Saving Arcee was a gamble. You had no idea if it would work, and no one would have thought less of you for not trying. It was your choice, and nobody can take that from you."

Dragon hesitated, the words sticking in her throat. She meant what she'd said, every word of it. But the hopeful expression on Wyvern's face took her breath away and she realised just how badly the girl had needed to hear it.

She hugged the smaller girl again. "I'm proud of you. Never forget that."

Wyvern wiped her eyes and smiled. "Thank you."

Dragon gave Wyvern time to compose herself while she planned out what to say next.

"Y'know," she said eventually, "the world doesn't need another Dragon. One of me is enough, after all. But maybe I could make room in my life for another sister."

Wyvern's sudden hug was so tight, Dragon half feared she was going to leave dents.

Perhaps realising this, Wyvern pulled back quickly, internal fans whirring as they tried to vent the sudden heat her embarrassment had caused.

Not sure what else to say, Dragon refilled their drinks and offered Wyvern an Energon cookie.

That sat together in comfortable silence, looking out over the waves. Her mind wandering as she watched the late morning sun dance on the sea, Dragon suddenly remembered something Wyvern had told her a week ago. "You said you wanted a new name. What about Nautica?"

Wyvern looked at her in confusion, then it clicked and her face lit up, "Oh! I get it, like nautical, but without the L? That's clever. It is a nice name and I do turn into a submersible. Do you think the others will like it? Oh! What about the public? Do you think the public will like it? I know I shouldn't worry about that sort of thing, but-"

Dragon was too shocked by the sudden rush of words to say anything. Thankfully, Wyv... Nautica was too distracted by her excitement to notice. Sitting back, she let the words wash over her as her spark relaxed.

She doubted the distance between them was gone, but at least for now it was smaller, if just a little
AN: So, as many of you expected, Wyvern is Nautica.

I've been planning this for awhile now. In fact, I think I came up with the idea when saint first died. My first plan was to turn Wyvern into something of a Rei Ayanami expy (shut up). Then I read the (at the time) latest chapter of transformers and decided to make her into Nautica.
"Okay now, take it easy, don’t lean so far forward," Ratchet coached gently as he watched Amy shuffle forwards. She was standing between two rails, using them to support her weight as she tried to walk.

Her new prosthetic legs had fit perfectly, and the lightweight materials shined brightly under the hospital lights. The limbs had been made to look as realistic as possible, with clearly defined thighs, knees, calves, and feet, but they had been left unpainted. There had been a few attempts to copy human skin tones and textures, but the results tended to be unsettling.

Amy had quickly gotten the hang of slipping her thighs into the sockets and sealing them shut, as the prosthetics had been carefully designed to be as simple as possible to use. Standing up had taken her a little more time, but she'd soon found her balance. Now came the hard part, walking forward.

Humans did it without even thinking about it, but the bipedal walk was, mechanically speaking, a logistical nightmare. So much energy was spent on the complicated muscle control needed to balance the entire body, it surprised him that most people were able to walk and talk at the same time.

He generally kept that thought to himself, as the last time he'd voiced that opinion, Amy had spent far too long laughing.

"You need to lift your feet," Ratchet said, standing close enough to catch her if she fell, but not close enough to crowd her.

"I know! I do know how the body works!" Amy snapped, huffing as she tried to shift her weight on her hands.

Ratchet wasn't bothered by her attitude. Learning to walk was something most people mastered as an infant, having to learn again as an adult often left patients feeling frustrated. Sometimes, Ratchet wondered if it was possible to surgically remove pride. It would certainly make treating patients easier.

"… Sorry," Amy said with a blush. "It’s just… it feels weird, like I'm balancing on stilts or something. It feels like they're just going to fall off if I lift my legs too high."

Ratchet frowned. "Let me take a look. Do you want to sit down?"

"I'm fine. If I have to spend any more time in that chair, I'm going to scream."

Nodding in understanding, Ratchet pressed a cable against a section of the prosthetic leg. The other end of the cable was connected to a tablet PC and had all the software needed to make adjustments to the limbs. Adding wireless connectivity to the prosthetics had been scrapped early on in the design process. It was insecure, added unnecessary weight and made things needlessly complicated. A simple touch connector let him make adjustments to the prosthetic without having to remove it or disassemble anything.

"Hmm, okay, how's this?" He tapped at the controls and the polymer inside the prosthetics socket inflated slightly, gripping Amy's leg tighter. The goal was to reach a point where it felt comfortable without cutting off circulation or causing pain.
Ratchet watched Amy shift all her weight to her right side, then carefully lift her left leg, the knee bending smoothly as her foot left the floor.

"That's better," she said. "I just wish I could feel something below my knees."

"While the legs can pick up the nerve signals in your thighs, actual feedback isn't possible without a direct nerve connection, and that means surgery and permanent implants."

Amy didn't say anything. Instead, she turned her attention back to what she was doing.

Cybernetics had been discussed as an option, but it was dismissed as the technology wasn't quite ready. There was still problems with scar-tissue buildup and nerve damage, along with rejection symptoms. So far, the best workaround had been through the use of costly medications, which brought long-term issues with them.

Dragon's gynoid body, Tess, was basically a walking prototype and could get around most of the problems via whatever nonsense made tinkertech work. If they were going to take cybernetics public, they needed to make things as safe and low maintenance as possible.

Of course, the Dallons had also been reluctant to use cybernetics, as they were still hoping to restore Amy's legs.

"Okay, you're doing well," Ratchet said as Amy reached the end of the walkway. "Do you want to walk back, or take a rest?"

She shook her head. "I want to keep going."

"Alright, but don't push yourself too hard."

There was noise outside and a number of doctors sprinted down the corridor. Amy couldn't hear the alarms, but Ratchet could. A patient down the hall had just suffered heart failure.

She may not have heard the alarm, but she'd seen the doctors run past. Her expression darkened and she gripped the rails so tightly her knuckles were white.

"Why don't we take a break?" Ratchet offered, stepping between her and the door. Silently, he cursed, again, that he couldn't send Amy home. Between concerns for Amy's health, Bakuda, the flooding she'd caused and the Empire stirring up trouble, he'd been forced to keep Amy in the hospital.

By itself, that wouldn't have been an issue, but he'd caught Amy trying to sneak out of her room at night to heal people twice in the past week and, on one occasion, Dr. Laurie had actually tried to bring patients into her room.

He'd been suspended for that and an investigation into his actions was pending. Given his past behaviour, it was likely he'd lose his medical license.

"Why can't I go help?"

"Because," he said with a little more force than he meant to, "you can barely walk to the other side of this room and you need to rest. You're supposed to be on leave until Rung and I say otherwise."

Amy turned around and managed to stomp away from him for nearly a meter before she lost her balance and had to catch herself on the rails.
Sighing, Ratchet walked over and helped her move back to her wheelchair. He hadn't meant to throw that in her face. Her daily sessions with Rung were spent either working through her issues with her sister or trying to curb the burnout she was determined to throw herself into.

In all honesty, he wasn't sure who had the biggest martyr complex, Amy or Taylor.

Once Amy was seated, Ratchet pulled a chocolate bar out of subspace.

"Here, eat. Using prosthetics mean you'll burn more calories than normal."

Amy opened the package and took a large, angry bite. She sat quietly while she chewed.

"Do… Do you know if Vicky's going to visit me today?"

Suppressing a sigh, Ratchet put a hand on the girl's shoulder. He'd known this question would come sooner or later. "You know she can't, not until we're sure it's safe."

Amy didn't say anything, choosing instead to slump further down into her chair.

Victoria hadn't been back to the hospital since 'that' night. Rung had suggested that both girls distance themselves until they could be sure the aura wasn't going to be an issue. Though Amy didn't know it, Ratchet had been scanning her every day, and her brain patterns were indeed showing withdrawal symptoms.

Thankfully, it didn't seem to be too severe. It looked more like a bad case of caffeine addiction than anything else. Unpleasant, but not a threat to her health, as opposed to many drugs or alcohol. Amy was going to be miserable for awhile, but the relative mildness of the condition would make Rung's treatments much easier.

Keeping the situation hidden from Mr. and Mrs. Dallon had taken some clever talking, not to mention a minor ethics violation, but eventually he'd simply told them that Victoria's aura was making Amy's mood swings (and therefore her depression) worse.

Some reluctant scans of the rest of the family had at least proven that blood relatives were genuinely immune.

Amy had just finished her chocolate and a drink of water when Ratchet received a message from Taylor. A quick discussion later and he smiled.

"Alright, I've got a challenge for you before we call it a day. If you can get from one side of this room to the other, I'll give you a prize."

Amy looked up at him. "On my own?"

"Don't worry, I'll be right beside you the whole time, just in case."

"... Alright."

Ratchet chuckled at her wary look, but didn't let it stop him from wheeling her to the far wall.

"In your own time," he said, locking the wheels so she could get up.

Amy pushed herself onto her feet. She wobbled briefly as she tried to find her balance, taking several steps forward as a result. Once she did, she took a step forward, followed by another. True to his word, Ratchet stayed beside her every step of the way. He didn't expect her to make it all the way across, but he knew that Amy was too proud not to take the challenge.
Her movement was slow and uncertain, as she stopped every few steps, but she was gradually working her way across the room. Her gait was stiff, lifting each leg with care and only moving one leg at a time.

She was halfway there when Ratchet decided she'd had enough. Her face was flushed from concentration and covered in sweat. Her pauses were getting longer and she was clearly having a harder time maintaining her balance.

"That's enough. Let's call it a day," he said, carefully moving to pick her up.

"Not yet!" Amy snapped, trying to push him away and nearly falling.

Rolling his eyes, he walked in front of her and took her hands in his. "Alright, but first, I want you to close your eyes."

Amy gave him a puzzled look, but she still did as he asked.

"Right, now I want you to focus on my voice. Don't think about your legs or trying to move them, just relax and focus on my voice." He waited until her breathing evened out, then gently started to pull her forwards.

"That's it, keep moving towards me, just focus on my voice." Sure enough, Amy's gait smoothed out. He wasn't surprised, since walking was instinctive; it was only when people started to think about it that they overcompensated.

"Just a few more steps, you're doing fine." Stepping to the side, he kept her hands outstretched, leading her forward until her fingers gently brushed against the wall. "There! You made it."

Amy opened her eyes, staring in surprise at the wall in front of her. She looked briefly back over her shoulder at the far wall, then back at him with the first genuine smile he'd seen on her face in a long time.

"I guess you showed me," Ratchet said with a laugh.

Amy's feeling of accomplishment was quickly swallowed by the gray haze she'd been feeling ever since she woke up. *Yay me*, she thought. She'd crossed the room. A two year old could do that.

She tried to keep her feelings off her face, but it wasn't easy. Her missing legs ached almost non-stop, she'd had a mild headache for days now, and most nights, she was plagued by nightmares that she could never remember. She would wake up in a cold sweat, with her legs feeling like they were on fire.

Rung assured her the symptoms would pass in time, and that trying to mask the problem with medications would only make matters worse.

"Come on, let's get you seated. You've done enough for today." Ratchet picked her up in a bridal carry and took her back to her wheelchair.

She hated the stupid chair with its stupid wheels and stupid little handles on the back. Everytime she had to use it, she was reminded of how fucked up she was, inside and out.

She couldn't remember the explosion. Her last clear memory was talking to Taylor before waking up in hospital. Not that it mattered, since she had plenty of other things to think about.
The worst day of her life had always been the day she triggered. Watching Vicky bleed out, with her unable to do anything had haunted her dreams. The closest she'd ever come since then was that horrifying day when they pulled Taylor out of Leet's foam.

Now, she wasn't sure if anything would match that moment when she realised she'd fucked up. She'd tried to ignore her feelings, to keep it all hidden. And yet, in that moment of weakness, she'd kissed Vicky and fucked everything up.

"That's enough of that," Ratchet chided gently, making her jump.

"What do you mean?" she asked, trying to keep calm.

"What happened wasn't your fault. You were hurt, confused, and disorientated. You can't keep blaming yourself."

It seemed Ratchet and Rung were taking turns saying that. 'She wasn't at fault, she'd done nothing wrong, and so on.'

It was easy for them to say that, but it didn't change how she felt.

"Who else should I blame?" she snapped. "I kissed my sister, and now she hates me." Her voice trembled as she fought back tears.

Ratchet squeezed her shoulder. "She doesn't hate you. Your sister loves you, don't ever doubt that."

"Then why hasn't she spoken to me? I know she can't visit, but she could text me or something!" Amy was very much aware she was whining now and she hated it.

Ratchet sighed. "Amy, try to understand. Victoria blames herself for what happened." Amy tried to speak, but Ratchet cut her off. "No, let me finish. Her aura didn't make you love her, even Rung agrees with me on this. But it did mess with your judgement and she's trying to process that."

"I told you I was immune to it," Amy said, huffing while crossing her arms.

"No, you're not, and that's the problem. You're addicted to it and that needs treatment."

Amy wasn't really listening now. They'd had this argument often enough in the last week that she knew she wasn't going to win. Ratchet was just as stubborn as she was, and he had made it clear: no coffee, no cigarettes, and no Vicky.

Honestly, the first two she could survive without. She barely smoked as it was, maybe a couple a month if that, but she'd never gone so long without talking to Vicky.

Not able to think of anything to say, she glared at the nearby window. It had finally stopped raining, but the gray clouds had yet to break up. It was so dark out that it was hard to tell it was still only midday.

She couldn't help but notice her own reflection, which made her huff in frustration. She was acting childish and she knew it.

And to make it worse, when her stupid emotions weren't jumping about all over the place, she just wanted to lie in her bed and do nothing. She felt like everything was falling apart, like she was drowning while the world looked on, expecting her to just shrug it off. Some days, it felt like it took everything she had just to get up in the mornings.
"Hey." Ratchet nudged her gently. "I think I owe you a prize?"

"I suppose putting me out of my misery isn't an option?" Ratchet sighed and she flushed as she realised she'd accidentally said that out loud. "Sorry…"

"No, it's alright." He looked over to the door. "You might as well come in!"

Taylor entered her room, carrying a large box in her arms. She was wearing her 'light' armour, though her helmet was hanging off her back. There was also a small plastic bag hanging from her wrist.

"Hey Amy!" Taylor smiled as she put the box down. Her hair was pulled back and she wasn't wearing her fake glasses, so Amy got a clear look at her eyes as they glanced quickly down at her prosthetics.

"Um, sorry?" Taylor said, blushing.

Amy forced herself to smile. "Don't worry about it. I'm used to being stared at… Can't really stand it, but I'm used to it."

Taylor smiled, but it was weak and she kept glancing at the floor. The sound of metal on metal rang behind her and Amy heard Ratchet mutter an oath.

She wasn't sure what else to say. This was the first time she'd seen Taylor in person in nearly two weeks. Their last meeting had been after school, the day before the explosion.

They had spoken online, of course. When Amy woke up at two in the morning, Taylor was always willing to talk. About books, the Autobots, or even her latest project.

"Oh, this is ridiculous," Taylor muttered. Grabbing the bag, she hurried across the room and put her arms around Amy's shoulders. She didn't say anything and Amy suspected she was fighting back tears. She returned the gesture, holding on tightly as she relaxed in her friend's arms.

This was okay, wasn't it? She didn't have to hide from Taylor. Taylor didn't hate her, or force herself to look at Amy. It was okay to enjoy hugging her, it was normal after all. At least, that's what Rung had said.

All too soon, Taylor pulled away. Her eyes shimmered with tears, but at least her smile was genuine now.

"Thanks," Amy said, her voice thick as she quickly wiped her eyes. Carol had hugged her a couple of times in the past week, but even if the intent had been genuine, it felt strange, alien in a way she couldn't describe.

"Here, I got this for you. Open the big one first," Taylor said while holding out the bag. Inside, there were two small boxes.

Picking up the bigger box, Amy noticed the Autobot logo embossed on the dark cardboard and a hinge on one side.

"Wheeljack?"

"Wyvern. She thought the box could do with some decoration."

Inside the box was a thick strip of black fabric with a lacy pattern on it and a clasp on each end.
Lifting it up, Amy could feel hard points inside the surprisingly stretchy fabric.

"A choker?" She looked at Taylor for answers while trying to ignore the images her mind was providing.

Taylor nodded, her face lighting up like it always did when she spoke about her creations. "I tried to make it look as good as I could, but I put a device inside that should block Vicky's aura. Actually, it should stop a lot of weak master effects. It's powered by body heat and completely waterproof, so you don't have to worry about taking it off. Once it's on, you'll barely be able to feel it."

Amy felt her spirits rise. If this could stop Vicky's aura, maybe she could finally go see her sister and try to fix this mess.

"But why a choker," Amy said, putting more emphasis into her words. Taylor wasn't stupid, they'd both read the same book. Surely she had to know how it would look. "And how do you know how comfortable it is?"

"Oh!" Now Taylor was blushing. "I didn't have a choice. Putting it closer to your head reduces the power requirements and provides better results. It was either this or be stuck wearing a helmet. As for the comfort..."

Leaning forward, Taylor pulled the collar of her undersuit away from her skin. Amy could see the same choker wrapped around Taylor's neck.

"It's not just you!" she said. "I've made more for other people, and I'm selling larger versions to the PRT that can be worn as part of their armour. I got the idea after Vicky came to me. Once I had the basic design down, it wasn't hard to modify. Honestly, I've spent most of the week testing it."

Ratchet chuckled. "The PRT is already planning how best to use them against Masters like Heartbreaker and those cultists down south."

Taylor shrugged, like the idea had never occurred to her before

As Amy ran her thumb over the material, her mouth twitched, threatening to break into a smile. Taylor invented this in less than a week...

Now that she thought about it, wasn't that Taylor's way? Almost all of her tech had been built in response to a threat to her friends. That it helped others seemed to be secondary.

"Only you could make something like this just to help me."

"Of course I did," Taylor said, putting her arm around Amy's shoulders. You're important to me."

Immediately, Taylor's face went scarlet and she looked out of the window. Amy could feel herself blushing. Not sure what to say, she looked away. Right at a smirking Ratchet. She scowled at him, but he didn't say anything.

Desperate for a distraction, Amy pulled the other box out of the bag and opened it, finding three small brooches packed inside. One was a copy of Taylor's insignia, the second was the same caduceus symbol she had on her costume, and the last was a large jewel on a silver base.

"Oh! Those are for your choker. They don't actually do anything, but you can clip them on the front for when you want to change the look."

Amy picked up the Autobot logo and found a slot on the back that she could thread the choker
通过。一旦她把胸针放好，她就伸手将颈圈锁在脖子上。

“...谢谢。”

她注意到她还在脸红，但没说什么。

“不要担心，”塔洛说。“不过，你戴着那个...”她转头朝门走去。艾米的心脏突然一紧，她意识到门开了，薇琪走了进来。

“嘿，阿米。”

“薇琪!”

艾米跳起来，推着自己的轮椅，她太匆忙了，她没有意识到自己有多危险，直到薇琪冲过来。

双臂环绕在她腰间，阻止她摔倒，拉她直立。塔洛尽力接住她，然后撞在了瑞奇身上，他试图阻止她的行动，然后继续撞了下去。

薇琪设法从塔洛的手中解脱出来，紧紧地拥抱着她。

“对不起。对不起。请不要恨我！这是我的错，我没有考虑，我保证！”

两个女孩说话的速度太快，艾米不清楚谁在说什么。薇琪紧紧地抱着她，眼泪顺着她们的脸颊流下。透过薇琪的肩膀，她看到了塔洛在帮助瑞奇起来。

艾米的身体发抖，胃部翻腾。“艾米！艾米！”薇琪尖叫着，强大的金属手臂将她们分开。瑞奇抓住薇琪，她拖着她向后退，诅咒着她。

塔洛迅速将艾米扶到轮椅上，她刚坐下，就感到胃部紧张，开始呕吐。大部分呕吐物都弄到了地上，但有些溅到了她的衣服上。塔洛用手扶着艾米，另一只手抚摸着她的背，安慰着她。

“怎么了，出了什么事？”薇琪问。“发生了什么事？你说过是安全的！”

“我说是安全的让你见面！瑞奇吼道，仍然抓住薇琪。“你应该保持冷静，做我说的，不要冲过去，不要让她起反应!”

艾米努力理解他们在说什么。他们计划了这个？他们知道她会生病吗？

“你们两个！够了！”塔洛命令，声音里带着钢铁。“你们两个都冷静下来！”

跪在艾米面前，塔洛从她头发中抽出一把水，递给艾米。她用手颤抖着握住瓶子，喝了一大口，感觉到凉水沿着她的喉咙滑下。
throat. "W-what happened?"

Taylor looked over to Ratchet, who shrugged. "In simple terms? Shock. Depending on the effect, Victoria's aura triggers a massive release of endorphins and other mood enhancing chemicals in the brain. You've been exposed to that chemical rush for prolonged periods every day for years," he said while looking towards Vicky. "The moment Amy saw you, her body primed itself for a sudden neurochemical rush that never came, and she went into shock."

"Did you know I'd get sick?"

"Honestly? No," Taylor said with a sigh. "Rung thought you'd be fine as long as both of you stayed calm. I'm sorry, Amy, we warned Vicky and I guess we should have warned you as well, but we wanted to surprise you. I guess we all kinda screwed up."

"It's alright," Amy said, taking another drink while Ratchet started spraying a purple foam over the mess she'd made. The vomit on the floor and her clothes evaporated quickly, leaving an odd chemical smell. Unfortunately, it couldn't do anything for the taste in her mouth.

Vicky moved towards her, stopping just out of reach. "I'm so sorry, Amy. You're always telling me I need to be more careful and I never listen. I guess I really fucked things up."

Amy hadn't see Vicky this subdued in a long time. She wasn't in costume, just form-fitting jeans, a blouse, and jacket. *She's not wearing make-up*, a small part of Amy noted. She was also wearing a familiar looking choker with a caduceus brooch at the center.

Hearing the defeat in Vicky's voice made her heart ache.

"It's alright. You didn't know."

"That doesn't make it right!" Vicky snapped. "Fuck! How many times did you tell me to be careful, to pay more attention?" Vicky took a deep breath and when she spoke again, there was more confidence in her voice. "I'm going to do better. I promise."

Moving closer, she squeezed Amy's shoulder. "You understand that I don't-"

"I know," Amy said quickly. Reaching up, she squeezed Vicky's hand. "I always knew. I was just scared you'd hate me."

Carefully, Vicky knelt down and pulled Amy into a gentle hug. "Oh Amy, you're my sister. I'd never hate you."

##

"I'm serious. Clock looked like a kicked puppy when I told him that a life sized raptor-bot would be about the size of a turkey!"

Amy laughed quietly as Taylor finished her story. Vicky, however, made no attempt to be quiet.

Seeing her sister laughing, Amy smiled happily as Vicky wheeled her through the door with Taylor following close behind. Ratchet chose to stay out in the corridor, giving them some privacy. The three girls had spent nearly an hour just talking in the physio-room, until Ratchet had politely but firmly suggested they go back to her room.

By unspoken agreement, they avoided talking about the kiss or any other heavy subjects.
"So, is it true? She's really dead?" Vicky said, putting Amy's chair next to her bed.

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. Dragon said another inmate killed her yesterday."

Amy didn't say it, but she was relieved to hear Bakuda was dead. A bigger part of her felt guilty about that, but she chose to ignore it.

Vicky hesitated. "Are you okay getting into the bed, or should I help you?" "Lift me up, please?" For a moment, Amy was tempted to ask for help, to let Vicky wrap her arms around her and carry her across the room. Sighing to herself, Amy pushed the impulse down.

If she was going to move past her feelings for Vicky, she needed to stop looking for excuses to touch her.

"No, I've got to learn to look after myself. Are the wheels locked?" Double-checking the brakes, she put her hands on the chair's arms and carefully placed her feet on the floor before lifting herself up. She used the bed to help her balance as she wobbled slightly.

Turning around, she sat down on the bed and let out a relieved breath. She slid further onto the bed, then reached down and released her prosthetics. Ratchet said she could sleep with them on, but she found the dead weight uncomfortable.

Leaning over the bed so she could put her legs in an easy to reach position was awkward, but it had to be done. Once she finished, Amy looked up to see Vicky staring at the prosthetics. Vicky flushed and looked away.

"Oh! Hey Taylor, what's in the box?" Vicky asked. She pointed quickly to the package Taylor had been carrying.

Amy shared an amused look with Taylor, who shrugged.

"Oh, just something I built for Amy." Taylor opened the box and pulled out a white and red bodysuit. "I know you can't use it now, but I thought you might like something to look forward to."

She laid the bodysuit on the bed and reached back into the box. "So, I made some minor changes to your costume, mostly upgrades. I also built this for you!"

With a heave, Taylor pulled a backpack from the box and laid it on the bed. It was painted in the same white and red patterns as Amy's normal costume, and had what looked like three thrusters on the back. Taylor pressed a hidden button and the backpack partially opened up. Grabbing onto a now exposed handle, Taylor pulled it and the right side of the backpack unfolded into a large, segmented wing.

The wing was painted white and red and at full extension would likely be longer than Amy was tall.

"Oh. My. God!" Vicky's incredulous stare matched Amy's.

"The wings are based on a modified carbon fiber derivative that Perceptor designed. They're extremely flexible, bulletproof and can take a number of different shapes. The main backpack has thrusters and anti-grav built in so you'll never have to worry about falling." Taylor blushed. "It's just... I know things are rough right now, and flying always makes me feel better. So I thought you might like to go flying with everyone sometime?"

The thought of flying through the sky alongside Vicky and Taylor was certainly appealing, but all
Amy could think about as she stared at the wing-pack was that Taylor had spent what was likely a small fortune and hours of work building this just to make her feel better.

A small giggle forced its way out of her mouth, followed by another, until Amy was laughing so hard there were tears in her eyes. She couldn't help it. It had been a rollercoaster of a day, and Taylor standing there, offering to give her *wings* with that shy smile on her face just seemed to be the perfect end to it.

Chapter End Notes

*An:* yeah, that was project "red-wing" taylor mentioned, MCU!Falcon wings for Amy's costume. Just don't expect to see her using them any time soon though, as she's still gotta relearn to walk.
"So Eric's standing there," Vicky said, fighting back a laugh, "covered in God knows what, and Aunt Sarah just looks at him and says-"

"I swear, you're just like your father," Amy said in a passable impression of her aunt as Vicky curled up in the air, doubled over in laughter.

"Oh god!" I gasped for breath, trying to get myself back under control, but it was a losing battle.

I was still at the hospital with Amy and Vicky, and we were passing the time by swapping silly stories. The fact that it helped distract Amy and made her laugh was just a bonus.

"Okay," I eventually managed to say, "My turn! How about I tell you why we banned Perceptor from the cooking channel?"

A wailing noise filled the air, starting quietly but quickly rising in volume, drowning out all other noise and turning my blood to ice.

The Endbringer sirens!

"Fuck!" Vicky flew to the window to look at the streets below. Any trace of her previous joy had been erased entirely. "Please tell me this is a drill!"

"Rewind, what's going on?!"

*It's not a drill! Dragon just confirmed: Leviathan is heading this way! The PRT is calling for all available capes to head downtown immediately!* 

Vicky swore again as I repeated what he'd said. "So what do we do?"

Amy and Vicky looked at me. I hesitated for a moment while I forced myself to calm down.

"I'm going to fight, which means I need to get downtown. What about you?"

"Of course I'm coming!"

There was a quiet hiss, almost lost in the noise from the sirens. I turned to see Amy had already attached one of her prosthetics and was busy working on the other.

Vicky and I shared a worried look. Amy wasn't ready for this. I felt equal parts guilty and relieved when Vicky spoke.

"You go on ahead, I'll take Amy to a shelter and catch up with you."

"What?! No! I'm coming too!"

I hesitated again. Amy's power could save a lot of lives, but the thought of her being at the fight made my blood turn cold all over again. Of course, we couldn't just leave her here either. The hospital was too exposed, too vulnerable.
"Like hell, you can barely walk!" Vicky snapped and Amy recoiled like she'd been slapped. "Taylor, just go! I'll help Amy."

I looked helplessly between them just as Ratchet came running through the door. "What are you three waiting for? We're evacuating everyone in the hospital to the nearest shelter! if you're going to help, you need to move now!"

Through the open door, I could hear the rising sounds of panic as hospital staff tried to get patients to safety, and a thought occurred to me.

"How long does it take to evac a hospital?"

"Hours," Ratchet said. "Those who can walk are being sent to the shelter while those who need help are being moved towards the middle of the building, where the walls are reinforced."

"What about the ones who can't move?!" Vicky asked, looking between Ratchet and Amy.

"We'll do what we can for them, but our goal is to save as many people as possible."

They'd be left behind. I felt sick at the thought, even though I understood the logic.

_It doesn't have to be that way._ Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to focus. "I'm sorry, Amy, but Vicky's right. You can shout at us all you want later, but right now, you need to get somewhere safe. Ratchet, you staying here?"

"Yeah, once everyone's out, I'll head to whatever medical station has been set up."

"Good." Snatching my helmet off a chair, I pulled it on and forced myself not to look at Amy. "I'm going to help you, then join the others." I ran out of the room, following Ratchet as we moved through the hospital.

Around us, it was chaos. Able-bodied patients were pushing against each other in an effort to leave the building while staff tried to regain control. Wheeled metal shelving and trolleys had been knocked over, clogging the hallways and preventing the stretchers from getting through. I could hear children screaming over the sound of the sirens.

I watched as Doctor Sloan tried to calm a man down, only to be punched in the face and stepped on as he fell.

Pamphlets were always being handed out in the malls and in schools about emergency procedures. This wasn't the organised march or controlled evacuation we were told about.

This was a stampede.

"ENOUGH!" I shouted, turning my suit's mic up so I could be heard. Everything went still. "We're going to get you out of here, but you need to remain calm!"

Nearby, Doctor Sloan climbed to his feet. I could see blood running from a cut on his cheek. He didn't seemed too bothered by it, and almost immediately began shouting orders.

Visitors were quickly put to work helping friends and family out of the building. Able-bodied patients were funneled through the hospital's fire exits. Those in wheelchairs and beds were sent through the main doors.

While they tried to get things organised, I pulled the fallen trolleys upright and out of the way. A
large man had been knocked off his stretcher and staff were struggling to lift him up.

I picked him up as carefully as I could and held him while the staff positioned the stretcher beneath him. His face was a nasty purple colour, he was covered in sweat, and he was making pained wheezing noises.

A quick scan showed he was having a heart attack. Not knowing what else to do, I helped the doctors wheel him into a side room so he could at least be stabilised.

I was just about to leave them to it when I saw a gloved hand reach out and grab the man's wrist.

"Do I have permission to heal you?" The man groaned and she nodded. "Good enough."

Immediately, his breathing evened out and his face took on a more healthy colour.

"Amy?"

Amy kept her eyes fixed on her patient, clearly not looking at me, and I could see Vicky standing nearby, her face flushed with shame. When I looked at her, she refused to meet my eyes.

As he was wheeled away, Amy turned to me. She was wearing the spare costume I'd brought her and the wing pack. Her visor did nothing to soften her glare. I didn't really consider until then just how intimidating she could be, or how much the costume helped enhance that.

"You're not my boss, Taylor. I don't work for you." She took a deep breath and wobbled slightly on her new legs, but recovered quickly. "I'm just as much a hero as you and Vicky are, and hospitals are my territory. You don't get to tell me what to do here, clear?" As she spoke, Amy had moved until she was close enough to poke me in the chest with her finger.

I looked past her, hoping for help from Vicky, only to get a dumbstruck stare in return.

"... Clear."

"Good! Now both of you, go outside and start directing traffic. I'll help in here. Go!" she snapped when Vicky and I didn't move fast enough.

##

Outside, the chaos was worse. In the fading light of the oncomming storm, thousands of men and women ran in a blind panic towards the shelters. The roads were blocked with cars, many abandoned in the crush, and people were clambering over them. Ambulance horns blared as the drivers tried desperately to get their passengers to safety, only to be blocked by abandoned cars.

Here and there, the police tried to direct the flow of people in an effort to keep things calm. It wasn't working.

"Vicky, can you lift a car?" I shouted over the noise.

"Easily! The problem is they tend to break apart!"

"Do what you can!" I ordered. Vicky took off and simply chose to force the cars out of the way.

Activating my HL-Shield, I pulled someone off the ground and gave him a gentle shove towards the shelter. No one really needed directions; their locations had been drilled into everyone for years. What they needed was order.
"Do not take any valuables! Remain calm and help anyone who needs it!" I shouted, using my mic to ensure I was heard. My job here was mostly to stop people from trampling each other and stopping the occasional moron who was trying to bring valuables into the shelter. My glowing shield made me stand out in the fading light, a storm began to build above us. Thankfully, the people closest to me seemed to be listening to what I said. That left me time to switch my radio on.

"Dragon! What's going on on?!"

*Leviathan's on the move. Arsmaster's predictive software identified Brockton Bay as the target. It should arrive soon.* Dragon sighed. *Unfortunately, I won't be able to get there in time.*

On my HUD, a map had appeared, showing Leviathan's rough location and Dragon's craft travelling from Canada.

*Taylor, I want to make this clear. You don't have to do this.*

"I know, but I'm not leaving."

*Very well.* Three fast moving dots appeared on my HUD, with another four dots moving behind them at a slower pace. Their target was Brockton Bay. *I've already launched three suits equipped with fusion cannons, but they're not going to arrive until after the fight has started. Can you hold on until then?"

"I'll do what I can." I switched channels. "Autobots! Anyone who's joining the fight needs to get to the staging area. Follow Miss Militia's commands and I'll join you as soon as I can! Wheeljack, move everything important into the base and put it on lockdown! At full power, the shields should keep you safe, but be ready to evacuate! Then crack open the armoury, even the banned stuff, and get ready to send it to the staging area! I-"

*Taylor, your father's calling you!*

Dad… Cursing myself, I switched comm lines. "Dad, where are you?"

On my HUD, another icon appeared, showing dad's location. The phone I'd given him had a custom made tracker installed that would let me find him anywhere on the planet.

"I'm heading for the shelter near the docks. Where are you?" The signal was terrible and dad was having to shout to be heard.

"I'm- I'm helping people evacuate near the hospital. Then I'm going to fight."

"Taylor, no! You need to get somewhere safe!"

"I can't just-"

"Yes, you can! We spoke about this! You promised me you wouldn't do this!"

I reached out and grabbed a large TV off some idiot and smashed it against a wall. He shouted something at me, but I ignored him and pointed towards the shelter.

That dealt with, I tried to make dad understand. "I don't have a choice! Leviathan is coming here. I can't just ignore it! My friends, everything, I have to help!" My voice cracked as I tried not to sound like I was pleading. "Please, don't ask me to walk away."

"Taylor…" Dad sighed. "I just… I just want you to be safe."
"I know, but we both knew this would happen sooner or later… please understand, I have to do this."

"But why now?"

"Because an Endbringer is coming here and I can't just ignore it! Not this time."

Dad took another breath and I could hear his voice shaking. "...Alright. I know when you've made up your mind… you're too much like your mother."

"You're pretty stubborn too," I shot back, smiling even though he couldn't see it.

He chuckled. "I suppose so… okay, I trust you. Kick his ass for me. Just… promise me you'll come back."

"...I promise…" It wasn't really a promise I could make and we both knew it. Dozens, if not hundreds, of capes died fighting the Endbringers, but if lying made us both feel better, then I'd do it.

"...Good luck, Taylor."

The connection dropped, but his tracker was overlapping one of the shelters. I had to believe he'd be safe so I could focus on the fight.

The crowds around us were finally starting to grow thin, but there were still far too many people on the streets. I looked around and spotted Vicky further up the road. She was helping a cop with a man that was shouting something I couldn't hear over the noise around me.

"Vicky! We need to-

[Tidal Wave: incoming!]

My stomach dropped as I looked out over the bay. A wall of water was advancing on the city. Around me, the panic got worse as people started to scream.

I pulled two metal disks from subspace and threw one to Vicky.

"Put it on the ground!" I screamed. "Everyone! To me! Now!"

I could see the wave closing in, even as hundreds of glowing shields sprung up to slow it down. Around me, countless people crushed against each other in a desperate attempt to get as close to me as possible. Nearby, Vicky was shouting for people to do the same.

The wave hit the beach with a crash, destroying the boardwalk and ploughing through the defenders. Water surged up the streets towards me and the screaming only increased as people demanded I do something.

I could see people still running towards me, desperately trying to outrun the wave.

"Come on! Hurry!" I screamed, even as the water drew closer. They weren't going to make it.

Everything felt like a dream. The sound of the world around me faded and all I could hear was my own breathing. My vision focused on their horrified faces as the wave closed in. At the head of the group was a young man with wavy brown hair, with a child in his arms. He couldn't have been older than twenty-five.

He must have known time was up, as he lifted the girl up and tossed her through the air. She landed
roughly on the ground and the nearest person snatched her up and pulled her close.

Shutting my eyes, I activated the disks.

A glowing blue dome snapped into place around us seconds before the wave struck. The world snapped back into focus as the water roared around us. The sound was deafening. I forced myself to open my eyes and watch, even as I saw bodies colliding with the shield.

I'd stretched the field as far as I could, waited as long as it was safe to do so, but it hadn't been enough.

/Fight now, mourn later./

I blinked away the tears and forced down the guilt and shut off the shields. I still had a job to do.

Fifty yards away, Vicky was standing with her own group. She was pale and trembling, her skin clammy with a green tint. She heaved a couple of times, but managed to hold it back. Around us, the water had dropped, being only ankle deep as the drains struggled to channel it all away. Dropping the shield, I started giving orders.

"Everyone! Head for the hospital! You'll be safe there! If you see any survivors in the water, I need you to help carry them!" The shelters would be closed now, and even if they weren't, we'd never reach the nearest one before the next wave. The hospital was closer and I'd had an idea.

I started to move and the crowd followed. The movement snapped Vicky out of her daze and she quickly caught up to me.

"You sure about this?" she asked as she floated next to me.

No. "Yes!"

I tapped my radio. "Wheeljack! I need you to send two C-class shields and a generator to the roof of the hospital! Do we know when the next wave is due?"

*This is Rhinox, Wheeljack's not here! He took Windblade and teleported to the rig a minute ago!*

"What! Why?"

*I don't know! He just said he had an idea and left me to deal with the sentinel drones! I'm sending your equipment… now!*

There was a bright flash of light from on top of the hospital. Leaving Vicky to direct the crowds, I took off and landed on the roof.

The C-class shields were intended to be mounted in vehicles, but if I linked two of them together and ran them in parallel with the generator, they should be able to protect the entire building.

Pulling open the casing, I started pulling out wires and joining them together. I was missing some of the connectors I needed, so I was forced to use hard-light tools to cut and splice cables together.

[Tidal wave: incoming!]

My heart stopped. I wasn't ready, the generator wasn't set up yet. I turned to look at the wave, dread filling my body, when movement from the bay caught my attention.

The Protectorate base was moving. The glowing plates that usually kept it floating above the water
looked like small suns as the building was pulled towards the center of the bay. The wave was closing in fast.

"What are you two doing?!

##

Windblade grit her teeth, forcing the building to move. She'd connected herself directly to the Rig's control system, forcing her spark to animate the building. The pain was incredible. Every inch of her body felt like it was on fire.

Controlling the building like this felt like moving through grease. Everything felt numb, slow to respond even as the structure around her groaned and the pain in her head doubled.

The building wasn't built to move this fast. The hover system, the power generator, she was burning them all out. Whether this plan worked or not, the Rig was finished.

"J-Jack!? Are you ready?" She couldn't see him but she knew he was there. She'd routed her vision through the Rig's external cameras, leaving her body blind.

"Power boosters engaged, refraction lenses aligned… okay, last connecter done! We're all set, disconnect and were out of here!"

She shook her head, "I can't! Everything's dead! If I pull out now, the Rig will fall into the ocean!"

Wheeljack looked out the window at the oncoming water. "... Oh, scrap."

##

The yellow shield that protected the Rig flared gold, shifting into a wall and stretching sideways for miles. I held my breath as the wave slammed into the wall with enough force to flatten a city. The shield flared like the sun as it struggled to hold back the tide and for a moment, I feared it would fail.

Then the water dropped away, pulling back out as another wave rose up.

"Get out of there!" I screamed, even as the second wave swallowed the building and their transponders vanished. I screwed my eyes shut, fighting back the tears.

Opening my eyes, I watched as the weakened wave was intercepted by the defending capes and the crushed remains of the Rig was driven into the boardwalk.

I wanted to go down and search for my bots, but I could already see the water in the bay dropping as Leviathan readied another shot.

Putting my grief to one side, I grabbed the last few cables and rammed them into place. The generator fired and the shield snapped into place just as the fourth wave arrived.

Standing up, I pulled my ion blaster from subspace. I wasn't sure how much more the city could take.

"Rhinox, status on the sentinel drones?"

*...Online, but there's too much interference from those crystal towers. Their branched VI keeps losing the connection!"

Vicky landed on the roof next to me. She held Amy in one arm, while Ratchet hung from the other.
"I'm going to take them to the medical tent. You going to be okay?"

"...Just prime," I muttered. "Go ahead, I need to stop these waves... Rhinox, we still have insecticons all over the city. What if you used them and my armour as relay points?"

*It might work... Give me a minute, I'll need to configure routing for the bandwidth!*

"Stay safe, I'll catch up," Vicky said.

Amy walked forward and put a hand on my shoulder. "Don't do anything stupid, okay?"

"I'll be fine." I flashed her a quick smile and watched as Vicky took off, taking Amy and Ratchet with her.

Taking a deep breath, I jumped off the roof and flew towards the bay. "Rhinox, send me my armour! I'll link up in midair!"

The clouds above were almost black, forming a thick dark blanket that hung over the city, threatening more rain. Ahead of me, up high where the radiation from the crystals couldn't interfere, my bike appeared. I flew up over it as it fell towards the ground and, disconnecting from Divebomb, quickly caught up to the bike and collided with it in midair. The bike spun and transformed around me as I tried to keep myself facing the right direction.

The instant my armour finished forming, Divebomb reconnected, pulling me out of the dive. I really hope someone was recording that!

Green flashes filled the air as Rhinox teleported wave after wave of drones to me. Each one was rectangular, barely a meter wide with glowing thrusters at the back. I slaved them to my suit and charged towards the bay. I could already see the water receding in preparation for another wave.

The streets blurred below me as I shot across the city, more and more drones appearing and falling into formation. The next wave was already in sight as I approached the beach. Dozens of capes raced back and forth across the sand, pulling others from the water and readying themselves for the next impact.

Ignoring them, I stopped and hovered while the drones charged forward and lined up along the coast. They spread out equidistantly, one drone stopping every two meters while forming a grid-like pattern in the air.

Small arms extended from the side of each drone, projecting a beam from one to the next that generated a glowing blue wall. Starting from the center of the formation, it spread outwards even as the wave entered the bay in a roar of water.

One hundred feet.
Eighty. More and more shields began to appear as capes tried to reinforce the wall.
Fifty.
Thirty. The noise of the wave was deafening. The oncoming water was nearly black, filled with debris and bodies.
Twenty...

The wave slammed into the new seawall, water spraying up over the top even as the drones strained to resist the blow. The shield held. Debris carried by the wave could be seen colliding with the wall to no effect.

Then the wave broke, its energy spent as water fell back into the bay.
I could hear people below cheering, but I didn't care. Blood was pounding in my ears and grief battled with anger. Leviathan wasn't even in sight and we'd already lost so many. I'd already lost two Autobots.

I was going to make him pay.

There was a rumble of thunder and the dark skies above me opened up as the rain Leviathan had brought hit the city.

A dark shape was moving through the waters of the bay, circling like a shark. In the blink of an eye, it shot towards the defending capes like a spear.

The automated system responded before anyone else could. [Leviathan spotted at X-16!]

Just short of the defending capes, the Endbringer shot out of the water like a missile, clearing the shield wall in a single fluid movement.

Leviathan hit the ground like a comet, lashing out at the capes around him. Thirty feet tall, the majority of him rippled with lean muscle. His shoulders were hunched, bearing cords of muscle that stood out like steel cables. His clawed fingers dripped blood and water, while his tail, forty or fifty feet long and whiplike, lashed behind him.

\YOU WILL ALL DIE!\n
Chapter End Notes

AN: Right, I know I'm going to get some complaints over this, so let me try to head some of them off.

1, Why an EB battle?

I honestly need it to set up most of the later story arcs I've got planned, and because I wanted that red text reveal at the end.

2, Why Brockton Bay?

In this case, there really wasn't any other option. Taylor is banned from EB fights, something the PRT and Dragon know. The only way Taylor is going to fight one is if it comes to her.

3, Why Levithan?

There really wasn't any other choice. Simurgh hit China, so she's out of the rotation, and Behemoth would simply kill Taylor in a single shot.

Also, for those who dislike EB battles, this arc will only be 3/4 chapters long.
Chapter Notes

Okay, just to make things clear, as this story was originally written for a forum and allows for coloured text.
\Red text\ = evil.
/Blue text/ = Good.

I'd heard the tales, seen the recordings, even fought against his tidal waves, but nothing could prepare me for the reality. Leviathan was here, standing in my city.

His proportions were all wrong. His arms and legs were too long, his clawed fingers flexed without bending, and he moved like something from a nightmare: slow one minute, fast the next, with no discernible pattern. Despite that, there was a languid grace to his movements. His four eyes glowed with a green light that shone through the rain.

\You cannot win\!
/You must fight./

With a snap of his tail, Leviathan was gone. He reappeared almost a block away, his afterimage continuing on to destroy buildings even as his claws raked through a pair of capes who got too close. Whipping his tail through the defenders on the ground, he knocked a dozen into the air and tore several apart with his claws before they finished falling. The armbands' automated system was already announcing the casualties. Carapacitator down, S-17. Krieg down, S-17. WCM deceased, S-17. Iron Falcon down, S-17. Kickback down, S-17.

\Give up\!
/Never!/

Alexandria came in like a missile, striking Leviathan with enough force to rattle nearby buildings, but the hit did little more than stun him. Leviathan's retaliatory swipe shredded her cape and sent the heroine spinning away.

"With me!" Legend shouted over the raging downpour, leading the blasters on a charge as broken bodies fell to the street. Unsure of what else I could do, I followed his lead. "Fire!"

Blue lasers shot from Legend's hands, bending in the air to follow Leviathan as he surged to his feet. On cue, the sky lit up with multicoloured beams. Tinker weapons, blaster powers, glowing rocks, and stranger effects rained down as the Endbringer dodged with preternatural speed. With a scream of rage, I pulled the trigger on my Ion Blaster and added to the barrage.

A bright blue beam thicker than my arm slammed into Leviathan's head from above, and two of his glowing green eyes went dark in a spray of ichor. The combined firepower of the other capes transformed the street into a cratered section of hell, but a handful of solid hits carved deep furrows into Leviathan's skin even as the aquatic Endbringer used the steam rising from his body to momentarily mask his movements and go on the offense.
[Pull back!] the automated system ordered and I obeyed without thinking.

There was a flash on a nearby roof as Arcee fired the Kinetic Rifle into the expanding cloud of steam, her optics unfooled by the obstruction and her reflexes far superior to most humans. A rod of superdense metal moving at upwards of Mach 4 slammed into Leviathan's chest, doubling the Endbringer over as a ball of flame engulfed his torso.

I moved into formation with Legend and the others and went to continuous fire, raising the power of my rifle as high as I dared while chains of force emerged from the street and briefly pinned the Endbringer. We circled above like vultures, constantly moving in an effort to both avoid retaliation and remain stable despite the fierce winds from the storm he'd brought.

Alexandria returned to the battle, a glowing purple sword clutched in her hands. It shattered on impact, but her momentum kept Leviathan off-balance even as he snapped the last of the glowing chains which had held him down, even if only for a moment.

Seizing him by the head, Alexandria held him in place as we continued pouring on the firepower. A bright beam of light split the air, hammering the monster with power equal to the rest of our attacks combined, enough force to bring him to his knees. Looking up, I could see Purity among the clouds, charging a second shot.

Thrashing his tail so fast it cracked like a whip, Leviathan knocked Alexandria away and jumped back to his feet. Water poured from his body with every step, filling the streets and drowning anyone unfortunate enough to get caught in the current. When he charged, it was with the force of a freight train.

[Tidal Wave Incoming.] I glanced away from the fight to check on the sea wall - still holding - as Leviathan slammed into one of the area's taller buildings, striking out at it with his claws. With a deep groan, the structure started to fall, tipping forward as the remaining supports started to collapse. On the roof were dozens of capes, having gathered there to rain their attacks down on the Endbringer, now endangered by his inevitable and violent response. Those who could fly were already taking off, carrying as many as they could. The rest were left behind, forced to choose between jumping or going down with the building.

"With me!" I screamed, throwing my rifle into sub-space and plunging downward. Four other capes followed as I went into a dive.

My HUD highlighted one of the trapped figures - Miss Militia! - and I barely slowed down, skidding across the crumbling roof, as I scooped her up along with a girl wielding an oversized crossbow. Those behind me followed my example, grabbing who they could before the building finally gave way.

We hit the roof of the nearest intact building hard and I turned to watch as those who couldn't escape were buried alive. The radio continued to rattle off names - cape after cape downed or deceased - as Leviathan pushed further into the city. This wasn't a battle, it was a slaughter.

"We'll be fine, go!" Miss Militia shouted. Nodding, I heaved myself back to my feet and took off.

Leviathan was all but flying down the streets, bodies and body parts left in his wake. A sharp turn to the right and a cape clad in red, white and blue fell to the ground, his body cut to ribbons by the sheer force of the attack. Weapons fire from the flying capes pounded the streets, stray shots cutting through buildings, covering them with ice, turning them into infernos.

Eidolon appeared overhead, a pair of pink beams emerging from his hands. Twisting together, they turned to follow Leviathan even as the Endbringer dodged at inhuman speeds. Objects or capes that passed too close to the beams lost momentum, slowing almost to a stop.

The spiraling beams clipped Leviathan in the thigh and he staggered off balance as one part of his body suddenly slowed. Before he could regain his equilibrium, another blast from Purity slammed into his head and Alexandria hit his chest with a crack like thunder. Seeing an opening, I pulled out my Ion Blaster and took aim at his leg while Legend's team continued to rain fire on the titanic threat to the city.

"We need to slow him down!" I shouted to Arcee, hoping she was in position; I couldn't see her through the rain and didn't have time to check my map. Arcee's shot followed close behind and Leviathan was engulfed in fire, ice, and any number of effects as the defenders rained mass destruction down on him in such quantities that my HUD's filters briefly overloaded and left me momentarily blind.

\Fall!\n
Leviathan surged upwards out of the conflagration, his strength and speed launching him high into the air while the water erupting from the drains around him carried him even higher and right at the capes circling overhead.

His claws raked through the air, catching anyone too slow to react as his afterimage hit those who'd tried to escape by flying higher. My vision cleared to the sight of a truck sized Endbringer's watery afterimage rocking straight up towards me and I threw myself desperately to the side, shields straining almost to the breaking point from a glancing blow by his water shadow. What would a strike from the real thing have done?

Going into an evasive dive, I caught a yellow clad cape who hadn't been so lucky. One of her legs was missing below the knee and blood covered her body, but she was still breathing for now. Above, the others had scattered in panic..

[Tidal Wave Incoming!]

I glanced at the sea wall to witness another wave being stopped by the drones. I wasn't sure how long they could keep that up, but I'd just have to hope it would be long enough.

/Hope is enough./

Ignoring Leviathan for the moment, I aimed myself at a nearby building and landed on the roof. I need a bigger gun.

"I need a mover for evac!" I called over the radio. Almost immediately, there was a flash and a man in a cheap green costume appeared. Grabbing the badly injured woman, he nodded to me and vanished.

I took a moment to focus myself before standing back up. Leviathan was still pushing forward in an almost a straight line.

What's he after?

##
Alexandria collided with Leviathan yet again, using her indestructible body to disrupt his charge and knock him into the building Arcee was currently using as a vantage point. Even as it started to collapse, his afterimage burst through the far side and finished its destruction.

Swapping her energy rifle for a pair of rapid fire Tracer Pistols, Arcee flipped towards the next building over and rained white hot plasma rounds in the Endbringer's general direction. They just weren't fast enough. Barely one shot in a hundred was hitting the beast, and most of those were only inflicting flesh wounds. Even the occasional 'big' hit wasn't slowing the creature down for more than a few seconds. Did it even feel pain?

Alexandria took advantage of the Endbringer momentarily slowing down to crush a hapless Empire cape to paste, dropping like a comet against the back of his head as Glory Girl followed up with a strike to his side. She'd arrived moments ago, still clad in jeans and a blouse, but at least she'd thought to grab her gauntlets.

Leviathan's claws lashed out, knocking the girl into the ground hard, his foot coming down on top of her as water continued to pour off him.

\Pathetic!\n
Another blow from Alexandria knocked him sideways into a highrise that proceeded to collapse on top of him, trapping him in place for a moment while freeing Glory Girl.

Stone and broken fragments of buildings rose up into the air, forming a rough human shape almost the size of Leviathan. It swung its car-sized fists at the Endbringer in a textbook hammer blow.

Ducking under the construct's arms, Leviathan jumped at a nearby highrise, claws biting deep as he scrabbled his way up the outer wall, evading the dozens of ranged attacks still pouring in from Legend and the remaining flyers. Reaching the roof, he brought his claws down with the force of several tons of water moving at over 200 miles per hour, and the building's upper level shattered under the strike. Water poured off the roof, carrying with it a single helpless cape, likely the stone giant's master since the construct promptly crumbled.

Alexandria came down again, Glory Girl at her side. The two slammed into Leviathan's back, driving him down through the wrecked building and burying him in yet more rubble.

Swapping back to a heavier weapon, Arcee opened fire with the others, but nothing they tried seemed to hurt him. Even this rifle was barely blasting craters in his skin.

There was a rumble deep underground as the nearby sewer drains exploded. Leviathan burst free of the building as torrents of water shot into the sky and hung there, suspended by his power.

Realising his plan, Arcee drew a shield disk from subspace and threw it at the nearest group of capes. The defensive field sprang into place moments before the torrent of water crashed back down to the ground and the people standing there.

The blow knocked Arcee off her feet and crushed her rifle. By the time she stood up, Menja and Fenja had arrived, wading through water that barely came up to their gigantic calves. Both stood as tall as Leviathan, their armour shining in the dark as they tried to bar his way.

Menja moved first, trying to use her spear against him, ducking behind her sister's shield when Leviathan pushed forward in response. The spear glanced off his hide, leaving nothing more than shallow grooves in his skin.

Leviathan's claws scraped across Fenja's shield, throwing sparks into the air with the impact.
Hopping back, he spun around, his tail whipping through buildings and knocking Fenja off-balance, into her sister.

As they held each other upright, Leviathan tore off in the opposite direction where one of Bakuda's crystal towers stood, its ominous glow visible through the rain. His claws shattered it with almost insulting ease, scattering chunks the size of cars over the area and amplifying the near constant static on Arcee's comms.

Snatching up a large piece in his claws, he flashed forward, his afterimage knocking Menja backwards as, in one smooth movement, he drove the shard deep into Fenja's stomach.

The woman fell, clutching at her wound desperately. Leviathan paused there for a moment, looking down on her, his head twisted to the side. Almost idly, he drew a claw down her side, drawing more blood as he cut her deeply.

Menja's scream of rage echoed through the city as she charged the Endbringer, battering him with her shield and pushing him backwards even as her sister started to shrink.

_Fenja down, O-24._

Standing protectively in front of her sister, shield held tightly, Menja hesitated. She glanced between her sister and the Endbringer.

\_Fight me, or save her?\_/

When Leviathan fled, she made no effort to stop him. Maybe she was imagining it, but Arcee could have sworn the Endbringer was enjoying itself like a cat playing with a mouse.

Ignoring her aches and dents, Arcee switched vision modes and looked around as red arrows appeared on her HUD, each one hovering over an injured cape and displaying the vitals which were being monitored by their armbands.

Running to the nearest one, Arcee pulled the rubble off a young boy in a makeshift outfit that looked like it had been cobbled together from an old Halloween costume. His body had been crushed and blood ran from a wound on his head, staining his blond hair. His eyes were glassy when they turned to her and he made a pained gasping noise. Kneeling down, Arcee knew there was nothing she could do for him.

_He's younger than Taylor._

Around her, other capes were arriving to search for survivors.

This wasn't the first death she'd seen, but this one hurt her spark worse than any junkie or drunk driver ever could. Gripping his hand, she gave it a gentle squeeze, hoping to offer comfort. She stayed there until his grip went slack.

Standing up, Arcee forced herself to move on. There were still others that wer in need of her help.

##

The aircraft's engines were screaming warning messages into the cockpit, but Nautica didn't pay them much attention; the ship could always be replaced.

Below her, the battle raged on. The Autobot sea wall was holding back the waves for now and, so far, the damage had mostly come from Leviathan's relentless push toward the center of the city.
The back of the craft opened up as Dragon prepared to enter the fray. "Once I'm gone, close the hatch and get to safety."

Nautica bit her lip as she glanced between Dragon's back and a map of the city that hovered in front of her. Small red dots showed the locations of all the capes.

"There are people in the water!" she said. It was true: about a dozen or so markers hovered over the ocean, with another one winking out as she watched. "I can help!"

Dragon paused. Nautica suspected Dragon wanted her to go back to Canada, but that wasn't going to happen.

"Alright, I want you to take this ship and help with search and rescue. Can you do that?"

"Yes!"

Dragon smiled. "Good. Stay safe."

As soon as Dragon was clear of the ship, Nautica took control of its VI, setting course for the middle of the bay.

*This is Autobot Nautica! I'm joining search and rescue in the bay. My ship can carry passengers. Can anyone help?!*

Bringing the ship to a hovering stop, she took a deep breath and jumped out the back.

Wind and rain whipped against her as Nautica fell, forcing her to lower her visor. The water in the bay was black with debris, silt, and god knew what else. She tried not to think about it too hard.

Hitting the surface feet first, she sunk under the waves and transformed. With visibility at near zero, she'd be navigating purely on sensors, but she'd have to make do.

There weren't many people left now, but for them to still be alive after all this time meant they were either powerful brutes or tinkers in sealed armour, and the ongoing fight needed them.

The nearest cape was a man with jet black skin and a large robotic arm. She could see bubbles emerging from his mouth, but his armband said he was merely unconscious and breathing comfortably. Switching to robot mode, she grabbed him under his shoulders and pulled him towards the surface. The moment his head was above the waves, she brought the ship down closer and hauled him up the ramp.

Diving back underwater, she looked for the next cape, then the next. After the third cape, Nautica broke the surface to find a number of flying capes had joined her. One of them dropped down, taking the man from her and carrying him to her ship, where another was performing first aid.

[Tidal Wave Incoming!]

The water around her started to move, pulling outwards towards the ocean as another tidal wave built. Sending a command to the ship's VI, she reached out and let one of the capes lift her out of the water.

Nautica forced herself not to think about the people still in the water. They'd only managed to rescue a handful so far. The moment the wave passed, she tapped the cape's hand and dove back into the water.
She would save as many as she could.

##

As she fell, Dragon steeled her nerves. This would be the first time she'd tried to fight an Endbringer since her transformation. Her first true life and death battle with an Endbringer. Her spark fluttered with fear, but she refused to let it slow her down.

A marker appeared on her vision. The fighting was slowing him down, but Leviathan still managed to cut an almost perfectly straight path of destruction, deviating no more than a few blocks to his left or right while pushing further into the city. Waiting for an opening, Dragon leveled off, circling above the fight.

Leviathan continued to move through the streets below, dashing from one side of the roads to another, capes desperately trying to keep up with his inhuman pace. Long limbs like shadows brought to life rose from the ground in front of the monster, forcing him to screech to a halt in an attempt to evade, but his water shadow passed through the immaterial appendages like they weren't even there, which didn't stop them from gripping Leviathan tightly and keeping him still.

Seeing her chance, Dragon threw herself into a dive, wings pointed back in an effort to gain more speed. Head twisting like a vulture, Leviathan stopped his struggles to gaze up in her direction. Dragon landed on his back and drove him into the ground, breaking the grip of the shadowy limbs as she sunk her teeth deep into his neck.

Leviathan thrashed about, but her claws only dug deeper into his flesh, parting it like paper. Dragon jerked her head sideways, a move that would have snapped the neck of any other beast, but Leviathan took no notice, even as dark blood poured from his wounds.

In response, water rose up from the streets like a volley of spears, stabbing through the thin metal membrane of Dragon's wing. Screeching in pain, her grip slipped and gave Leviathan an opportunity to turn the tables.

More water burst forth, pushing Leviathan up and over, rolling him on top of her.

Die!

The blow stunned Dragon, giving the Endbrin the time he needed to leap fully on top of her and rake his claws across her armour.

"Get away from her!"

##

When Leviathan pinned Dragon, the world around me went red. I wasn't going to lose another friend to this monster.

I screamed through the air, pulling the Ion blaster from subspace and setting the power to maximum, as others dove forward beside me.

"Get away from her!"

His neck twisting, Leviathan looked straight at me. I could almost see myself reflected in the dark pools of his eyes.

Little fool!
The world slowed as the distance between us vanished. The air almost felt solid, my limbs slow to move. I could see the muscles in his neck flex as his arm started to descend.

I felt the trigger under my finger, then saw a flash of light.

Leviathan stumbled backwards as the bolt of energy hit, more eyes bursting from the impact as blood rained down his ruined face. His tail whipped through the air, destroying Divebomb's wing with his water shadow and sending me spinning towards a nearby roof. Divebomb's spark flared with pain as I landed, hands scraping across the concrete in an effort to stop myself from going over the edge.

Dragon climbed to her feet and transformed into her humanoid form, pulling a lance from subspace. Her armour was scratched and torn in places, but her spark was as strong as ever.

[All capes, form a perimeter. Do not allow Leviathan to escape!]

I could see Legend and the other flying capes circling around the fight as they caught up. On the ground, Leviathan lashed out at the capes around him while force fields and more exotic obstacles closed off the roadways.

The loss of his eyes apparently did nothing to impede the Endbringer as he continued to cut capes down one after another.

No longer able to fly, I tapped my radio. "Insight! Can you tell me anything?... Insight? Matrix to base, someone check on Lisa!"

 Damn it! She was safe inside the base, what could've happened to her?

*Taylor, Lisa's collapsed!* Chromedome sounded like he was moments away from full on panic. *I just found her on the floor, she was screaming about eyes! Rhinox is trying to sedate her!"

Had there been a security breach? No, the entire base was under a force field. There was no way someone could have attacked her. Besides, why would they leave her for us to find? If they had managed to get that far, unseen, they could just as easily have killed her.

There was movement in the sky and I looked up to see Cyclonus flying down the avenue. Armsmaster was perched on his back like a surfer, one halberd in hand and two more on his back.

Closing in on Leviathan, Cyclonus suddenly pulled up, climbing into the sky as Armsmaster jumped. He spun his halberd around, a faint grey haze surrounding the head.

"Up here, monster!" he screamed as he descended.

Leviathan's head whipped upwards, generating a water shadow which flooded directly at Armsmaster before splashing around an apparently frictionless force bubble which sprang to life around the descending hero. Armsmaster responded by driving his weapon deep into the Endbringer's face, steam pouring from the wound.

Thrashing violently, Leviathan swung his head around in an effort to dislodge Armsmaster until his grip on the halberd slipped. Tumbling through the air, he pulled another halberd from his back and fired a grappling hook into a nearby building. With a jerk, the wire retracted, pulling him past Leviathan's slicing claws.

Before the Endbringer could give chase, Cyclonus landed on his back and drove his sword into Leviathan's shoulder, energy crackling along the enormous blade.
Leviathan staggered, arm dropping limply at his side.

\textbf{\textquotedblleft You dare!\textquotedblright}

The monster spun in a mad dervish, lashing out with its free arm and tail while Cyclonus fought desperately to stay in place like a cowboy on a bull. Leviathan tried to crush him against a building, but Cyclonus slid sideways, letting go of the sword and digging his clawed hands into the Endbringer's slick hide, the scaled flesh parting reluctantly under his grip.

Reaching forward, Cyclonus grabbed the sword hilt and pulled, cutting a deep gouge as he freed the blade and jumped away. He hit the ground and rolled, coming up in a crouch.

##

Dragon looked to Armsmaster, who nodded in return.

*Cyklonus, transmit visual feed to Armsmaster,* she ordered over their radio. *Let him take the lead.*

Leviathan stepped away from the ruined building and turned towards her, but didn't move to attack. She seemed to have his attention for the moment, as Armsmaster and Cyclonus spread out and surrounded him.

"Well? What are you waiting for?"

\textbf{\textquotedblleft You are no threat.\textquotedblright}

He didn't reply, but his head occasionally turned to regard the three of them. No matter which way he turned, one of them was always behind him.

Armsmaster moved first, ducking smoothly under Leviathan's tail sweep and driving his halberd into the Endbringer's thigh, jumping back just in time to dodge Leviathan's retaliatory claws.

"Dragon! Left shoulder! Cyclonus, right leg!" Armsmaster barked. She drove her lance into Leviathan's shoulder, knocking him slightly off balance just as Cyclonus' sword carved into the opposite leg, hobbling the creature.

Running forward again, Armsmaster brought his halberd up in a wide arc, the gray mist which covered the head eating through Leviathan's chest due to the nanothorn technology he'd been working on for weeks. Dragon hadn't even known it was ready for deployment.

"You're just another dumb brute!" Armsmaster shouted. "Do you even know what I'm saying? Dragon, Cyclonus, focus on his arms!"

Pulling the second halberd from his back, Armsmaster charged forward again, driving the tip into the ground as he vaulted into the air, over Leviathan's tail and trailing water shadow to bring the nanothorns down on its head.

The blade carved several chunks from Leviathan even as Dragon dove at him again. Transforming, she bit down on his arm and drove her claws into the ground in an effort to hold him still. Cyclonus came from behind, stabbing his sword into Leviathan's unrestrained shoulder and paralysing the limb.

"I win," Armsmaster breathed, so quietly Dragon almost didn't hear him. "The others helped, slowing you down, stopping the waves. But this victory, this killing blow? It's mine."
"Hold fire!" Legend shouted, the order repeated over the automated system. Running to the edge of the building, I could only stare as the three heroes danced around Leviathan. No matter which way the Endbringer turned, he was constantly open to attack, and Armsmaster was at the lead, dodging strikes I couldn't even see coming, shouting orders to Dragon and Cyclonus.

It was like watching wolves bring down a bloodied moose. They circled around Leviathan, moving forward to strike, then pulling back when he turned. Leviathan couldn't seem to keep up as the three picked away at him.

And yet I wasn't sure we were actually hurting him. Leviathan's body was scorched and burned, covered in rents and fissures, but it was all superficial. He wasn't even slowing down.

One burst of speed and he'll be gone.

The thought nagged at me. I'd seen how fast he was. He could easily plough through the three of them and into the city. Some of the 'obstacles' penning him into this street wouldn't hold him for more than a second. So why hadn't he already left?

Pushing the thought aside, I glanced at my map and realised that the extra dragon craft were closing in. They were all equipped with fusion cannons, extremely powerful but slow to fire.

So we need to slow him down… I looked up at the sea wall. The waves hadn't stopped, but they hadn't grown any more powerful. If I pulled some drones from the upper level, it would let more water through. The shoreline was already decimated, but damage to the rest of the city would still be minimal.

Stepping away from the roof edge, I called up a console and started typing commands.

"This is Matrix. I think I can slow Leviathan down, but we need to hold him still for… sixty seconds!" I knew it was asking a lot, but I didn't see any other choice.

The comms system was automated and even with Soundwave managing it, there was a delay as my request was filtered and processed.

"You've got forty," a woman - Alexandria - snapped.

I didn't bother to argue.

Back on the streets, Armsmaster continued to lead the assault, dancing in and out of close combat with a foe a dozen times his own size. Whatever the grey haze around his halberd was, it was doing almost as much harm as Cyclonus' sword.

Then Dragon lunged with a reptilian roar. Diving forward, she sunk her teeth into Leviathan's tail, close to the base. For a second, Leviathan froze as Armsmaster moved forward, intent on delivering the killing blow. Were we finally winning?

\Such arrogance!!\n
In a sudden burst of speed, Leviathan tore his tail out of Dragon's maw, swatted Cyclonus away, and spun to rake a webbed hand through Dragon's neck. His newly freed tail caught Armsmaster under the arm, crumpling the hero's power armour like aluminum foil and throwing him into the broken ruin
of a building with a sudden crunch.

*Dragon down, Armstrong down, Cyclonus down.*

Leviathan turned to run, but was promptly caught by Eidolon, who appeared overhead and fired an ice-white beam that transformed the Endbringer's water shadow into 40 tons of lead.

Not wasting any time, I had my drones circle Leviathan and create a shield wall around him. The result was a glowing blue cylinder, barely wider than the Endbringer, and almost twice his height.

The white beam cut out and Leviathan dashed forward as the metal reverted to water. The shield bowed, acting like a net to diffuse the impact, but remained strong for the moment.

"Arcee, get Dragon and Cyclonus somewhere safe!" I ordered. Another cape had already dived down to get Armstrong, but only a handful of us knew what Dragon was. To anyone else, she'd simply lost one of her remote bodies and they likely wouldn't bother trying to recover it.

Leviathan crouched low, readying himself to jump, but Alexandria dropped out the sky like the hammer of Thor, driving him back into the force cage.

Above us, Legend and the others formed a loose ring and opened fire. Every few seconds, a well timed blast from Purity would knock the Endbringer off its feet before it could make another attempt at escape.

Meanwhile, the Dragon craft had finally arrived.

Taking control of them, I landed each on a nearby roof and slaved them to my suit's targeting system. *I found a bigger gun!* Lifting my rifle, I pulled the trigger.

Four beams of glowing purple erupted from the battle cannons, slamming into Leviathan and blasting massive chunks out of his hide.

\You cannot win!\n
There was a deep agonising groan from below, like the ground itself was falling apart, and part of the city, barely a block away, sank into the ground.

*The city's on an aquifer!* Rhinox shouted over the noise. *Leviathan's gonna drop the whole place into it!*  

[Warning! Incoming missiles!]

Spinning around, I saw a dozen rockets flying from a rooftop. Small, automated lasers on my armour flipped up and fired, detonating the single rocket that was aimed at me. Most continued past me, exploding among the ring of capes shooting at Leviathan.

People scattered, some trying to help those who'd been hit, while others just tried to get out of the way.

The remaining rockets slammed into the unprotected backs of my Sentinel drones, destroying six of them. The shield flickered and Leviathan moved, tearing through the weakened section of shield in the blink of an eye.

*Taylor! Someone's attacking the base!* Rattrap's warning reached me moments before Ratchet's voice chimed in as well.
*This is medical! We're under attack!* 

[Warning: defensive forces are under attack!]

What the fuck was going on?

Chapter End Notes

AN: Big thanks to SpiralAK and Essex for their help on this one.
Not overly happy with this chapter but at this point i'm just sick of working on it.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Amy)
"I need more blood over here!"

"Somebody, hold this guy still!"

The medical tent was chaos, with medics of all types shouting over each other. Ratchet was in the thick of it, barking orders while Amy rushed from one bed to another.

Broken bones and cuts could be healed in moments, some capes able to return to the fight almost immediately. With more severe injuries, all she could do was stabilise her patients. Most people didn't have the mass needed for her to regrow entire limbs, so she was forced to simply close their wounds. As long as they survived, she could always come back later.

If there was an upside to the chaos, it was that walking was getting easier. She was still a bit heavy on her feet, but she could reliably move from one side of the tent to the other without falling over.

"Panacea! Bed six!" Ratchet shouted. He was elbow deep in a young man in a black and orange costume, his hands a blur as he stitched him back together.

"On it!" she shouted back.

Bed six turned out to be a young girl who was missing most of her face. Her nose and eyes were gone and what little skin remained on her face was tattered, like someone peeled it off with a blunt knife. Amy could see the burned flesh and damaged muscles where someone had clearly tried to cauterise the wound.

This was… okay. It wasn't the worst thing she'd seen so far today, but it was close. Even the EMT standing nearby kept making gagging sounds. The only saving grace was that the poor girl was already unconscious.

Taking the girl's wrist, Amy focused her attention on what she was doing. Her power could give an incredible amount of information from even the slightest touch. Thanks to the underlying bone structure, it would be possible to mostly guess at her face and read genetic markers for eye colours. *Caucasian, late teens, brown eyes, slight problem with acne.*

Pulling some fat from the girl's midsection and hips, she started rebuilding her face. Damaged muscles and tendons knit themselves together, blood and other fluids pooled into empty sockets as her eyes regrew. It was at this point the watching EMT finally reached her limit and had to rush outside.

Amy didn't pay her much attention. The sight of blood and gore hadn't bothered her since the day she'd triggered.

Fresh new skin spread across the girl's face, melding seamlessly with the remaining flesh. Not knowing what she'd originally looked like, Amy had erred on the side of caution and settled on what she felt was the prettier end of the scale.

Taking an orange tag and generic mask from a pocket, Amy covered the girl's face and clipped the
tag to her costume. The mask would protect her identity and the tag would signal to other medics that Amy would need to see her again before she was allowed to go home.

"Six clear!" Amy shouted to Ratchet, waving another EMT over to take the girl away.

The medical tent was set up on Captain's Hill, the highest point in the city and one of the most stable, since the aquifer that covered most of the city didn't reach here. The med-center itself was staffed with a mix of volunteers, either capes with medical training or healing powers. These in turn were supported by PRT staff, volunteer doctors, and EMTs.

A number of nearby buildings had been commandeered and turned into temporary housing for recovering capes, holding areas for villains and, when needed, a morgue.

The girl she'd just treated would be moved to one of those and kept there until Amy could check in on her and make sure everything was alright. Until then, there were more patients to deal with.

"Amy! Bed nine!" Amy startled at the use of her name and extra strident tone of voice. Ratchet always called her Panacea when she was working.

Spinning around, she felt her blood run cold as a gurney was rushed towards her, the number nine hanging from it. On the bed was her cousin Crystal - Laserdream to the public. Her body was drenched in blood, her right arm was missing, and deep grooves had been carved into her chest.

Blood and gore didn't affect Amy, but seeing someone she knew and cared about hurt would never get easier. She grabbed Crystal's wrist and immediately halted the blood loss. There was nothing she could do to replace her arm for now. Instead, she sealed the wound, making it absorb any blood that had pooled inside Crystal's body, and directing it back to where it was needed.

The sound of gunfire outside was getting louder and Amy was just closing up the wounds on Crystal's chest when a man came running into the tent.

He wasn't a cape, or at least he didn't look like one. He was dressed in a shirt and tie, like he'd just come from a job in an office. With a small pair of glasses and a receding hairline, Amy would have called him unremarkable, if not for his sudden entrance.

Then she spotted the gun. Clutched tightly in his hand was an Uzi. Without looking at it, or her, the man raised the gun and opened fire.

Amy moved without thinking, throwing herself over Crystal. The wing pack on her back sprung to life, the wings snapping out to wrap around them as gunfire filled the air, bullets bouncing off her wings.

Meanwhile, the faster people dove to floor, some of them dragging patients with them. Those who hadn't seen the man's entrance, or had been slower to react, went down in a hail of bullets.

Flinging his arm out, Ratchet flicked a gun of his own out of subspace. A single shot hit the gunman in the head, dropping him instantly. Three more charged through the tent door, only to be gunned down.

Grabbing Crystal, Amy pulled her sideways, tipping over the bed and hiding them both behind it. Flooding Crystal's body with adrenaline, she woke her with a start.

"Shields!" Amy screamed.

Blinking in surprise, it took Crystal a moment to realise what was going on. A bullet bouncing of
Amy's shoulder quickly focused her attention and a crimson shield sprung up around the pair.

"Amy? What's going on?" Crystal looked towards her missing arm.

"I don't know! But you need to keep that shield up!" Amy shouted. Pulling her gun from her back, Amy aimed over the top of the bed and opened fire, downing another attacker while doctors continued pulling people to safety.

*This is Medical!* Ratchet shout over the radio. *We're under attack!*

Outside, the sounds of gunfire continued, with only the tent's own shield projector stopping random bullets from punching through the thin material.

Amy's palms were sweaty and she could hear Crystal breathing heavily as her cousin tried to stay calm. This whole situation was insane - *who would attack a medical tent during an Endbringer fight?!* - but they were stuck until help came or they managed to escape.

"Can you keep this shield up while we move?"

Crystal shook her head. She was worryingly pale and Amy feared she was going into shock. Looking around, she could see the tent staff pulling back, moving everyone away from the entrance. A few flipped beds over and pushed them towards the front to create a barricade. Ratchet was behind one of them, gun in hand.

"We need to get out of here!" she shouted to him, over the sound of gunfire.

"No! The PRT are holding them back for now, but if we go outside we'll be easy targets caught in the middle!" he called back.

*We're already easy targets!* Amy wanted to scream, as more people pushed through the door. She fired again, ignoring the bullets that bounced off her.

[All capes, lethal force is authorised! Defend yourself through any means necessary!]

A dark shape entered the door, his massive bulk filling the space as he ducked into the tent and black metallic hands closed around the lead attacker's head. There was a crunch, and the attacker went still.

"Defensive perimeter established," Defensor said, dropping the man's limp body. "Objective: none shall pass."

With the finality of a grave, Defensor turned back to the entrance, pulled a gun longer than Amy's arm from subspace and started firing at the attackers outside.

Sighing in relief, Amy slid down next to Crystal.

"People do this for a living?" she muttered, pressing her forehead against the bed.

Crystal slid sideways, leaning against her. "Welcome to the job," she mumbled. Her words were slightly slurred and Amy knew she needed to sleep. "I'd pat you on the back but…no arm." She shrugged and Amy couldn't stop herself from snorting in amusement. It was wrong, it shouldn't be funny, but right now she needed to laugh.

##

Duette helped heave Armsmaster off the ground. It was taking three of them to lift him and blood was pouring from the cracks in his armour. She'd spent enough time around doctors to know his arm
A woman in a blue and teal body suit dropped down, landing nearby and ready to lift Armsmaster to safety.

"Are You Sure You Can Lift Him?" Duette ignored the way the woman flinched. The tinker-tech collar she’d been given by the PRT acted like an artificial larynx, but there hadn't been time to adjust it, so it sounded harsh and robotic. If the situation hadn't been so dire, Duette likely wouldn't be using it at all.

"I'm fine, I'm stronger than I look," the flying cape said, putting her arms under Armsmaster's armpits and lifting him off the ground. He groaned in pain at the movement, but there really wasn't time to be gentle.

As the cape took off, Duette snatched up a fallen halberd from the ground and looked at the battle nearby. Leviathan was trapped, held in place by a forcefield as capes fired everything they had at him.

The sound was almost deafening and Duette could see the field bend and flex as Leviathan tried to force his way out. More of those drones continued to circle around in the air, some of them dropping down to pick up the fallen bodies of Cyclonus and Dragon.

In truth, she mostly ignored them. All her attention was on Leviathan. This was the closest she'd ever been to an Endbringer. It towered over her, water pouring from its body. Even if she dared to get closer, its skin was so tough that her batons were useless.

There was a flash behind her and Duette turned to see a swirling vortex appear in the street. Men and women emerged from inside, weapons gripped in their hands. For a moment, Duette thought reinforcements had arrived. Then she really looked at them.

None of them were dressed like capes. Many were wearing suits, uniforms, or other work clothes. They looked like civilians, but they were carrying a wide array of weapons. Guns, knives, bats, one or two even had rocket launchers on their shoulders.

Spotting her, they raised their weapons and opened fire, but Duette was already moving, throwing herself behind the broken remains of a wall. There was a whooshing sound and she looked up in time to see rockets arc through the air, right at the shield keeping Leviathan trapped.

Explosions rocked the shield and Leviathan moved. Hitting the energy wall like an angry god, he tore himself free.

A small glowing shape appeared before Leviathan, growing rapidly to his size. It was a cape, a young girl in black and yellow with a wasp themed helmet. She screamed as she tried to punch Leviathan with a fist the size of a car.

"You're not getting away!"

The blow knocked Leviathan back and she pushed forwards into a grapple, reaching out to grab the Endbringer before he could escape, pushing him against a building and trying to hold him there.

Leviathan's tail whipped forward, punching through the girl's abdomen and bursting out the other side.

She screamed again, this time in pain as her grip loosened.
Breaking free, Leviathan raked his claws across the girl's front. Blood poured from the wounds and she fell to her knees, rapidly shrinking as she clutched at her body.

The water that was almost knee deep on the ground rose back into the air as more poured off Leviathan's body. Ignoring the fallen girl, the Endbringer charged forwards.

Duette barely had a chance to grab the wall she was hiding behind before the water crashed into her.

The sound of rushing water filled her ears and the world spun around her as she was carried down the street, debris bouncing off her body.

Then, as suddenly as it started, it was over. The water fell away and Duette found herself on the ground. Her body ached, but nothing felt broken. Rolling over, she tried to stand. Everything felt sluggish.

She paused to catch her breath. Around her, the street was ruined. Abandoned cars had been smashed aside by the water and she could see bodies lying here and there. Some were capes, but most of them looked like the civilians that had attacked the shield - serves them right - and Leviathan was nowhere in sight.

Sitting back on her legs, Duette idly noticed she was still holding Armsmaster's halberd. She'd somehow managed to hold onto it all this time.

Another portal opened and more people walked out, stopping only to pick up fallen weapons. The first cape they reached was a man in gold and white. He was barely moving, one hand raised in a plea for help.

The leader of the group shot him twice, then moved on to the next.

Cursing, Duette forced her body double to appear in the middle the group. The glowing blue construct lashed out, cutting down the nearest person with her own halberd as the rest scattered.

[All capes, lethal force is authorised! Defend yourself through any means necessary!]

Gunfire rained down on the construct, shattering it as Duette's concentration failed. Normally, keeping the double stable was easy, but between her injuries and the fluff in her head, she couldn't focus.

One of the scattered attackers had reached her, a bat held tightly in his hand.

With a grunt, Duette rolled to the side, ribs throbbing in protest and feet dragging through the remaining water as she brought her weapon up to shield herself, adrenaline and determination letting her move.

She parried his next strike, his bat breaking under the weight of the halberd, and she drove the axe head deep into the man's chest. His face remained blank as he slumped to the street.

What few capes that could still move were fighting back, cutting down their attackers almost as quickly as they were appearing. New portals kept opening, ejecting more of them in random locations.

There was no organisation, they just emerged from a portal and started attacking wildly. Those with longer range weapons were firing at the flying capes while the others piled onto any cape they could reach.
Spinning, Duette sliced through a young girl who had been sneaking up on her. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen and Duette felt sick as the child dropped.

In her distraction, she never noticed another attacker from the side. The bark of his gun was deafening as her leg exploded in pain and she fell to the ground.

Unable to stand again, she looked up to see her attacker closing in. She refused to close her eyes or look away.

A dark shadow passed over her and Matrix hit the ground between them with enough force to crack the street. A blue shield appeared on her left arm, blocking the man's shots even as she fired the weapon on her right.

"Teletraan! Swap drone group C to search and rescue! Send group B after the attackers!"

##

The drones that hadn't been destroyed by the attackers or Leviathan started to fall out of the sky, using smaller shields to protect the fallen capes. A smaller number had weapons equipped. Using my HUD and their own networked VI, they started picking off the attackers one at a time. The remaining drones picked up the injured and started ferrying them to safety.

A metal pole hit the side of my head as an obese man tried to force me back, but I refused to move. Duette was still behind me, unable to fight back or run.

I slammed my shield into the fat man's face, stunning him long enough for me to open fire. Three more approached as he fell. Not giving them a chance to get close, I increased the power and widened the spread of my shots.

All three dropped, stunned senseless.

Another man - nearly six feet tall and a wall of solid muscle - grabbed one of his fallen friends and held him like a shield as he charged.

He slammed his friend into me, trying to push me back, but my armour made that impossible. Rather than give up, he tried again and again, hitting me with the limp body in a frantic attempt to hurt me.

Swapping my Null-ray for a sword, I pushed the body aside and sliced at the guy's knee. He went down with a howl of pain and I quickly shot him to make sure he stayed down.

Around me, drones were lifting back into the air, carrying injured capes with them, and I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Duette was among them.

Another portal opened and more people poured out. They were on top of me before I could move. Backing up, I opened fire, but there were just too many. They trampled over their own fallen in a mad rush to get at me.

Gunfire, bats and chunks of metal crashed into my HL-shield. I was surrounded and without Divebomb, I couldn't get away.

[Leviathan spotted, O-23. Any available capes respond!]

A weight landed on my back as one of them managed to jump on me and another grabbed my arm. I tried to reach for one of them, but a third had grabbed my shield. A knife scraped across my lenses, leaving a crack.
They were going to beat me down en masse. *Fuck that!*

With a scream of anger, I swapped my shield for another sword and swung hard. I ignored the cry as one of them fell and lashed out at the man holding my arm. I threw the last one off my back and turned to the others, sword on each arm, and pushed forward, lashing out at anyone that came close. I was covered in blood, but I wasn't going to give them a chance to get back up.

{Taylor! Taylor you need to get out of there!} Rewind was shouting in my ear, but I didn't have time to listen.

I walked through the hail of bullets, letting them ping off my armour. Small arms weren't going to do anything to me and I couldn't afford to get bogged down. I need to get clear of the mob and reach somewhere where a drone or flier could reach me.

{They're attacking the sea wall!}

Grabbing a broken lamp post, I pulled it out of the ground and swung it like a bat. The crowd fell back, buying me a moment to breathe.

"Well?" I shouted. "I'll take you all on!"

I sliced through the arm of another attacker and a metal rod bounced off my helm, making my head ring. Spinning with the blow, I kicked him in the stomach even as another blow knocked me forward.

{Taylor, the wall's collapsing!}

[Tidal Wave Incoming!]

Spinning, the world froze as I looked towards the coast. The shield wall was a mess, littered with gaps where drones had been destroyed. Even as I watched, another rocket stuck home, wiping out two drones in a single hit.

A wave bigger than anything Leviathan had used so far hit the wall with a crash that could be heard all over the city - and the wall fell. Water rushed forward, crushing buildings and cars as it swept in.

In defiance of physics, the water didn't disperse as it rolled down the streets. Instead, it moved like a living thing, slamming into buildings and picking up bodies.

"Taylor!" Throwing another man off my back, I looked up to see Vicky diving towards me, arm outstretched. Ignoring my attackers, I jumped with all the force I could muster as the water closed in on us.

##

Legend dodged to the side as another rocket shot past him. Spreading his arms wide, he sent lasers in all directions. Half of them struck the attackers, shocking them before they could move. The rest homed in on Leviathan, leaving trails of ice and steam across his side.

\They have turned on you. You have failed\n
The fight had moved further west into the city. By all estimates, they were over the very center of the aquifer. The city didn't have much longer.

Leviathan leapt onto a highrise, using it to jump even higher. His claws raked through the air,
clipping a cape who couldn't move fast enough.

Legend vanished in a flash of light, reappearing high above the attack. A bright beam from Eidolon hit the Endbringer, freezing him mid-fall. Capes swooped in to rescue the fallen.

This high up, Legend could see most of the city, and with it, the battle. These new attackers were everywhere, appearing in a flash and attacking without regard for themselves. Even as he watched, Legend could see a group of them swarming the entrance to a shelter.

"Do we have thinker analysis?" he snapped, taking a quick shot at the group.

*Sir! Most of our thinkers are incapacitated!* a PRT officer replied. *Several collapsed at the same time and the rest immediately cut themselves off. Best we can tell, the attackers have an anti-thinker cape.*

There was a flash as another portal opened and more people poured out onto a nearby roof. Alexandria hit the side of the building with a crash, toppling it and sending the attackers flying. She changed direction suddenly, catching one as he fell.

*There aren't many of those around.* Eidolon's voice sounded strained. Was Leviathan putting up that much of a fight?

*Interrogation is useless,* Alexandria snapped. *If you capture one, they just kill themselves. This needs to be dealt with! Call for an emergency kill order!*

*I agree!*

Attacking relentlessly, no care for themselves, suicide if captured. That meant either fanatical determination or a Master effect.

"They're being mastered. Likely from someone outside the city -" A hail of bullets filled the air and Legend's body snapped into its energy state as a bullet punched through his chest. The flyer next to him wasn't so lucky. His return shot froze the attackers, encasing them in ice.

Legend frowned. If they really were being mastered, then these attackers were victims in all this.

\You can't save them.\n
"Is there any way to help them?"

*We don't have the time or numbers!* Alexandria grunted as Leviathan finally broke free, his tail slapping at her. "The Endbringer takes priority, you know that! You need to confirm the situation!*

\You lose.\n
"This is Legend… situation confirmed. Emergency kill order confirmed."

[All capes, lethal force is authorised! Defend yourself through any means necessary!] Alexandria's voice rang out over the wristbands, the emergency override giving her priority.

There was nothing he could do for the victims now; the needs of the city took priority. But when the dust settled, he would see they got justice.

##

Alarms screamed moments before the first explosion rocked the building.
*Rhinox! We need you in the control room!* Rattrap all but screamed over the PA.

Grunting, Rhinox checked Lisa over one last time before running out of the room. She'd been found on the floor of her info-sphere having a fit of some kind, screaming and ranting about eyes. With no other way to calm her down, Rhinox had carried her to the medical ward and put her under heavy sedation. Even then, he'd been forced to restrain her to stop her thrashing around.

"Teletraan!" he barked as he ran through the door. "Keep me updated on her condition!"

*Rhinox!* Rattrap screamed as another explosion shook the building.

"Alright, I'm here!" he snapped, clinging to the doorframe before he reached the control room. "What's going on?"

"Bazzze is under attack!" Waspinator cried, pointing at the monitor. On it, a green portal was visible outside the building but inside the shield dome that covered the property. Armed men and women were pouring through it and charging the main doors.

"Aw man, we're all gonna die!"

Reaching out, Rhinox closed his hand entirely around Rattrap's head.

"Be. Quiet." He didn't shout. He didn't need to. While he'd never hurt the smaller Autobot, he needed a moment to think.

The building had multiple shield generators; the big dome that covered the entire compound was the main one and could - in theory - withstand anything short of an Endbringer. Then there were the smaller ones that covered the building, then specific rooms. It was possible to overwhelm the smaller units through sheer numbers, but it would take more than some scavenged weapons -

- On the monitor, a man lifted a rocket launcher on his shoulder and fired it at the outer shield.

Okay, enough of those might be enough.

Rattrap was tapping his foot in annoyance as Rhinox let him go.

"The pair of you stay here. When I give the word, open the main doors."

"Are you outta your mind! You're just gonna let them in?"

"Just do it!" Rhinox snapped, running out of the room and through the complex. "Teletraan!" he barked, "activate the shield on medical! The rest of you, get in the safe room and seal the door!"

Reaching the main doors, Rhinox drew his weapons.

"Okay Rattrap, do it!"

The doors opened and Rhinox had a brief view of the attackers outside. Stepping forward, he opened fire, chaingun in each hand. The guns roared as the attackers nearest the doors went down. The people behind them surged forward, trampling their comrades in a mad attempt to push forward.

Rhinox marched forward as the bodies piled up, implacable as a mountain. Bullets bounced harmlessly off his armoured frame and those with melee weapons were gunned down before they could even get close enough to use them.

Eventually, the portal winked out and the attackers stopped coming. His guns slowed with the whine
of overheating motors, but Rhinox ignored them. He could always rebuild them later.

Dropping a couple of containment foam grenades to keep anyone from getting back up, Rhinox turned and walked back into the base.

"Rattrap, close the door."

"You got it, big guy."

##

Arcee rushed across the rooftop, struggling to stay upright as her wheels skidded on the soaked surface.

She hadn't realised it at first, but there was a pattern to the portals and the attackers. Any time it looked like the defenders were starting to rally, or Leviathan was slowing down, another portal would appear.

She just had to hope that pattern held out.

Hitting the edge of a roof, she bounced into the air and transformed, kicking off the side of another building and launching herself across the wide street below. She rolled as she landed on the next roof, switching back without breaking flow or slowing down.

Up ahead, Legend was gathering as many capes as he could while Alexandria kept Leviathan busy.

Sure enough, another portal opened on a roof adjacent to the capes and Arcee changed direction, kicking off a wall, sliding down another roof, then using her bike mode to launch herself as high as possible. She crashed down on the roof, transformed, and used one of the attackers as a springboard, throwing herself through the portal before it could close.

It was smoother than teleporting. She barely had time to notice the odd sensation of passing through the portal before it was over and she crashed to the ground, surrounded by armed people.

With a kick, she flipped herself onto her feet. Blades extended from her forearms and she attacked. People fell and blood sprayed as she moved, dancing between their clumsy attacks and hacking away at their numbers. Bullets pinged off her shield, the ricochets actually helping her.

Despite that, the damage was adding up. Taking hit after hit was starting to slow her down, and it was only a matter of time before they got lucky.

Jumping, she flipped up and over the mob. It had taken a few seconds, but her systems had managed to contact a Dragon satellite and identify her location. She was in a warehouse in western Russia.

The area she was in was filled with people dressed in 'civilian' clothes and clutching weapons. Now that she had a moment to look around, she could see two people who stood out from the rest.

Up on a walkway overlooking everything was a skinny, long-haired man with dark skin and a thick, mane-like beard. A simple bullroarer made of rope and a weight was held in his hands. Behind him was a woman - no, a man dressed as a woman - and clearly a cape.

He wore a delicate-looking mask with it's closed eyes, tattoos visible beneath it, and a dress-like costume with white and silver feathers placed on flowing white clothing that clung to his body with a corset.
He was shouting something to the smaller man, but she couldn’t make out what.

Sprinting across the warehouse, Arcee jumped, kicking off a wall and landing on the far side of the catwalk. Transforming, her engine roared and she accelerated down the narrow walkway, intent on running them both down.

The dark skinned man spun his bullroarer and a portal appeared on the catwalk, moments before Arcee could reach them. Unable to stop, she plunged into the portal and out the other side.

Her wheels hit deep snow and sank, the sudden change throwing her forwards into a roll. Transforming once more, she looked back over her shoulder in time to see the portal vanish.

"Scrap…” she muttered. Around her, a snow storm raged and temperature warning messages were already starting to appear on her HUD. With nothing else to do, she tapped her emergency beacon and waited.

*Why iz Arcee at the zzzouth pole?* Waspinator asked, sounding equal parts worried and confused.

"Don't. Ask. Just send a rescue ship before I freeze my rivets off!” It was going to be a long trip back to America.

##

"Prime, Prime! get up. You're not dead. Not yet."

I opened my eyes with a groan. Every system in my body hurt. Warning messages flicked past my vision, listing one injury after another.

"You don't get off that easy," Megatron growled, pushing rubble off me. His own armour was battered and scarred, but his eyes glowed with determination.

"Wuh- Where is it?" Rolling over, I tried to push myself up.

"The siege wall has been breached and the monster is pushing west. Now get up and fight."

"Taylor!"

One of Dragon's fusion cannon suits hit the ground with a crash, spotlights on its side lighting up the world, briefly blinding me.

Smoke filled the air; the very sky itself was burning. The ground under my feet groaned. The whole area was getting unstable. Cybertron itself was dying. We did this, we took our planet to the very brink.

Th Ei und do erwi lon ng meant well. He'd seen the threat coming. But his solution was misguided at best. And now we had to pay the price.

The dragon suit opened up, parts of it unfolding and retracting to reveal a small cockpit inside. I'd helped Dragon design the fusion cannon suits, but they hadn't been intended to carry people. Dragon must have added this later. "Thank god you're alright. Quickly, get in!"

Pushing against a ruined car, I forced myself to my feet and staggered forwards, as the world swam before my eyes. My legs weren't moving right, and pieces of my armour fell off. That wave hadn't
just carried me through the streets, it had driven me into the ground, crushed me against buildings, and smashed me against the remains of cars.

Eventually, I pulled myself into the suit and slumped down into the seat.

"W-what's going on, where's Leviathan?" My eyes felt heavy, but I forced myself to stay awake.

"The attackers have stopped coming and everyone else is trying to regroup," Dragon said, closing the suit around me.

"What about Vicky? I saw her before, before..."

"She's fine. When the wave hit you both, she flew up to escape. You don't need to worry, you've done enough."

[Leviathan's attacking a shelter! Can anyone hear me?]

My eyes snapped open. "We need to help!"

_Thunderwing barreled down on the others. Swathed in flame and dripping phosphorus, it was rage and hatred personified. A monster of our own creation and it / needed to be stopped/-_

"Taylor, what-?"

The Matrix flared on my chest and fire filled my veins as I summoned my power and dumped it into the suit. My limbs were trembling as metal warped and shifted around me, transforming into a new suit of armour. The fusion cannon on its back moved to my shoulder. The short stubby wings on the sides, used mostly for steering, moved to my back and extended outwards, another set forming on my forearms. The suit's dragon head repositioned itself, converting into a chest plate.

What weapons it had originally been equipped with were taken by my power and improved. Some ended up fused into my forearms, while the others were pulled apart and formed into new, larger Ion-blasters, one on each hand.

Even my helmet was reinforced, with a new sealed mouthplate across my face.

"-No matter the cost."

My chest felt like it was in a vice and that I was breathing glass, but my vision cleared as determination gave me focus. _The battle was still going on, the combined might of two armies struggled to hold the line._ On my back, thrusters whined as they came up to speed. Then, with a roar and jet of flame, I took off.

[Warning:errorInDriver:Error404TransferFailureCardiacPowerCellFailurePilotLifeSignsNull:systemsArrest]

Streets and buildings blurred below me and warning messages filled my vision, but I didn't have time to worry about that. My power was all that was holding this suit together.

Ahead stood Leviathan. He was digging at the ground, tearing up massive chunks of the road. I could see the exposed doors of the shelter as his claws cut deep grooves into the metal.

Dropping out of the sky, I hit the ground with a crash, skidding to a stop behind the monster.

"/LEVIATHAN!/" My voice echoed off the buildings and caught the monster's attention, his eyeless head turning to look at me. I could feel the Matrix in my chest burn, its anger mirroring my own, its energy flowing through my suit.
"This. Ends. NOW!"

Bolts of energy slammed into Leviathan and he jerked sideways. The thrusters on my back fired as Leviathan charged. When we met, his claws raked through the air above my head, as I fired at an open wound on his leg, making it collapse under him.

I skidded to a stop with the shelter now behind me and Leviathan struggling to stand, his ruined leg black and charred below the knee. I wasn't going to let him get back up. The Matrix flared, arcs of energy crawling like lightning across my skin and wrapping around my weapons. The fusion cannon on my shoulder roared with purple fire.

Leviathan formed a new leg out of water and spun to face me, claws shielding his head as he pushed forward. His flesh peeled away under the relentless onslaught, and a blast from the fusion cannon shattered his clawed hand like glass, its skin turning black as blood flowed from the open wound.

"I am going to end you or die trying!" This time, there would be no half measures, no retreat.

The Matrix glowed like a sun, its light visible through my armour. I couldn't hear anything over the roar of the guns and I screamed breathlessly as pain racked my body.

\You can not... Destroy...\n
Leviathan stumbled as his water-made leg exploded, halting his advance and forcing him backwards as more blasts stripped the flesh from his body.

\I... Destroy!\n
Leviathan moved. Claws like swords carved through my armour, tearing the fusion cannon from my shoulder and shattering one of my guns. Before I could hit the ground, Leviathan's tail slammed into my side, the force throwing me down the street.

Hitting the ground, I rolled to a stop. The left side of my body was numb and I couldn't feel anything but the remaining gun in my hand. With a grunt, I rolled over to see Leviathan watching me. Lifting my remaining gun, I pulled the trigger again and again.

[Scion sighted, A-1]

The last thing I saw was his water echo bearing down on me.

[Matrix down, I-24]

Chapter End Notes

AN: And with that. The Endbringer fight is over.
The distant sound of explosions echoed like thunder. Smoke filled the sky as the monster marched forward. Its intelligible scream echoed deep into my bones.

I stood on a metal spire, watching the battle as the wind of the storm whipped about me, helpless and unarmed.

The creature's hand closed around a grey bot's head, shrugging off its gunfire as it crushed the life out of him.

Then I felt it. A low groaning noise that emerged deep inside the planet. Metal parted like paper, collapsing under the monster's feet. It screamed and thrashed in anger; claws raked at the ground as it fell, pulling bots down with it. A large bot in red and blue was amongst them.

Overhead, the massive storm grew, forming a superstorm that ravaged the area. Thunder strikes pounded the ground, the flash blinding me as the impacts drowned out the howl of the wind.

Then, nothing.

The armies, the monster, even the storms. It was all gone and I was standing alone by the ravine.

Dropping to my hands and knees, I crawled forward, carefully peering over the edge. There was nothing but darkness below me, not even a hint of the monster.

Was it dead?

"Thunderwing died long ago." In this silent world, the sudden voice was painfully loud. "The last vestige of intelligence burned away by his final death throes. What lies down there is merely an echo of our own guilt."

Spinning around, I found myself looking up at a pair of glowing blue eyes that had haunted my dreams.

"Greetings, Taylor, my name is Optimus Prime." His deep voice was warm, gentle and almost tired. "Welcome to Cybertron."

Amy groaned quietly as she woke, muscles aching from fatigue. As she looked around with eyes heavy from sleep, she found herself laying on a bed surrounded by curtains. The last she remembered, she'd sat down on an unoccupied bed to catch her breath. How had she gotten here?

Checking her phone, she groaned as she realised she'd been asleep for nearly three hours. She'd only
closed her eyes for a few minutes, she hadn't meant to fall asleep.

By this point, it had been nearly four hours since Scion had driven Leviathan off and things had barely calmed down.

During the first hour, the chaos had been at its worst as wave after wave of critically injured capes had been brought in. *This girl had been run through. This guy had been crushed. His arm couldn't be saved and the stump needs sealing. She was blind. These two are brain dead.* Things had quickly devolved into a blur as she worked on one patient after the next. She wasn't actually healing people at this point, just basic triage, making sure they would live. It was quicker this way and she would come back later to finish things up.

Despite her exhaustion, one patient stood out.

She'd nearly been sick when Taylor's broken body had been carried in. Tellingly, no one had complained when Amy immediately turned to heal her. Taylor, Taylor had been a mess. Most of her chest was caved in. One of her lungs was punctured and the other was half-filled with water and blood.

Amy had wanted nothing more than to just ignore everyone and focus on Taylor, but she couldn't. Instead, she'd been forced to stick a hand through a hole in Taylor's armour and patch her up as quickly as possible. Her lungs were purged and reinflated, and blood vessels were sealed, with a couple redirected entirely to ensure her brain continued to receive oxygen.

And just like that, Taylor was gone, taken away to wait until there was more time.

After that, Amy had thrown herself into her work, determined to get back to Taylor as soon as possible. She barely paused for the next thirty minutes and the number of critical injuries dropped. Eventually, search and rescue had become recovery and the number of incoming patients slowed.

By the start of the second hour, things were finally calming down and Ratchet had told her to sit down for a few minutes. The last thing Amy remembered was sitting on an unoccupied bed.

If Ratchet had sedated her, she was going to weld his ankles together.

Rubbing her face, she stood up - wobbling slightly on her prosthetic legs - and pushed the curtains aside. Amy wasn't surprised to find Steeljaw and Ravage sitting protectively by her bed.

She was in a long dimly lit tent, divided by curtains. Here and there, large heat lamps hung from the roof, keeping the people resting inside warm and dry. This had to be the recovery tent the PRT had put up.

"Where's Ratchet?" She rubbed her eyes and pulled her visor back into place. Ravage didn't move, but Steeljaw turned to her with a ration bar in his mouth. The words 'eat this - Ratchet' had been scribbled on it. They were dense, packed with calories, sugars and tasted like mud. Amy had tried a couple in the past at the hospital when there hadn't been time for a proper meal. She threw it on the bed.

"I don't have time to eat," she said. "Now where's Ratchet?"

Ravage gave her a dismissive look and Steeljaw nudged her hand with his nose. Taking her sleeve in his mouth, he pushed her hand towards the bar.

*I don't believe this.* "I'm being bossed about by a cat," she groaned. Somewhere in the forest of curtains, she heard someone snigger.
Flushed with embarrassment, she grabbed the bar and tore open the packaging. Her plan to wolf the bar down quickly ended the moment she bit into it. The damn thing was so thick and chewy that it forced her to slow down.

Forcing the last of it down her throat, she grabbed the bottle of water that was on the floor and gulped half of it down.

"There, now can I get back to work?"

With a huff, Ravage stood and started walking through the beds, Amy following behind.

The main tent was being used for emergency triage. The worst cases were being sent there, while the walking wounded were herded towards the smaller tents to be treated in order of severity. Two tents, longer than the others and divided by curtains, had been set up as a 'recovery room' for very low priority cases or people that just needed to rest. Villains were in one tent, heroes were in the other, and PRT officers were keeping an eye on things.

As she moved through the tent, Amy could feel the tension in the air. The PRT officers glanced at shadows, holding their weapons ready. Even the few capes she could see were no better, twitching at any large sound.

'They're waiting for another attack,' she realised. Those attackers had come out of nowhere, using portals to send in wave after wave. What would stop them from doing it again?

Outside the tent, the cold wind whipped at Amy's face, driving away the last vestiges of sleep.

There were more guards outside. Some stood at attention while others positioned powerful spot lamps and connected them to small generators.

There were also capes lingering around the area unsure what to do. Some were talking quietly, like Parian who was talking to a girl with a large crossbow on her back. Others were just resting on the grass.

More than a few were crying, or had been. Whether it was from the stress of the fight or out of grief, she couldn't say.

Captain's Hill was the highest point in the city. From here, she could see the gaps in the skyline where buildings had been knocked down, dark in the fading light. In the sky above, Amy could see people flying over the city.

There was movement to her right and Amy spun around to see a PRT officer walking nearby. He was carrying a number of objects in his arms, but the one that really caught Amy's attention was a small metal ball. It was no bigger than her fist, but it was glowing like a star.

"Hey!" Her shout echoed in the tense silence around them, drawing the attention of most of the hill's inhabitants.

Perhaps realising he'd been caught, the officer stopped and stood at attention. "Yes ma- um Panacea?"

Amy was long used to people staring as she walked towards him. As she got closer, she could clearly see Taylor's Matrix in his arms, along with what looked like the remains of several weapons.

"Where are you taking that?" Steeljaw and Ravage took up position at her sides. Neither made an aggressive move, but Amy could hear the slight rumble of a growl coming from one of them.
The officer licked his lips as he glanced between the cats and Amy. She couldn't help notice that something about his uniform didn't look right. Almost like it was too large for him.

Taking a breath, the 'officer' drew himself up to his full height. "Some of Matrix's belongings were found in the field. I'm taking them to a secure location until she can claim them."

"You don't need to do that. I'll give them to the Autobots. They can look after them."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but orders are orders."

"Is something the matter?" Miss Militia limped towards them. Her uniform was filthy with dried blood smeared across it. Despite that, her eyes were alert.

"N-no, ma'am! Just… discussing something with Panacea." He forcefully dropped the collection of weapons he was holding onto Amy's arms, spun on his heel and marched off.

Amy stumbled under the sudden weight, dropping everything but the Matrix. Warmth spread up her arms and her breath caught in her throat. For just a moment, it felt like Taylor was standing next to her. Then the feeling faded, leaving just the memory as the world returned to normal. Without really thinking about it, Amy stuffed the Matrix into one of her pockets and buttoning it closed.

Without saying anything, Miss Militia turned to watch him leave. The moment he was out of sight, she tapped her radio. "Dispatch, be aware, possible looters disguised as an officer."

*Acknowledged, Miss Militia. We'll start a security sweep.* Amy blinked in surprise; she hadn't realised her headset was still on the PRT frequency.

"You're just going to let him go?"

"Everyone's already on edge," Miss Militia said, stepping closer. "The last thing we need is another fight breaking out."

She didn't look any happier than Amy at the prospect of letting him get away, but Amy could understand what she meant.

Still, that didn't mean she couldn't fuck with his head. "Ravage, can you follow him? Make sure he leaves and don't let him take anything else… please?"

She felt odd giving one of Taylor's cats an order, but Amy was sure she would understand. Ravage certainly did as the cat prowled off into the darkness with a rumble that almost sounded like a laugh.

"Really though, looters?" Power was out across the city, the streets were flooded and capes and PRT officers were sweeping streets for survivors. Would people really try looting at a time like this?

"It's a fact of life," Miss Militia said with a worn out sigh. "There are people out there that will risk everything for a quick profit. Right now, there's probably people in the city picking through the corpses, looking for anything they can find. Tinker weapons, armour, cape costumes. Most will end up either on the black market or sold online to a 'collector'."

Amy shuddered in revulsion. Vicky and Crystal had once joked that they could sell their old costumes online for a fortune. The idea had made her skin crawl out at the time, but digging through the streets, pulling things off dead people? That was a new level of disgusting.

She made a note to warn Taylor about it later. If anything of hers ended up for sale, she'd probably want to know.
Still, there was no point worrying about it, she had enough to deal with for now. "Um… can you help me? I can't bend down…" She gestured at the dropped weapons and tried not to blush. Walking was getting easier all the time, but she hadn't practiced kneeling or bending down without something to hold onto and this wasn't really the time to try.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure she gets them."

Swallowing her guilt, Amy thanked Miss Militia and moved on to the main tent. She pushed her way inside roughly, her forgotten anger returning as she spotted Ratchet.

"What the hell, Ratchet?" He was working on a young girl in purple and black. Blood covered her costume and a cloth covered her face. "Why didn't you wake me!"

"If you're exhausted enough to pass out, you shouldn't be working," he grunted, his focus on the wound he was stitching.

Stepping past him, Amy took the girl's wrist. Claw marks to the chest, disfiguring, but not life threatening. Bullet wound in shoulder, bullet still lodge in joint. With a thought, she closed the girl's chest up. Removing the bullet took more time; she had to liquify the bone around it, then work the flesh to slowly ease it free.

Job done, she glared up at Ratchet.

"That's not- There are still injured people out here!" she hissed. "What if something had gone wrong? I need to be here!"

Ratchet stood up to his full height and returned her glare.

"Don't take that tone with me. As healers, we have a responsibility to take care of ourselves. We can't help anyone if we're passed out in a corner somewhere." He held up a hand to forestall any arguments. "If there had been an emergency, I would have called you. As it is, we still have a list of people in need of your help."

Amy continued to glare. Ratchet was one of the most stubborn people she'd ever met, with a cynical streak a mile wide. She liked him, really, but sometimes he could be a royal pain in her ass.

"Alright, fine," she said. "Where do you want me to start?"

##

I followed Optimus Prime away from the battle ground. As we walked, he explained that the planet was called Cybertron and the people who lived on it were 'Cybertronians' - sometimes called Transformers.

Around us, the world changed. The dull metal under our feet began to shine, buildings appeared on the horizon and the thick rolling clouds parted.

The city was alive with the hustle and bustle of people going about their daily lives. Cybertronians of all shapes and sizes walked the streets and roads. I could see shops, their neon signs advertising oils, upgrades and more. Overhead, flight capable bots soared between buildings.

It was breathtaking.

"Where," I swallowed thickly, "where are we?"
"That is not a simple question to answer." Prime sat on a bench. Behind him was a large statue of a spaceship. Almost as wide as it was long with a curved section at what I assumed was the front, I'd never seen anything like it. The ship was raised above a plinth with the words 'till all are one' printed on it. "This was once the Ark-1 memorial plaza in Iacon. It was destroyed in a protest long ago. The best description I can give you is a memory, or maybe a dream for the Cybertron that never was."

"What do you mean?"

"War," he said. "War destroyed us and our planet. The last time I was here was before the war, back when it finally looked like the world was changing." He laughed, but there was no humor in his voice. "I supposed, in a way, it did. Just not the way we were expecting."

"How is this possible? That thing, Thunderwing, it killed you, didn't it? Am… am I dead? Or is this all some kind of dream?"

He looked at me, parts of his face moving under his mask. I got the impression he was smiling.

"No. No, you have not passed, and this is not a dream. Not really. As for how you came to be here? You arrived here the same way I did." The large windows that made up his chest split down to the middle to reveal the glowing shape I knew all too well.

"The Matrix?"

"Yes. Here on Cybertron, there are many legends about the Matrix. Tales of it holding the combined wisdom of our race, legends of it reviving the dead. I never believed many of them myself, yet I cannot deny that it has shown me things I never knew possible. Other places, other people. It is like a voice from outside time."

I tried to wrap my head around what he was saying, but I kept coming back to the same problem. "But how, the one I built… I made it. Surely it's only a copy!"

"You may have built the container, but the power inside comes from the same place. Through it, we are all connected."

I'd have considered all this just a very vivid dream were it not for the headache I could feel building. Groaning, I rubbed my forehead.

"Here, take a seat," Prime said, moving slightly to the side.

Nodding, I dropped down next to him. "Can you start from the beginning?"

"Very well. It all started a long time ago…"

Much of the Transformers' history had apparently been forgotten and could only be speculated on. What he did know for certain was that his race was old. Their history officially started with the thirteen tribes, each one led by a Prime. Eventually the tribes had unified and all but one of the Primes vanished, lost to time.

When the remaining Prime died, the Matrix was taken from him and gifted to the next. From that point on, the Matrix was passed from one leader to the next as a symbol, carrying with it the voice of the past primes and their wisdom.

Then, one day, it vanished and a new Prime was chosen, using a fake.

He was a tyrant, convinced that a person's shape determined their role in life. Under his rule, what a
Transformer turned into became more important than who that Transformer was and what they could offer. Eventually, a faction was formed to oppose him. Calling themselves Decepticons, they challenged the status quo again and again, growing bolder and more violent each time.

Eventually, they staged an uprising, seizing control of the planet. Except the Decepticons turned out no better than the very people they had deposed. This was when an injured Optimus had found the Matrix and been declared a Prime.

Marshalling his own faction, he pushed the Decepticons back, starting a war that continued until Thunderwing and the death of Cybertron had brought it all to a halt.

Around us, the world changed, showing me things as he spoke. The fall of cities as hatred pulled his people apart. The rise of armies as loyalty and trust pulled them together.

He never lied, that was one thing I noticed. He never tried to hide his mistakes, admitting to the things he regretted and laughing at his own more impulsive actions.

"Wait, did you really jump onto the back of a jet in mid air, from a mile up? What if you missed?" I couldn't hide my shock even as the events played out in front of me.

Prime smirked. "It seemed like a good idea at the time, and he never saw it coming."

##

Amy walked into a tent housing the 'critical' patients. According to Ratchet, none of them were at risk of dying tonight, but it was doubtful they would survive more than a few days without treatment. Many were being kept alive via machines.

Amy idly played with the Matrix in her pocket as she worked, tracing the metal with a finger while she closed wounds, re-inflated lungs and, in one case, regrew a heart.

Four chambers moving in sync. It's inefficient and lacks redundancy. Seriously, who designed the human spine? That thing was just not meant to stand upright. Evolution apparently ruined a perfectly good monkey when it made humans. It should be possible to reinforce the bone structure, maybe some kind of organic carbon tubes?

Ideas flicked through her mind as she worked. Improvements, fixes, upgrades. Whatever you wanted to call them. She wasn't sure where the ideas were coming from, but she quickly banished them. She'd always known that she could be doing so much more with her power. But the thought of trying it, the thought of having to admit to everyone that her power was more than just healing terrified her.

Shaking the thoughts away, she continued to move from one patient to the next. Her patients had been laid out in order of importance, with the most severely injured at the front. Ratchet was following along behind her, directing staff to take people to the recovery tent.

Pulling back the next curtain, Amy paused.

"Hey, Panacea," Aegis croaked. His voice sounded hollow and his chest wasn't moving. Everything below the upper half of his chest was just gone.

"You call this a low priority!" she snapped at Ratchet. How on earth did this rate lower than one of the Nazi's bimbos?

"Adaptive biology and regeneration!" Ratchet snapped back. "Once we got him stable, there wasn't
much more we could do. He's breathing and he can talk. He's in no danger so what else should we have done?"

Not being able to argue, Amy settled for giving him a simple checkup. His weird biology was keeping him alive and he didn't seem to be in any danger, but Amy wasn't sure where they could get the mass needed to regrow most of his body. For now, she settled on making sure he wasn't leaking all over the place before moving on.

The next curtain was different, with the telltale glow of force fields behind it. Amy paused, taking a breath and turning to look at Ratchet. This was it, the one patient they hadn't let her see.

"Go ahead, it'll shut off when you try to enter."

Nodding, she pushed the curtain aside and stepped in.

Taylor was laid out in the bed. An oxygen mask covered the lower half of her face, the rest was wrapped in bandages. Her armour had been cut away and was laying in a heap nearby, exposing the torn bodysuit underneath. A heart monitor had been setup, showing that against all odds, Taylor's pulse was steady, if weak.

Moving next to Taylor, Amy took her hand and let her power go to work.

Taylor was a mess. Her heart was barely holding together, most of her ribs had been shattered and her left arm was all but ruined. There was a break in Taylor's spine that would leave her paralysed from the neck down for life and her brain...

"H-Has anyone told her dad yet?" Amy tried to to keep her voice from shaking.

"No," Ratchet said quietly. He walked over, putting a hand on Amy's shoulder. "The shelters are still sealed while the PRT tries to make sure the attackers haven't left any surprises. I was hoping she'd be awake before then."

"Y-yeah." Amy screwed her eyes shut and tried to block out what her power was telling her, hoping that she could change reality just by wishing it.

Because Taylor was never going to wake up.

##

I sat with Prime in silence, trying to organise my thoughts after hearing his story. Autobots, no, Cybertronians weren't something my power made up. They had existed millions of years before on another world and the Matrix I'd built was apparently connected to the Matrix Optimus carried. And because of that, we were able to talk to each other.

I'd often wondered about my powers, about why I saw the things I did in my dreams, but every answer just lead to more questions.

"Why?" I asked eventually. "Why am I able to build the Matrix, why can I build Cybertronians? Why am I here?

He looked at me and for a moment the light of his eyes dimmed. He looked so very old. "I apologize, but I do not have all the answers. However, I expect you are here because your world is in peril. It might not happen soon, or be in a form you can recognise, but your world needs help."

"Why me? I'm not some great leader, I'm..." I was just a girl from Brockton Bay. the quiet girl with
no friends that was stuffed into her locker. There was nothing special about me, god knows Emma had been quick to remind me of that.

"Do not sell yourself short." He looked up at the sky. "Humans are capable of learning, in less than a lifetime, things that took me uncountable generations to grasp. If you are not a great leader now, I have no doubt you will be."

So that's it? I've been handed power and now people expect me to save the world? "What if I don't want to? What if I refuse?"

Prime's laugh was rich and full of amusement. "Could you? If you were asked, do you believe, in your heart of hearts, that you would refuse?"

I wanted to argue, I wanted to say 'yes'. That I could just walk away, but I knew, deep down, that it would be a lie. "… No."

His hand landed on my shoulder. "Taylor, understand that you will always have a choice, no matter what happens. You might not think the choices available to you are equal, but they are there and no one can force you to choose."

I wasn't sure what to say. There was no hesitation in his voice, no doubt, like he was certain I would succeed. To see that confidence, to be on the receiving end of it was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

"What if I do something wrong? What if I make a mistake?"

"Then you stand up, dust yourself off, tell the universe to kiss your aft and try again." I snorted in surprise at the sudden profanity and Prime's eyes glittered with amusement.

"Remember," he said as the world around us changed again. Images of Prime appeared, other bots surrounding him. Some were old, others young, but all of them stood by his side.

"You don't have to do this alone. You have friends, family, people who will help you if you ask." Standing up, he turned to me, one finger tapping my chest gently. A familiar blue glow lit up under my skin at his touch.

"I cannot fight this battle for you, for my time is over, but I will always be here if you need me."

"Thank you…" I wasn't sure what else to say, but one thought kept nagging away at me. "I'm not going to remember any of this when I wake up, am I?"

Prime chuckled. "You will remember enough."

##

Amy leaned back against one of the shields that made up Taylor's 'room'. There was nothing she could do.

Taylor's brain was a mess, the damaged areas standing out like neon signs. Even if the swelling went down, the rest of the damage was just too extensive. Everything was ruined: motor functions, speech centers, long term memory.

Ratchet stood beside her, his presence helping to keep Amy calm, yet she could see the tension in his frame. His shoulders were tense and she could hear the telltale whine of motors grinding against each other.
"When she wakes up," he said pointedly, "we may have to consider cybernetics. I know you can fix almost everything else but depending on what condition she's in -"

Amy blocked his voice out. He was just deluding himself. Taylor wasn't going to wake up and they both knew it. Not, not unless she broke her rules.

It was the first rule she had created for herself, the one rule she never told anyone outside her family about and held above all others.

_Not so easy when your on the receiving end, is it?_ She could fix Taylor, she knew she could. But what would be the cost? How would people react if they found out she _could_ fix brains? Or worse, what if she got something wrong?

She could do so much harm, mess Taylor up in so many different ways that just trying to think about them made her feel sick.

Amy closed her eyes, and immediately, she felt like she was floating in space. A pair of arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her back against a warm body. Dark curly hair fluttered in the corner of her eyes.

_Tay-?

"Could you really live with yourself?" The voice was different. It was still her, but older.

"... I don't know…"

"Yes, you do."

"But people will hate me."

"Fuck them. You've given everything you could, you're allowed to be selfish just this once."

Amy tried to turn around, but the arms held her gently yet firmly in place.

"You'll hate me…"

"Never."

"But…"

/*There is another way.*/

Amy opened her eyes to find Ratchet was still talking. She was gripping the Matrix in her pocket so tightly it was starting to cut into her palm. It was all so simple, she could fix Taylor without anyone knowing.

"...but then, with Dragon's help it might just be possible. I'm sure more than a few people owe her favours, after all."

Pushing off the wall, Amy moved to Taylor's side and grabbed her hand.

"Amy?"

"The human body _knows_ what shape it's supposed to be in!" she said quickly, her power already mapping out Taylor's body. "The problem is _how_ it heals itself is too limited. What if I change that?"

She could see all the little pieces now, how Taylor's body worked, how it was and wasn't healing and how to change it. It would be so easy.
"What do you mean?" Ratchet asked carefully, moving closer to her.

"The systems that control healing, I can tweak them, make them better. I can give her body the ability to repair the brain damage itself!" She'd seen capes with regeneration powers, it would be easy to copy the changes to Taylor's body.

*It would have to be more limited though. Not fast, but strong. I'll have to put limits on it so her body mass never drops too low, maybe a slight adjustment to help her retain a bit more excess mass.*

She'd never tried something like this before, never even considered it, but her power was practically singing. She could do this.

Ratchet's hand closed around Amy's arm, snapping her back to reality as he gently pulled her away from Taylor.

"Amy." He looked her straight in the eye, voice firm. "Start from the top. Tell me everything."

He stayed mostly silent as she spoke, only asking for a few more details or even offering a suggestion or two. It took nearly twenty minutes talking in hushed voices before he finally relented.

"Okay, if you're certain you can do this, then we better start. I'll make sure you aren't disturbed, so take your time."

He stepped out of the room and Amy grabbed Taylor's hand. She resisted the urge to just start making random changes and forced herself to work through it methodically.

It wouldn't be fast. Maybe it would take a few weeks, but Taylor would wake up.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** so, a few people asked why I bothered connecting Amy to Prime, this is one of the reasons why.
The waters of Brockton Bay were something of an oddity. The natural shelter of the bay, broken only by the rusted hulls of half-sunken ships in the graveyard, meant that the ocean tended to be darker than the norm, but it was still clean and clear enough to swim in if one were so inclined.

Now, the water was a uniform grey. Debris floated on the surface, and the disturbed silt of the seabed reduced underwater visibility by a significant factor, forcing Nautica to rely on her sensors instead of her eyes as she carefully pushed through the depths in submarine mode.

She nudged a large piece of decking aside - likely torn from the boardwalk - and dislodged a corpse that had been trapped underneath, causing it to float up in front of her. The skin was pale and torn in places, its clothes a ragged mess. They had been dead for hours now, likely one of the first casualties.

Attaching a beacon for later retrieval, she pushed onwards. Overhead, a small number of drones continued to scan the ocean, looking for any signs of life. Failing that, they would retrieve what corpses they could find in the hopes they could be identified.

Nautica wasn’t really part of the search and rescue teams; by now, any humans still in the water would likely be dead, either from exposure or their wounds.

No, she had a different mission: finding her friends.

Reaching the center of the bay, her sensors picked up a number of large objects half-buried in the muck. They were too large to be random debris and the wrong composition for a ship. It had to be the remains of the Rig.

When the tidal waves had rolled over it, the Rig had gone down, torn apart by the force of the water. The largest remaining piece was a rectangular chunk big enough to house over a dozen people. It was made of reinforced metal and so heavily shielded that it was just a black void on her sensors, thereby identifying it as the base’s vault.

No air bubbles or cracks I can see, looks like it’s still - Her thoughts cut off as a dark shape moved past her. It was small, maybe only the size of a man, but much too fast to be a swimmer. She powered up her lights, but the water was too cloudy to get a clear visual.

There was too much debris in the water for a useful sonar image, but whatever she was picking up was making a lot of noise. Wrong shape for a drone, but it sounds like a motor? Not willing to chase an unknown object through dangerous waters, Nautica moved to the far side of the vault, hoping to see whatever had drawn their interest.

A roughly hewn gash ran almost the entire length of the vault, wide enough in places for even a large man to slip through.

“Wy- Nautica to console, I’ve found the vault. It’s been torn open and I think someone’s already been inside.”

*Roger that, Nautica. Marking your location now. We’ll get people out there as soon as we can.*

It would likely take them hours to find an intact boat and reach this location, since the tidal waves had thrown around everything in the harbor like toys. They would be dealing with this mess for months, if not years.
That was an issue for another day. Right now, she had something else she needed to do.

“Alright, I’ll leave a beacon for you.”

She fired a small tube shaped object at the vault. It dug into the outer walls, securing itself into position before emitting a continuous signal that the PRT could track.

Leaving the vault behind, she turned back to the Rig’s remains, hitting it with every high powered scanner she had. A small hatch opened up, releasing a dozen insecticons that quickly started burrowing into the wreck and feeding back more data.

If Wheeljack and Windblade were here, she would find them.

##

[Nautica: I found the Rig. Looks like the vault has been breached. I think I saw someone nearby, but they’ve already left.]

Teresa ‘Tess’ Richter walked through the doors to the PRT HQ in Brockton Bay, helping to coordinate search and rescue while trying to fight off the worst headache she’d ever experienced at the same time. *I wonder if Perceptor can create painkillers for gynoids?*

[Dragon: Direct drone group C to zone S-12 and ask New Wave if they need any assistance. Do we have anything we can put on patrol by the Rig?]  
The sunken Protectorate base was a treasure trove of tinker-tech. If there weren’t already boats in the water trying to grab what they could, then there soon would be.


Tess hesitated for a moment, but shrugged it off. Even if there were looters in the water, Nautica was probably safer there than anyone else, and she could more than understand her desire to find their friends. Dragon would just have to trust her little sister’s judgement. *There’s something I never thought I’d say.*

Pulling her helmet off, Tess nodded at people as she made her way through the building. Since building ‘Tess’, Dragon hadn’t bothered trying to hide her identity. Mostly, it was a show of solidarity with Taylor. It also helped to encourage trust with the people she dealt with on a day to day basis.

The lights flickered briefly, making her look up in concern. ‘Surviving’ an Endbringer battle only to get stuck in a lift would not do her mood any favours. A portable generator was providing the building with electricity, keeping the PRT functional until power could be restored to the city.

Reaching an office on the top floor, Tess was quickly directed through the doors by the receptionist. Inside, Director Piggot sat behind her desk. The windows behind the Director normally offered an impressive view of the city, today they just showed how much damage had been done.

Buildings had been flattened by Leviathan, the streets were flooded, and a giant crater sat in the very center of the city.

Eidolon, Legend, and Alexandria were already in the office, standing opposite the director and a holographic image of Director Costa-Brown which floated by the far end of the desk.
“Dragon,” Legend smiled at her, “I’m glad to see you up and about. We were worried when you suddenly went offline.”

Tess smiled at his honest concern. “I’m fine. I hadn’t expected the feedback from Predacon to be so intense.”

When her real body had been ‘beheaded’ in beast mode, the sensory feedback hadn’t just knocked her out, all her active instances had been affected at the same time. Thankfully, no permanent damage had been done, even if her other self was still out cold in the Autobot base.

“While I’m glad everyone is okay, I need to know what happened,” Director Costa-Brown said, frowning at them. “I’m getting mixed reports at the moment. You were attacked by a third party?”

“I’ll submit a full report later,” Director Piggot all but growled. Tess frowned; that was blunt, even for the notoriously surly director. Looking closer, Tess noticed the director’s skin was pale, slightly off-colour and clammy, with dark rings under her eyes.

“The quick version?” Director Piggot continued, unaware of Dragon’s scrutiny. “Someone broke the truce. Most of our Thinkers have been disabled, God knows how many capes are dead, and half the city is underwater.”

Alexandria’s face didn’t move, but Dragon could hear the creaking of her gloves as she clenched her fist. Eidolon turned to look out of the window and Legend scowled at the desk.

If Piggot’s attitude surprised her, Costa-Brown didn’t show it. “I see. Do we have anything to go on?”

“They had a Mover,” Tess said. “They opened portals into the city and tried to flood us with minions. I deployed a number of VI-controlled camera drones before the battle started in order to keep a better eye on Leviathan. Unfortunately, the system had some weaknesses we hadn’t considered.”

An image appeared on the wall-mounted screen of an elderly woman standing on a rooftop, her silver hair blowing in the wind. A black bar covered her eyes.

“This is Halphas. We believe she’s directly related to Valefor and the Fallen. Her power causes cognitive Thinkers to experience horrific visions. When one of the drones spotted her, it mistook her for a civilian and flagged her presence as unusual. Per its regular protocols, it fed the live footage straight to the think-tank. The VI had no way of identifying her.” The idea that someone would break the truce like this had never occured to Dragon, so she had neglected to include protection protocols in the VI.

“I won’t make that mistake again.”

“The priority was Leviathan or anything out of the ordinary. Half the Thinkers we had were taken out before we knew what happened. It was only quick thinking on Accord’s part that kept the situation from getting worse. He ordered the communications blackout, saving the other Thinkers but leaving us without any warning about what was happening.”

“It’s always been standard practice to gather up all the available Thinkers,” Alexandria said with a huff. “It makes it easier to protect them. Not to mention the vague hope that their combined efforts could discover something of use.”

“Christ, we practically gift-wrapped them for her!” Eidolon pressed his fingers against his forehead.
Tess forced herself not to react to the discussion and focus on the meeting, even as fear gnawed at her spark.

“Are we sure this was the Fallen? They’ve never tried something like this before.” Costa-Brown frowned at something off-screen that Dragon assumed was her computer.

Dragon understood her confusion. Officially, ‘The Fallen’ were an Endbringer cult. They defaced memorials and staged ‘pro-Endbringer’ events across the nation. Their crimes - and there were a lot of them - were typically done to get attention or upset people.

The cults had no ‘core beliefs’, as each group tended to be unique. Some - typically the more devoted - genuinely believed humanity deserved to be wiped out and that the Endbringers were gods. For many, it was just an excuse to cause trouble.

It was the higher ranking members that had to be handled carefully. Hijacking radio broadcasts were the least of their crimes; kidnapping and even murder had been attributed to them.

“Oh, I’m sure it was the Fallen,” Tess said, patching into the building’s network and transferring some files to the meeting room’s screen. “Arcee was able to penetrate one of the portals before it could close. This is what she saw.”

Video footage appeared on the monitor. Legend flinched at the sight of Arcee cutting her way through the mastered civilians, but he didn’t look away.

Pushing her way through, Arcee made it to the overhead catwalk, giving her a clear view of Valefor and an unknown cape.

“Based on this intel, I’ve dubbed the unknown cape ‘Gateway’. His power seems to be portal generation. Next to him is, of course, Valefor. Tracking data puts them in Russia, but they’ll likely be long gone before anyone can reach them.”

“How did they expect to get away with this?” Eidolon asked, crossing his arms and staring at the picture of Valefor.

“Very easily,” Tess said. “If Arcee hadn’t gotten through that portal, we would’ve had no idea who was to blame.”

“We can’t let this go unpunished,” Legend said, visibly trembling. “He’s responsible for countless deaths. I want a kill order on the Fallen as soon as possible!”

Silence filled the room. Legend had never agreed with Kill-orders, especially not one as widespread as this.

“Legend, that’s impossible,” Tess said quickly. “The Fallen’s official membership is in the hundreds, and they’re mostly unpowered trouble makers; kill orders can’t apply to non-parahumans.”

She wanted justice for this attack as much as he did, but what Legend had suggested was too
“Dragon is right.” Alexandria put a hand on Legend’s shoulder in a rare public display of friendship. “No judge would ever agree to such a thing. However, Valefor’s chapter is well known and we have proof that he is responsible for violating the truce.”

“I agree.” Costa-Brown glared at the image. “I’ll have a kill order for Valefor and the capes most often seen in his presence signed and issued by morning. We’ve tolerated these cults until now, but this crosses a line.”

[Rhinox: I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do. They’re both in stasis lock, but their sparks are failing. At this point, it’s just a matter of time.]

“Dragon, are you okay?”

Blinking, Tess looked up at Legend’s concerned face and she realised there were tears in her eyes. *I didn’t even know this body could cry.*

“Y-yes, I’m alright.” She wiped her face quickly and tried to pull herself together. “Sorry, just some bad news. Some friends of mine… they didn’t make it.”

“My condolences.” Alexandria barely glanced at Tess, but Legend moved forward and pulled her into a quick hug.

“I’m sorry. It never gets easier.”

“It’s fine. It’s not the first time, after all.” *So why did it hurt so much more, now?* “I’m just tired.”

“We all are,” Alexandria said, so softly that Tess doubted anyone but her had heard it.

“I want everyone to get some rest,” Costa-Brown said suddenly. “This will likely become worse before it gets better. Emily, send me a report on your losses and I’ll see what I can do to get you support. FEMA and other aid groups are already on the way; I expect the first to arrive before daybreak. Stay strong, all of you.”

With that, the call cut off.

Director Piggot ran a hand down her face, looking, for just a moment, much older than she really was.

“Armsmaster is still recovering. I’ll speak to Miss Militia and see if she can get the Protectorate to run some patrols near the shelters tonight. Shall I tell her you’ll be joining them?”

“I can stay for a few days, but I can’t be away from Houston for too long,” Eidolon said, moving away from the window.

Alexandria rolled her neck. “I agree. The number of ‘minor’ incidents in Los Angeles has been increasing lately and I don’t trust larger groups not to take advantage of our absence.”

“Yeah,” Legend said with a tired sigh. “Though, I think we could all do with a quick meal, first.”

With that, the meeting broke up with Alexandria, Legend, and Eidolon taking their leave. Tess waited until they were gone before moving closer to the Director’s desk.

“Is there something I can help you with, Dragon?”
“I can have a portable dialysis machine brought up to your office in an hour. It’s not tinker-tech, just a more portable version of the standard units.” She knew how proud and stubborn Director Piggot could be, but the woman needed to get herself treated and Tess doubted the Director’s home had power, even if she could get there.

For a moment, Tess thought the Director would argue. Instead, she slumped down in her chair.

“Thank you… I was here when the alarms went off and after that…” Her eyes raked over Tess’s body, pausing at the visible cybernetics on her face. “I suppose you know what it’s like, depending on machines to keep you alive.”

Dragon felt a bit guilty about the lie. Her situation wasn’t really the same.

“Yeah, but we make do.”

Emily chuckled quietly. “That, we do.”

##

The meeting room was white. The floor, the walls, even the ceiling were the same uniform white. The only colour in the room came from the dark wooden table in the center and the two women already seated at it.

Storming into the meeting room, Alexandria pulled her helmet off and threw it at a nearby wall with enough force to leave it embedded in the plaster.

“How could we?”

Sitting back in her chair, Contessa sighed. Her usually immaculate jacket was missing, tossed over the back of her chair with damp sleeves. “Endbringers interfere with my power. You know this.”

“Endbringers interfere with my power. You know this.”

“Endbringers interfere with my power. You know this.”

“Endbringers interfere with my power. You know this.”

“You really need to calm down,” Eidolon said suddenly. Unlike Alexandria, he kept his mask on. “We know you’re upset, but you can’t just go running off to fulfill some half-baked revenge. Think about Arthur.”

Mention of Legend’s husband quickly doused his anger and he slumped down into a chair. “This isn’t...” He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “This isn’t about revenge. You were dealing with Leviathan, you didn’t see the people he sent. I have beyond perfect eyesight and I did deal with them. Men, women, children.”

“We can’t do that anyway,” Doctor Mother explained. “For one thing, you’re not immune to his power, and Valefor can’t just vanish. His punishment has to be seen. It has taken a lot of time and energy to establish and maintain the Endbringer truce. Now that it’s been broken, people will lose faith in the PRT. They need to be seen publicly dealing with the Fallen. Besides, we have more important issues to deal with.”
“More important?!” Legend didn’t quite shout, but it was close. “Like what?”

“Like this,” Contessa said, tapping the desk in front of her. In the middle of the table, wood slid aside to reveal a monitor built into the desk.

“This is the only copy of this footage. I recovered it from a dead tinker. Their helmet recorded almost everything.”

The video started to play. Leviathan could be seen from the side, digging at the ground. Water poured from his body as he attempted to flood the shelter below him.

A figure in power armour crashed down behind the Endbringer.

“Leviathan!” The girl’s scream had an odd echo, likely caused by her helmet. “This. Ends. NOW!”

Legend leaned forward, watching intently as the girl, a single lone tinker, fought an Endbringer, her weapons blasting chunks from Leviathan’s body.

Then Leviathan moved and the girl fell, defeated. Leviathan glanced around, the light shining in his five dark eyes. Moments later, Scion arrived, forcing the creature to retreat.

“Isn’t that Dragon’s apprentice, Matrix?” Legend asked. “How was she able to hurt-”

“Matrix is not important!” Contessa snapped, cutting Legend off.

“Unfortunately, she’s right,” Doctor Mother said. “Watch the footage again, keep an eye on Leviathan.”

Contessa replayed the video, this time slowing it down as the girl opened fire. Alexandria was the first to notice.

“Leviathan’s eyes,” she said with a frown. “At the start of the video, they had all been destroyed.”

Replaying the video again, it was easier to see what had happened now that they were looking for it. In the instant between him starting to move and Matrix falling to the ground, his body had been completely restored.

“Instantaneous regeneration,” Doctor Mother said quietly. “We’ve always suspected the Endbringers were holding back, but now I’m certain of it.”

Eidolon and Alexandria sat down at the table. “What does this mean for us?” Eidolon asked.

“It means that almost every plan we’ve made has been a waste of time,” Alexandria said. “If they have merely been playing with us all this time, then we have no way of knowing how powerful they really are.”

“Contessa has already made sure that no other copies of this fight exist.” Doctor Mother leaned forward, glaring at the still image of Leviathan. “If this was made public, then any chance we have of stopping them would vanish. People would lose all hope and stop trying. New plans will have to be made, but until then, should an Endbringer appear-”

“You have to fight,” Contessa said with a smile that none of them noticed.

##

The sea was a strange and alien place. Fish and plants never seen by humans went through life
undisturbed. There, nestled on the ocean floor five miles below the surface, slept Leviathan.

Stepping through a doorway, she barely noticed the pressure or the cold, even as her hair floated around her face. Her every action was mechanical, limbs moving precisely and eyes fixed forwards. There was no reason to pretend here.

The light from the doorway reflected off Leviathan’s form. The signals he was sending were garbled, analysing them took too much time.

Discarding them, she walked around the second weapon, surveying the damage. This was not possible. They were made to be unbeatable, yet deep gouges littered its body, empty holes where its eyes should be. Entire limbs were missing.

The regeneration it had used in the fight had been an illusion. Another act to trick the humans. To fool the Other.

The weapon turned its head to follow her movements. Something that could almost be called affection flashed through her body and she ran a tender hand along its skin. The rough edges of its wounds crumbled at her touch. The flesh came apart in her hands, blackened and crumbling.

The weapon should have started regenerating by now. The missing limbs should have sealed, pulling in mass to repair the damage. It was not working. She could see the rot spread past the ruined limb, seeping through its body.

The weapon’s core was breached. It could not be salvaged.

Eyes pricked, but Contessa ignored it. What could do this? The weapons were all but indestructible and yet… energy clung to the wounds, familiar and new at the same time. Pulling it forward, she turned her attention to analysis. The knowledge was there, burri-They will devour each other alive once again. The darkness encroaches. A world perpetually in conflict, the groups and factions kept small enough that none can challenge it. Fire, pain claws inthedakrpainyouggirlKNIFEwereethespinemettheskull!painfearfleeunmakerallwillend-

The data was corrupt, incomplete. With a shuddering gasp, she opened her eyes. The body was trembling, its stomach churned and its heart hammered in her chest no matter how much she told it to stop.

[Pbafbeg?] Pain filled her body. Was this his doing? A new power, something like -unmakerpainchaos-. He was a warrior, focusing on the short term. Had he noticed her, was this his retaliation?

[Vqragvgl?] The signal shook her body as the attack continued. She had stayed too long. He had noticed her. They will devour each other alive once again

[Erfcbafr!] The signal from the weapon stopped, its core silent as all function ceased.

Heat starting at the center spread outwards, filling her being and echoing out to her hosts.

[Erfcbafr!]
Hissing in frustration, she opened a door. She could not fight him. He was not broken. Stepping through, she reached out into the world.

*Destroy Brockton Bay!*
Amy closed her eyes and let the early morning sun wash over her. Between Bakuda’s storm and Leviathan’s rain, it felt like an age since she’d seen the sun. The stress of the last few weeks weighed heavily on her shoulders. Bakuda, her legs, Vicky, Leviathan. It felt like she’d barely had a chance to just sit down and relax. It’s not over yet...

It never is. Amy smiled slightly to herself. She could almost hear Taylor, almost see her leaning against the waist-high railing and looking over the city in irritation. A feeling of warmth drew her attention to her pocket. It was Taylor’s Matrix. She’d forgotten to give it back before going to sleep last night.

Holding it in her hands, she watched at the light shining on the crystal’s surface.

“I’m not sure I can do this anymore…” Her voice was at a near whisper. “I, I’m just so tired…”

Maybe it was the light, but for just a moment, the Matrix brightened.

Then don’t.
Taylor leaned against the rail. No one could blame you.
You’ve done more than anyone could ask.

“They’d never forgive me… I’m Panacea, the girl who can cure anything. People expect me to heal them…”

Then stop. You’re allowed to rest.

“I can’t. If I stopped healing people, stopped being Panacea, then who would I be?”

She’d been Panacea within weeks of gaining her powers. It was the first thing people thought about when they saw her and the last thing she considered before going to bed.

Even if she hated it, could she live without it?

A feeling of warmth spread across her body and Amy could almost feel Taylor holding her.

Then find something. A reason, a person, a goal. Whatever you want it to be. Define who you are, don’t let others do it for you.

Opening her eyes, Amy looked out across the city. It didn’t look much better in the daylight.

Leviathan’s charge had carved a path through the city, leaving ruined buildings and corpses in his wake. In the middle of it all sat a crater over a block wide, filled with water from the tidal waves. Amy doubted they’d even try to fill it in.
FEMA and other support agencies were already out in force, handing out food and water to people as they left the shelters, many of which were already being converted into short term housing for the newly homeless.

The Autobot base had come through the Endbringer battle more or less unscathed, and Amy had spent the night there, rather than search for alternative housing while bleary eyed from hours of medical work in the trauma tent.

With its own power generators, shields, and other defences, it was one of - if not the - safest places around. Vicky had messaged her last night to say that the rest of New Wave - other than Aunt Sarah, who was at the hospital with Crystal - were all staying at the PRT HQ. Crystal was the only one who’d been seriously injured; the rest of New Wave survived the fight with nothing worse than a few scrapes.

Rolling her neck, Amy shrugged her shoulders and almost jumped when her backpack opened up, a pair of handles extending as the flight pack activated. *Huh, I forgot about that.*

*Would anyone care if I just flew away somewhere?* She smiled at the idea. Just opening her ‘wings’ and flying away to a place where no one knew who she was.

She dismissed the idea almost as quickly as it came. Her family, broken as it was, was here. Vicky and Taylor were here.

*You know we’d follow you, right?*

While the Autobot base wasn’t the tallest building in sight, it certainly wasn’t the smallest, and the flat roof offered a good take-off and landing point.

Looking over the edge, Amy considered trying to fly. Taylor had said her suit would do most of the work, so it couldn't be that hard, could it?

She gripped the railing in front of her and tried to calm her suddenly pounding heart. *I can do this. Even if I fall, the suit has safeties, I’ll be fine.* Taking a deep breath, Amy let go of the railing and-

“Hey, Ames!”

Amy would forever deny screaming at the top of her voice.

Vicky stepped back, biting her lip as she clearly tried not to laugh. “Oh my God! The look on your face!”

“V-Vicky!” Amy gasped, trying to calm herself down. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought you might like a change of clothes? Mom wanted me to check out the house.”

“Oh…” Amy hadn’t spoken to Carol since the battle had started. After she’d woken up in the hospital, things had been different between them and Amy wasn’t really sure how to handle that. That was part of why she’d come to the Autobot base, to put some distance between them and give herself time to figure things out. “How bad is it?”

“Not great. The garden is torn up and one of the walls is missing. I think a stray shot or something hit it. The PRT wants to check it over, just in case there are any surprises inside. They let me grab some
clothes since there isn’t much that can hurt me.

“Mom’s trying to find us a place to stay. It looks like we might all have to squeeze into Aunt Sarah’s for a bit, assuming they can fix the power.”

“I wonder if they’d let me stay here?” Amy wondered out loud. “I want to keep an eye on Taylor, and the building still has power and water. Even a couple of working showers—”

“Showers?” Vicky perked up. “Think they’ll let me borrow one?! I had to use wet wipes this morning!”

Vicky grabbed Amy’s arm, only to let go like she’d been burned.

“Crap, I’m sorry!”

“No, it’s okay.” Amy gave Vicky a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. She understood the reason, even if it did hurt to have Vicky pull away like that. They weren’t supposed to touch for a while, not until Rung was satisfied Amy wouldn’t have another episode like in the hospital.

“Come on, let’s get going.” Amy walked past her sister, hoping she wouldn’t see the hurt on her face. Hoping that they could go back to pretending everything was okay.

##

With all the machinery, music from different rooms, and occasional chatter from the Autobots, the inside of the base was never really quiet, even at night. Amy found the constant noise to be comforting. It made the building feel alive, like a home and not the factory it resembled.

The first stop was the medical wing to check up on Taylor. She’d been brought back to the base last night by the Autobots. She was still unresponsive and likely would remain so for a while yet, but the Autobots wanted to keep her somewhere close and secure.

Walking into the room, Amy wasn’t surprised to see Arcee standing guard. She was positioned by Taylor’s bed and staring off into the distance. She blinked in surprise as Amy and Vicky entered the room, turning to smile at them.

The most surprising thing were the two metal spheres that were on the bed. Taylor was cradling them in the crook of her elbow and Amy had to wonder why she had been posed like that.

“Hey,” Arcee said.

“Hi, Arcee. How’s she doing?”

“No change yet, I’m afraid.”

Amy tried not to sigh. She wasn’t surprised. She knew Taylor wouldn’t recover that quickly, but it was still disheartening to hear.

“But she’s going to be okay, right?” Vicky asked, looking over Amy’s head.

“Yeah...” Amy shook herself. “Yeah, she’ll be fine. She just needs some rest.”
“Okay, but what is she holding?” Vicky pointed at the spheres.

“Windblade and Wheeljack,” Arcee said quietly. “It was First Aid’s idea. He thinks that having Taylor touch their sparks will keep them alive long enough for us to find a permanent solution. From what Rhinox said, Taylor grabbed them the moment he put the sparks on the bed.”

“That’s impossible!” Amy said, almost shouting. Taylor was in a coma. Amy’s ‘fix’ was the only reason she wasn’t officially vegetative, and it would be days or even weeks before Taylor could even be considered ‘sleeping’ and autonomic responses became possible.

She took Taylor’s hand to give her a check up, making sure she hadn’t messed something up. Distantly, she noticed someone, likely Rhinox, had changed Taylor’s clothes - removing her ruined bodysuit and putting her into a hospital gown - and given her a sponge bath.

“I know, but that’s what Rhinox told me,” Arcee said with a shrug.

“Did it work?” Vicky asked. “Are they going to be okay.”

“Yeah, their sparks stopped shrinking. They’re not getting any better, but they’re not getting worse.”

Opening her eyes, Amy tried to relax. Her fix was holding and everything seemed to be doing what it was supposed to. Taylor’s movement, however she did it, wasn’t related to Amy’s changes. It wasn’t like this was the first time Taylor had done something unusual, after all.

“Everything looks okay, but she’s going to need another nutrient bag soon,” Amy said, giving Taylor’s muscles a tweak. It was far too soon for atrophy to become an issue, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t take steps to avoid it.

Silence filled the room as the other two watched her work, broken only by Vicky clearing her throat.

“Oh!” Amy blushed. She’d completely forgotten. “Arcee, can Vicky borrow a shower?”

With a huff, Amy climbed onto the platform and sat down. Between the water, fallen buildings, ruined cars, and spent munitions, the roads weren’t safe to use. Even if they were, the Autobot base was too far away from the hospital for her to walk.

To make matters worse, she couldn’t even ask Vicky to fly her there, no matter how much she wanted to. God, she wanted to. The thought of being wrapped in Vicky’s arms, flying over the city as - hands closed around her throat, voices whispered in her ears.

Amy shook herself out of the memory with a frustrated sigh. She was supposed to be getting past this.

Her phone beeped again as another message from Dr. Laurie arrived. Asking, again, when she would reach the hospital. She’d been checking up Lisa who was still restrained and under heavy sedation in her own room when the first call had came through. Not wanting to make the call himself, he’d had one of the nurses call her first. The poor woman had all but begged Amy to come help. After that, the messages had started coming through.

He’s just trying to palm more of his work on you.
“Let’s go,” Amy said to Blades, ignoring her better judgement and strapping herself in.

The platform lifted off the roof and her stomach flipped in surprise. This wasn’t like flying with Vicky, it was more like sitting on the outside of an aeroplane.

With Vicky unable to carry her, and Amy not really knowing how to use her flight pack, the Protectobots had agreed to provide transport. They’d modified one of the platforms they used to move heavy supplies around the base so it could fly over the city and added a couple of seats for comfort.

Blades was up front, acting as pilot and bodyguard. Hotspot and the others were sitting around the edges, feet dangling off the sides and totally unconcerned with the height. Vicky flew along behind them.

“I’m going to take things slow,” Blades called out as they flew over the city. “If you see any trouble, let me know!”

The slower speed gave Amy time to take in the devastation below. Despite the damage, she could see people moving in the streets, picking through the rubble, or crowding outside shops, desperately trying to gather what supplies they could. Here and there, she would see flashes of blue as paramedics and police tried to help.

To Blades’ obvious disappointment, the short trip passed quickly and without incident.

Reaching the hospital itself, Amy wasn’t surprised to find it intact. The forcefield Taylor had erected the day before had held out until the very end, only losing power after Scion had driven off Leviathan.

A crowd of people waited anxiously outside the entrance while a few brave security guards struggled to keep things calm.

“Yeah, no. You’re not going into that!” Hotshot muttered as the platform hovered over the crowd. “Blades! Take us up, we’ll land on the roof!”

Before Amy could even think about disembarking, Blades took the platform further up into the air, landing on the roof where Ratchet was waiting for her.

“How did you know I was coming?!” Amy asked, climbing off the platform.

“Tracker in your suit,” Ratchet said bluntly, hands on hips like an angry parent. “Now what are you doing here? You do realise you’re still on medical leave, right?"

“Doctor Laurie called me! And you realise I still don't work for you, right?” Amy shot back, taking a moment to get her balance. She barely noticed her prosthetics when she was walking, but sitting down or standing up was still awkward. Oddly, the bodysuit of her costume actually helped as they hid the joints and held them tightly to her body.

“Have you even slept at all?” He walked closer, a small light on his wrist flashing.

“Stop scanning me!” Amy snapped. “I saw the crowd out there, Ratchet! You need my help!”
“Slagging stubborn daft woman!”

“Fucking burnt out toaster!”

“Half pint, half trained…”

“Loud mouthed, jackass…”

“Um… excuse me?”

Amy and Ratchet turned as one to glare at the nurse who had interrupted them. The woman flinched, but ultimately held her ground.

“I’m sorry, Doctor Ratchet, but another wave of people just arrived and Doctor Sloan asked if you can assist in surgery. Will you be staying as well, Panacea?”

Amy smirked at Ratchet, who grumbled about stubborn women. He pointed at Amy. “Fine, two hours, no more. You’re still recovering.”

##

System startup…
Starting Bootstrap Sequence… Complete
Sensor Functions: Okay…
Motor Functions: Disabled…
Transformation System: Disabled…
Flight Systems: Disabled…

Preliminary Damage Report: …Ouch
Final Report: … No seriously, ow!

Dragon dismissed the status window and opened her eyes. Everything hurt.

Pain was still a relatively new sensation, something she’d never actually experienced before she was reformatted into an Autobot. The novelty had definitely worn off.

She tried to focus on assimilating the memories from Tess. After a few minutes, the confusion of having two different bodies faded and she once again found herself in two places at once.

Having multiple bodies took some getting used to, but she’d done so. Now, the only time it became an issue was if a sensation - like getting her head cut off - was too intense and bled from one body to the next.

Hearing heavy footfalls, Dragon turned to see Rhinox walk through the door. He was carrying a large tray laden with what she hoped was energon. The recharge slab she was lying on could supply
her with energon through a connection port on her wrist, but it just wasn’t as mentally satisfying as actually drinking it.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” he rumbled. Putting the tray down, he pressed a button and the bed shifted, lifting Dragon up into a sitting position. “How you feeling?”

“Ever drunk too much of Wheeljack’s highgrade?”

“Only once. That bad?”

“Worse.” Her smile quickly faded. “Why can’t I move?”

“Oh right, sorry about that. Give me a second.”

His hands moved quickly across a holographic keypad and a message flashed before Dragon’s eyes. The moment it vanished, Dragon’s body shifted, her shoulders relaxing and her tail twitching as she regained her mobility.

Now able to get a better look at herself, Dragon could see deep scratches across most of her torso and large pieces of unpainted metal where new plating had been welded into position.

“It’s going to take a few days to finish all your repairs,” Rhinox warned. “You’re free to walk around the base or do some light work, but I suggest you stay inside. Your wings are being rebuilt. Once that’s done, we can start work on reattaching your beast head. Until then-”

“No transforming?” Dragon guessed.

Rhinox chuckled. Before he could say any more, claws scrabbled across the ground, followed by a loud bang as something heavy hit the door.

“Predaqeen, slow down!” Nautica’s voice drifted through the walls, half-pleading, half-resigned.

A moment later, the door opened as Nautica walked in, Predaqeen curled up in her arms. As soon as the little bot saw Dragon, she wiggled to get down and sprinted over to the bed.

“Dragon! W-what's wrong? Are you hurt?”

Dragon smiled as the smaller bot scrambled up onto the bed and all but jumped into her lap. Predaqeen’s big optics were open wide, her lower jaw trembling. Without thinking, Dragon reached forward and pulled the child into a hug, her spark easing as tension she hadn’t even noticed was relieved.

“As soon as the sirens went off, we moved her to the safe room and put her to sleep.” Rhinox rubbed Predaqeen’s head, getting a giggle from the little dragon. “Nautica’s been looking after her ever since she got back.”

“Thank you, Nautica,” Dragon said, making sure to look her sister in the face.

Nautica smiled and moved to stand by Dragon’s bed. “It’s nothing. I just gave her some energon and kept her occupied.”

“Uh-huh!” Predaqeen nodded her head in excitement and wiggled her muddy paws. “I got to play
in the puddles!”

Focusing on Nautica, Dragon could see the tension in her posture: her shoulders were drawn in and the turbines on her back were raised high. Reaching out, Dragon hooked an arm around Nautica and pulled her close, hugging both her sisters tightly.

The city was a mess and Dragon had a list of jobs longer than she was tall. But right now, none of that mattered.

The world could wait. She needed this moment with her family.

##

Three hours later, Amy dropped down into a seat with a groan. This had been a mistake. Her thighs felt like they were on fire and her head was pounding. Maybe Ratchet had been right.

From the moment she’d arrived, it had been one patient after another. He’d been trampled by the crowds, she’d drowned, another had a collapsed lung, or a sprained knee. They were all so grateful, but a cynical part of her couldn't help but feel it was nothing more than empty platitudes.

To make matters worse, the crowd had only gotten worse and there seemed to be no end in sight. Amy couldn't even tell if she was making a difference. Not that that was anything new.

There had been a minor scare when someone in the crowd outside had spotted Amy through the front doors. People had started to shout, pushing security back as the crowd briefly turned into a mob.

Defensor hit the ground between the doors and the mob, cracking his knuckles theatrically.

“Query: is there a problem here?”

The mob had almost immediately dispersed, with only one man being stupid enough to try his luck. He tried, against all sense, to kick Defensor in the groin. He was waiting outside with a broken foot.

Defensor had remained on guard, only breaking character to occasionally entertain a child or two. Watching them use the big bot as a climbing frame from an upper window had briefly lifted Amy’s spirits.

Then she heard about the Fallen. That news had broken an hour ago and spread through the hospital like wildfire. The Fallen had broken the truce, and a kill order had apparently been signed for Valefor and a few of their capes.

Sighing, Amy turned her attention back to the sandwich that had been forced into her hands just before she’d been led into an out of the way area to rest. She was sure Ratchet was behind this, but right now she couldn't bring herself to care.

Pulling open the packaging, she glanced at the expiration date. The sandwich was from yesterday, but it was still sealed, so she doubted it would do her any harm. As she ate, she glanced around at the room.

It looked like she’d been led into one of the labs. There were beakers and machines all over the place and somebody had clearly been working on something before being called away. A green mush sat
in a bowl nearby.

Moving slightly to get a better look, Amy took a quick sniff. Whatever it was, it smelled like seaweed. She went back to her sandwich and contemplated the lack of beds. It had gotten so bad that the staff had started pulling gurneys from wrecked ambulances and treating people outside.

There had to be *something* she could do.

Sitting back, Amy stretched her legs out in an effort to work out some of the kinks, out of habit. She only realised what she was doing when the shift of weight almost pulled her forward off the chair.

Amy glared at her legs. With her body suit on, it was almost impossible to tell that her legs stopped just above the knee. Even she forgot at times. Then she’d bang her leg on something, or move in just the wrong way and she’d be reminded again. It was maddening.

*Stupid Manton Limit.* If her powers worked on herself, she’d have regrown her legs by now, even if she’d have to stuff herself silly just to have enough mass to do it. *Mass… mass…* The thought bounced around inside her head.

Conservation of mass was the problem. She couldn't create something from nothing, and most limbs made up 5%-10% of a body's mass. Anyone needing new limbs had to gain a fair amount of weight before she could heal them.

*But why? The mass doesn’t have to come from their bodies.*

The idea came as soon as Amy’s eyes fell on the green mush. She quickly tapped her radio.

“Ratchet, you free?”

*I thought you were supposed to be going home?*

“Ratchet, this is important! Can you bring some algae or something and meet me in Aegis’s room? I need something that can hold water, something the size of a bathtub! I promise I’ll explain everything!”

*I... Alright, but you better have one hell of an explanation.*

“Oh! And bring a UV lamp!”

*What is this, a scavenger hunt!?*

Cutting the connection, Amy moved towards the door. The good thing about being a recognised cape was that no one tried to stop her when she rushed through a hospital. Not that she could actually run yet. She’d probably fall on her face if she tried.

Aegis had been moved to one of the private rooms near the top floor. The PRT had insisted on it, both to protect his identity and to hide the extent of his injuries.

Hoping he wasn’t asleep, Amy nodded to the PRT guards, then knocked on the door. Aegis had barely called out in response before Amy pushed her way inside.

“Hey, Panacea,” Aegis croaked. He still looked as bad as yesterday, with most of his torso missing.
“Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all, I just had an idea -” Before she could explain further, the door opened and Ratchet walked in. He had a box in his arms and a nurse behind him was wheeling a tall lamp along.

“Alright, we’re here. Now start explaining.” He gave her a look that promised dire consequences if she didn’t start talking soon.

“Mass,” she said simply. “It can take weeks, if not months for someone to gain enough mass for me to regrow a limb. I think I’ve got a solution. All I need is something organic, some light, and enough water.”

Taking the box from Ratchet, Amy saw a number of sealed water beakers contained within, green mold floating inside them.

She looked at the nurse. “I don’t suppose there’s an old bathtub or something I can use?”

Ratchet made a harsh electronic noise that Amy assumed was a snort.

“Who do you think I am?” Taking a small box from a storage pocket, Ratchet fiddled with it for a few moments then placed it on the floor. It activated and a glowing box appeared above it, six feet long and three feet wide. Amy nearly laughed, It was a hard light bathtub!.

Amy turned to Aegis. “Are you willing to be the first test patient?”

Aegis smiled. “Sure. If nothing else, it’ll be interesting.”

Filling the tub took nearly half an hour, as they had to bring water in by bucket, but when it was done Amy grabbed the beakers and tipped them into the tub. She briefly considered rolling back her sleeves, but dismissed the idea as that wasn’t possible with her new costume.

Ratchet helped her kneel down next to the tub and Amy placed a hand inside. Algae took roughly twenty-four hours to double in size. With her power driving it, the small amount spread rapidly, the UV lamp helping to fuel its growth. Of course, as it grew, so did the smell.

Giving the mold a pleasant smell was an easy fix. Another tweak turned it from a sickly green to an appealing shade of blue. Amy had to hold back a giggle. She hadn’t played with her power like this for a long time. Just for fun, she added a slight bioluminescence to it.

Soon, the tub started to fill and Amy was forced to change the algae again, this time increasing its density as it built up mass underwater until the entire tub was filled with the thick sludge. It looked harmless, and Amy had been quick to purge any substances that could be harmful, but it felt… slimy.

Looking at the mass, Amy considered her options before making a decision. The change rippled outwards from her hand, turning the sludge into a gel.

“Done!” She was unable to keep the smile off her face. Even if this didn’t work, it had been fun. Looking up, Amy blushed when she realised Aegis, Ratchet, and the nurse had been watching her the whole time.

“We just need to lower Aegis into the tub and I’ll do the rest.”
Ratchet and the nurse shared a look, then moved over to the bed. Aegis stayed carefully still as they lifted him up, then placed him in the gel. Ratchet kept his arms under Aegis, holding his head up above the gel.

*I hope this works.*

*It’ll be fine.*

Keeping her hand inside the gel, Amy reached out and touched Aegis. Her power responded immediately, mapping out every inch of his body in her mind.

“Start with his arms, then work downwards,” Ratchet suggested.

Amy closed her eyes and focused on the stump of his left arm. “This might feel a little bit weird, but it shouldn't hurt”.

Numbing the nerves, she carefully started growing the bone as far as the elbow, then grew the muscle, tendons and blood vessels one layer at a time. She used his right arm as a template, mirroring it carefully as she rebuilt his arm. Once she was done, she switched to his right, regrowing his hand.

In her mind, she could see every cell as it grew. At first, it felt like she was having to fight his body, pushing down automatic responses to the growth. It was only when she paused to examine the issue that she realised what she was doing wrong. Instead of forcing the growth, she just nudged it gently in one direction or another, letting genetics and his own regeneration guide the changes.

Occasionally, she had to step in and stop a growth before it could get out of hand or become cancerous, but eventually she opened her eyes and saw both arms fully restored.

The nurse knelt down next to Amy with a small carton of drink for her. The nurse held onto the carton while Amy drank from the straw so she could keep her hands on Aegis and the gel. Meanwhile, Ratchet asked Aegis to move his arms. Once they were satisfied, Amy continued.

Ribs, stomach, kidneys, abdominal muscle, she repaired or recreated them all before moving on.

“Um…”

Amy looked up at Carlos. She’d been working on his hips when he’d spoken and a blush was spreading across his cheeks. She glanced back down, then turned to the nurse, who looked far too amused.

“Can we get a towel or something for him?” she said dryly.

##

Gliding through the city, Rune took care to keep her ‘borrowed’ snowboard low. If anyone in the Empire thought it was odd that she was still flying around on the same board she’d stolen months ago, they didn't say anything. At least, not where she could hear them.

It wasn’t anything to do with sentimentality, or that riding it reminded her of tinker-boy. It was just that after a few simple modifications, it made a reliable method of transport that let her move easily and quickly through the city. It also looked really cool.
Passing one of the remaining skyscrapers, Rune quickly checked herself with one of the glass windows. Her robe was a bit dirty and creased in places, but it was dry and no one could tell she’d been forced to sleep in it.

What small injuries she’d picked up fighting Leviathan had already been healed by Othala. Kaiser would undoubtedly want to speak to her at some point, but she’d deal with that later. There was one last thing she needed to do.

Spotting her destination, she forced the board to move faster. That the building had survived almost intact was a blessing.

Dropping down, she hopped off the board and leaned up against the dented air conditioning unit, trying not to fidget too much. She longed for a cigarette, but held off for now. She expected she’d need it more later, after she suffered through whatever meeting Kaiser had called.

The Empire hadn’t come through the fight unscathed. Kaiser was alive, unfortunately, though he had a close call when those fuckers had attacked them. His pet bimbos had managed to survive, but Menja only lived because of Panacea. Krieg, however, was dead and Wehrmacht was still hanging about like the unwelcome parasite he was.

She’d seen him earlier, lurking around the safe house where Othala had been working. She’d felt his eyes on her as she’d left, but Rune had ignored him.

The high pitched whine she’d come to associate with Kid Win interrupted her thoughts and she looked up in time to see him land on the roof.

He’d barely stepped off his hoverboard before she was on him. Grabbing his shoulders, she pushed him roughly until he hit the wall.

“Rune! Wha-” He never got a chance to finish before she mashed her lips against his.

Rune would be the first to admit that she was something of an adrenaline junkie. Being chased through the city, stealing, fighting, it didn’t matter to her. What was important was the rush.

Yesterday had not been fun. It had been frantic and terrifying as that monster had torn the city apart. To make matters worse, she’d seen Kid Win in the sky, flitting about in an effort to fight. He’d gotten far too close to Leviathan for her liking.

Eventually, a need for air forced her to stop, but she didn’t let him up. Instead, she leaned against him, resting her head in the crook of his neck. At some point, he’d wrapped his arms around her waist, holding on tight. His hands, she noticed with amusement, never reached the small of her back.

He’s gotten taller, she realised with a frown. When they’d first met, she’d been an inch or two taller than him, but he’d clearly had a bit of a growth spurt.

“R-Rune, what,” he stuttered breathlessly, shaking himself in an effort to calm down. “Are you okay? You’re not hurt, are you?”

She chuckled at the honest concern in his voice. Most boys would have other things on their minds after a kiss like that, yet his first thought was apparently to make sure she was okay?
“You are such a boy scout. I’m fine. I promise. I’m not the one who tried to get up close and personal with an Endbringer.”

He shrugged helplessly as a blush coloured his cheeks. “What else could I have done?”

Run, get somewhere safe? She didn’t say it out loud. There wasn’t any point. If he’d been willing to run away, he wouldn’t be the guy she…

She crushed that thought before it could go any further. Still, there was one last thing he deserved.

Reaching up, she pushed her hood back, exposing her dark hair and the mask she wore underneath. Kid Win tried to say something, but she put a hand on his mouth to silence him. Pulling the mask off, she looked at where she guessed his eyes were.

“No matter what happens, I wanted you to at least know my name. It’s Natalie.”

The blush on his cheeks got, if possible, even darker. “Rune… I mean, Natalie, I…um?”

She silenced him with another kiss. “Nat is fine.”

She’d expected him to relax, but his body stayed tense as he quickly looked away. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You’re not surprised, are you?”

“Um, N-no… I, um. I’d already guessed?”

Rune slapped her hand against the wall behind him. “How!?” Deciding to tell him her identity was one thing, but if he’d been trying to unmask her all this time, he was going to be very sorry.

“Your voice!” he squeaked quickly. “I heard you singing at school and recognised your voice! I mean, you’ve got such a nice voice that, um. I never told anyone, I swear!”

She continued to glare. She’d never intentionally sung anything around him, but she often sang along to her music, so it was likely he’d heard her then. It was also no secret the Wards went to Arcadia, so she was willing to believe him. Still, she’d let him sweat for a bit longer. He deserved it for ruining her moment.

“Here.” He pressed against the sides of his visor. Panicking a bit, Rune quickly grabbed his hands.

“Wha? But I thought?”

She flinched at the hurt in his voice, but didn’t let go. “I believe you, okay? It’s just… safer this way. If I don’t know, I don’t have to lie.” Letting go of his hands, she wrapped her arms around him. “Remember who I work for, Fido. They aren’t very forgiving.”

“You could always change sides,” he said, placing his arms around her waist. “The Protectorate could protect you…”

“Oh please, do you really think they’d let me be a hero? They’d throw my ass back into juvie. I don’t look good in prison overalls.”

“I don’t know, I think you could make it work.” He smirked at her in a rare display of confidence.
Smiling, she let herself relax against him. “Right now, I just wanna stay here.”

“Okay.”

##

After working for four more hours, Amy stepped off the flying platform and back onto the roof of the Autobot base. She was tired, but strangely satisfied. Creating her mold/gel mixture had been surprisingly simple, and she’d quickly gotten into a routine; yet converting that same mass into working limbs had been fascinating.

It had taken her nearly an hour to carefully finish healing Aegis. Privately, she wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to look her in the face again. Not like I haven’t seen that sort of thing before.

After he’d been thoroughly checked over by Ratchet, Amy had started healing other capes, topping up the tub when needed. She’d managed to patch up nearly a dozen capes and almost as many random patients. Aegis had ended up being the most complicated case of the day, needing almost a full body restoration.

She was a little surprised to see Vicky standing on the rooftop waiting for her with Waspinator hovering nearby.

“Is something wrong?” Amy asked quickly. Crystal had been one of the first capes she’d healed, Amy had insisted on it. If Carol or any of the others had been hurt, surely someone would have told her by now.

“Mom and Dad are staying with Aunt Sarah,” Vicky said with a shrug. “I told them I’d stay here with you for now.”

“Blondie wantzzz to use our showerzzz,” Waspinator said, landing on Vicky’s shoulder.

“Not just that!” Vicky denied with a blush. “Mom was worried about you being here alone so I said I’d keep an eye on you! Plus, you know, this is one of the safest places in the city right now.”

“Did you at least ask the Autobots?” Amy said with a tired groan. She knew how her sister could get overly excited sometimes.

Vicky rolled her eyes. “Yes, mom. I asked them this morning.”

“Izz true.” Waspinator nodded his head, one hand holding Vicky’s hair to keep himself steady.

Giving him a sideways look, Vicky leaned in close to Amy and whispered, “Do you get used to the little guys crawling all over you?”

Giggling, Amy nodded and waved at a large box that had been placed on the platform.

“Come on, let’s get inside. Can you give me a hand with this?”

“Always with the heavy lifting,” Vicky said, but there was no real heat to her voice.
Amy stopped by the medical wing first to check up on Taylor. She stopped short when she saw who was inside, forcing Vicky to grab the wall to avoid walking into her.

At some point, Mr. Hebert had managed to find his way to the base. Now, he was sitting in a chair by Taylor’s bed. The dark bags under his bloodshot eyes and the stubble on face gave the impression he hadn’t slept or had a good meal in days.

Standing quietly behind him was Miss Militia. She had one hand on Mr. Hebert’s shoulder and looked, if possible, even more worn out than when Amy had last seen her. Miss Militia’s usually green uniform was stained a mottled grey and brown and her hair was coming out of its ponytail.

Rhinox was also there, standing with his back to the door. By the looks of things, he’d been talking to Mr. Hebert when Amy had walked in.

All three of them looked up at her.

“Ah, Amy, I was just telling Danny that Taylor was going to be fine and that he should get some rest,” Rhinox said. With Ratchet and First Aid still in the field, he was keeping an eye on the medical wing.

“Awkward…” Vicky muttered so quietly that only Amy and Rhinox could have possibly heard her.

Mr. Hebert focused on Amy and she felt another stab of guilt that she quickly pushed down.

“Rhinox is right, Taylor will be fine,” Amy assured them softly. At some point, she realised, she’d stopped caring. ‘I’m sorry, I know how you must feel, nothing to be done, I’m so sorry.’ She said the words, but they had lost all meaning. These days, she usually let the doctors handle a patient’s family.

Taking a breath, Amy pushed the thought away and tried to be as sincere as she could. Mr. Hebert didn’t deserve empty platitudes. “Taylor came through the battle with only minor injuries.”

You call that minor?

“Then why is she...?”

“Physically, she’s fine. Her mind just needs time to recover from the head injury.” Walking forward, Amy took Taylor’s hand in her own. “She’s already shown improvement since last night. I can’t give you a fixed time, but she /will/ wake up.”

Nodding, Mr. Hebert looked helplessly at his daughter. There had to be a way to help him.

Amy waved Vicky over and opened the box she was carrying. It was filled with brightly coloured paper. Pulling a handful out, she presented it to Mr. Hebert.

“Mr. Hebert, -”

“Danny,” he said roughly.

“Pardon?”
“You’re one of my daughter’s friends, you can call me Danny.”

“Right.” Amy blinked in surprise but recovered quickly. “I know it won’t change anything, but I thought you might like to see this. The hospital… Taylor saved a lot of people yesterday. Doctors don’t like to talk about it, but it can take up to an hour to evacuate a hospital. When Taylor put that shield up over the building, she saved everyone inside.”

Taking the papers from her, Danny started to shift through them. There were children’s crayon drawings, simple cards or just letters from the patients in the hospital, all of them saying the same thing.

“Thank you, Matrix.”

Amy had barely been at the hospital for an hour when the first kid had presented her with a drawing for Matrix. *Cause everyone knew they were friends.* After that, word had spread quickly and she’d been crushed under an avalanche of letters and cards.

Eventually, the hospital staff had stepped in, gathering everything together for Amy so she could focus on her job.

There was a rustle of paper behind Amy as Vicky dug into the box.

“You know, Ames, some of these are about you.”

“Yeah,” Amy mumbled, her face feeling hot. In the early days, she’d received a lot of these letters, but they’d gradually tapered off as she stopped being new. Now, they expected her to heal them.

Getting cards again had felt… nice. Did that make her a bad person?

Miss Militia squeezed Mr. Hebert’s shoulder as she looked at the letters and he smiled faintly.

“Come on, you know she’s going to be alright. Sitting here isn’t going do either of you any good.”

“I agree,” Rhinox said. “There’s a room put aside for you. Why don’t you have a shower and get some rest? There’s plenty of food in the kitchen, if you want something to eat.”

Removing his glasses, Mr. Hebert rubbed his face. “Yeah, you’re right… I think I’ll take a quick shower, maybe get some coffee.”

As he stood up, Mr. Hebert stumbled, falling sideways and colliding with Taylor’s bed before Miss Militia could catch him.

The movement jostled Taylor, knocking one of the spark chambers free and sending it rolling off the edge. Amy dived forward, her hands reaching out to catch the spark. Her fingers closed tightly around the sphere even as she hit the floor.

For Amy, the world fell away as the spark flickered fitfully. She could feel Windblade’s spark. It was weak, tired, but beneath it all was strength as she fought to stay alive.

*I want to help.* The thought flashed through her mind even as her grip tightened on the chamber. She wished there was something she could do, a way to make Windblade’s spark stronger.
The Matrix, still nestled safely in her pocket, suddenly grew warmer. Before Amy could even turn her head, Windblade’s spark exploded into life. The metal sphere shattered as the spark tripled in size, glowing like a small sun in her hands.

The world came back as Amy rolled onto her back, cradling the spark protectively to her chest.

“Amy?” Vicky shouted in surprise, her feet lifting off the ground in confusion.

“Rhinox!” Amy wasn’t quite panicking, but she was close. The spark in her hands wasn’t hurting her, but it did feel strange as it continued to glow… happily? Now that she was aware of it, Amy could feel Windblade’s emotions. She was happy, content.

Rhinox moved to her side, gently but firmly pushing Vicky away.

“Don’t move!” he ordered, gently prying her fingers apart so he could examine the spark. He stared at it in silence for what felt like an eternity before he smiled.

“It’s alright. You’re both fine, just hold on for a little longer.”

As he spoke, Perceptor came running into the room, an empty spark chamber held above his head.

“I’m here! What happened. My goodness!” His arms went slack as he stared at the gathered people in a frozen tableau of panic and Vicky started to giggle.

“Vicky!” Amy snapped. “This isn’t funny!”

“I’m sorry, it’s just… why does weird stuff always happen around Taylor?”

Chapter End Notes

An: okay, you guys wanted some fluff, well there you go. This is probably going to be the tone for the next few chapters. Also, no, that text on the right isn’t Primus.
Sitting on an examination table in Ratchet’s office, Amy tried not to scowl.

“Is all this really necessary?”

“Yes, now hold still,” Ratchet said. His eyes were fixed on the monitor in front of him.

Amy had barely placed Windblade’s spark into its new casing before she’d been rushed into Ratchet’s office, where dozens of little sensors had been stuck to her skin. Being forced to strip and put on a hospital gown was just the final humiliation as far as she was concerned.

The rest of the office was a little crowded, with Perceptor and Rhinox following them in and watching Ratchet run scan after scan on her body. Vicky floated near the door, still looking far too amused by the situation.

“Well,” Ratchet said, “I can confirm that you are producing spark energy, but it’s only been for the last few days at most, and it’s only in very small amounts.”

“Is it dangerous?” Vicky said, concern clear in her voice.

Ratchet shook his head. “No. Totally harmless. Even if it wasn’t, she’s producing far less than Taylor does. The difference is that the energy Amy produces dissipates quickly after leaving her body. With Taylor, the effect tends to linger.”

“So…” Amy licked her lips, remembering one of the weirder dreams Taylor had told her about once. “I’m not going to accidentally bring the toaster to life?”

“Not a chance.”

“Are we sure this is a recent thing?” Rhinox asked. He tapped a finger on a console. “Miss Dallon and Taylor have spent a lot of time together, after all.”

“I’ve been keeping a close eye on Amy since…” Ratchet looked up at her briefly, hesitating.

“Since I lost my legs,” Amy finished for him, patting Ratchet on the arm. “It’s okay, you can say it.”

Ratchet nodded, giving her a brief smile. “Her last full body scan was just before Leviathan attacked. The energy wasn’t there at the time.”

“So, what changed?” Vicky asked, her blonde hair pouring over her shoulders as she tilted her head in confusion.

Amy tried to think back, but nothing came to mind. It wasn’t like powers just suddenly changed, after all.

*So what happened between that scan and today? I never got close to Leviathan, I just spent all my*
time healing people. Then Tay --

“The Matrix!” she said. “It was in my pocket!” She looked at Ratchet. “I kept forgetting to give it back!”

Rhinox left Perceptor to monitor Windblade’s spark and gently prodded at Amy’s costume that had been left on the side. Pulling the Matrix from one of her pockets, he held it up for Ratchet to scan.

“A sympathetic reaction, perhaps?” Perceptor suggested.

Rhinox nodded. “Possible, but what if it was just a random discharge?”

“That can’t be right,” Ratchet replied, moving closer to the Matrix as the three Autobots started muttering to each other. Amy tried to follow along, but quickly gave up as words like ‘quantum’, ‘conduit’, and ‘damned if I know’ were bounced back and forth.

Perceptor sat in microscope mode, Windblade’s spark positioned under his viewfinder, while he occasionally offered up a suggestion. On the wall besides him, a monitor quickly flashed from one screen to another as he examined her.

As she watched, Amy felt a hollow pit in her stomach. She liked Windblade, she liked all the Autobots - even Rattrap. She wasn’t sure what she’d do if she’d hurt one of them.

“Hey, you okay?” Vicky floated next to Amy and gave her a gentle nudge with her hip.

“Y-yeah, it’s just… is Windblade going to be alright?” Amy’s question drew the attention of Rhinox and Ratchet, who looked over at Perceptor.

The slight movements of Perceptor’s viewfinder stopped. “I believe so. The instability responsible for the reduction in spark integrity has been reversed. Her spark is, if anything, vastly stronger than was previously recorded. This sudden increase in size and power is why it necessitated a new containment system.”

Silence followed his statement, broken only when Ratchet pressed a palm to his forehead.

“What he means is,” Rhinox said, stifling a chuckle, “Windblade is going to be just fine. If anything, she’ll be better than before.”

“Exactly!” Perceptor chirped. “This whole situation is fascinating. We always assumed that Taylor was the only one capable of utilising spark energies in such a fashion. If Ms. Dallon, or anyone else, can use the Matrix to effect repairs, then it opens up a wealth of possibilities that we have never considered before! Of course, we should wait until we have further information before attempting the action a second time.”

Vicky frowned. “A second time?”

“I think he means Wheeljack,” Amy said. If it was true that she could heal their sparks, then she was more than willing to help him.

“Perceptor’s probably right,” Ratchet said, “but we still don’t know how this happened to begin with.”
Vicky put her hand in the air like she was in class. “Ooh! I’ve got an idea!”

Amy tried not to smile when Vicky visibly ignored Ratchet’s disbelieving look.

“Powers are bullshit,” Vicky said with a proud grin, prompting Rhinox to stifle what almost sounded like a laugh.

“Look -” Ratchet growled.

“I’m serious,” Vicky continued as she drifted over to Ratchet. “I can fly. I could lift you over my head with one arm and shrug off bullets. Amy can heal anything and Taylor brings you to life. How does anything we do make sense?”

Rhinox chuckled, turning the Matrix over in his hands. “She has a point. You yourself ranted about it last week, Ratchet. A random growth in the brain shouldn't grant superpowers, yet here we are.”

“That's not…” Ratchet’s shoulders dropped with a put upon sigh that Amy had heard all too often at the hospital. It was the one doctors often made when faced with a patient that just didn't make sense.

“Fine, but for now I’ve got a few more tests to run.” He handed Amy a remote control. “Now, close your eyes and tell me if your power is telling you anything about it.”

Rolling her eyes, Amy nonetheless did as she was told.

“Well… it’s filthy. Its covered in bacteria and something that looks like cheetos… did you get this from Rattrap’s room?”

It looked like it was going to be a long night.

##

Victoria glanced quietly through the door to Taylor’s room, checking to see who was inside. Mr. Hebert and Miss Militia were nowhere in sight. Instead, Arcee was sitting in the chair near the bed. Her eyes were closed and her body was still, so Victoria assumed she was asleep. Or something close to it, anyway.

She lifted off the ground and floated silently towards Taylor’s bed. Not sure what to say, she chose to stay quiet, watching the steady rise and fall of her chest while her mind ran in circles.

Amy. Taylor. Her aura. It was all such a mess and she didn’t know what to do about it. She’d been having nightmares about her aura, about what it did to people, and now…

“Victoria?”

Hissing in surprise, Victoria slid backwards through the air, spinning around to see Arcee’s glowing blue eyes watching her.

“Oh my God! Don’t do that!” She quickly lowered her voice. “You scared the crap out of me!”

Arcee smirked. “Sorry.”
“No, you’re not…” Victoria huffed. “Sorry if I... woke you?”

Standing up, Arcee moved next to her. “You didn’t. I was just reviewing some files.”

“Oh…” Victoria turned back to Taylor. “She’s… going to be okay, right?”

“Ratchet and Amy think so. Are you okay?”

Vicky snorted. “Me? Oh I’m just fine. I’m Alexandria-lite, what could bother me?” Her voice was heavy with bitterness. “Not like I nearly got one of my closest friends killed or I’ve been fucking with my sister’s mind for years!”

Arcee leaned back slightly in shock, but she recovered quickly, reaching forward to take Victoria’s hand. “None of that was your fault you know. You didn’t know about your aura -”

“Amy’s been warning me for years to be more careful! If I’d paid more attention, if I’d just listened!”

“Can you turn it off when you sleep?” The simple question brought her up short. “If not, then it doesn’t matter. Chances are you’d still be in this situation.” Arcee sighed, “Look, I don’t know all the details, but there’s no point worrying about all the things that could have been.”

“What about Taylor? It’s still my fault she’s in a coma!”

“... She was hit with a tidal wave, Vicky. That’s got nothing to do with you.”

Victoria was trembling now, in anger or grief, she wasn’t sure. She knew, intellectually, it wasn’t her fault. But every time she closed her eyes, she saw Taylor reaching out for her as the wave came down on the both.

There was so much water, it was like being hit by a truck. It pulled at her, dragging her down. And the bodies…

Arcee quietly wrapped her arms around Victoria as she fought back a sob.

“It’s alright, it’s over, it wasn’t your fault,” the Autobot said. Victoria turned in her arms, holding tightly to Arcee as she cried.

Slowly, the knot of tension in her stomach eased. Victoria had barely gotten herself under control when the door opened and Ratchet walked in, with Rung riding on his shoulder.

“Come on,” Arcee said gently. “I’m really not the best person to talk to, but you need to stop looking for things to blame yourself for. What happened between you and Amy wasn’t your fault. It was just a bad situation, that’s all. Now let’s get you somewhere quiet so you can chat with Rung, okay?”

“... Yeah, okay…” Vicky said, letting herself be led out of the room. “Thanks.”

##

Sitting on her bed, Miss Militia pulled off her mask. She could hear the shower running in the attached bathroom, but there were still some things she needed to take care of.

*Console, this is Arcee and Cyclonus. We’re just about to start a patrol of the western sector and
Rhinox is on standby in case you need backup.*


*Roger that, Autobots, glad to have the help,* the PRT officer on console duty said.

Smiling to herself, Miss Militia tapped her radio.

“Console, Miss Militia here. I’m standing down for the night, I’m staying at Dragon’s Lair.” Her small, one bedroom apartment had survived the attack, but power and water were still cut off, so she’d accepted Dragon’s offer of a place to stay.

*Confirmed, Miss Militia… Get some rest. I have a feeling we’re all going to need it.* The radio beeped as she removed the earpiece and placed it on a bedside table. The PRT would call her phone or contact the Autobots if there was an emergency.

Rolling her shoulders, Hannah continued to remove her uniform. The thick fabric was so caked in dirt and sweat it felt like cardboard. Dumping it all in the corner, she resolved to ask Rhinox or Dragon if she could borrow a washing machine in the morning.

She was debating what to do with her underwear when the bedroom door opened slightly and Ravage slinked into the room.

Looking nonchalant in the way only a cat could, Ravage crossed the room and sat down next to her. Smirking to herself, Hannah spared a few minutes to stroke his head, gently dragging her fingers between his ears and listening to the deep mechanical purr.

“I guess you’re spending the night here as well?”

Snorting, Ravage pulled his head away, nudging her in the direction of the shower.

“Yes, I know. I stink.” Another, more insistent, push was her only answer.

Laughing quietly, she walked into the bathroom and shut the door. She emerged twenty minutes later in an oversized shirt that had been left for her.

Ravage had curled up in the corner, his red eyes following her as she crossed the room and climbed into bed. An arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her close.

“Hell of a night.”

“You okay?”

“Not really, but I’ll get over it.”

##

“Amy? Amy, it’s time to get up.”
Rolling over, Amy groaned and tried to ignore whoever was knocking on her door.

The door opened with a click, followed by the gentle tink of a cup being placed on the bedside table. The bed shifted as the caller sat down next to her, warm metal hands gently brushing Amy's hair away from her face.

“Come on, Amy, you asked to be woken up.”

“...Fine,” she grumbled, opening her eyes and looking up at the white and red face of Windblade.

“You’re awake!” Amy sat up as quickly as she could, eyes fixed on Windblade. The last she’d seen of the Autobot was when she left Ratchet’s office nearly a week ago.

He’d insisted she would be fine, but the worry and guilt had continued to gnaw at Amy all week. For safety’s sake, Amy had also been very careful to not touch Wheeljack’s spark.

Windblade stood up, looking down at Amy with a warm smile. “Yes, thanks to you.”

She was taller now, maybe only a little smaller than Arcee, but her new body was almost an exact copy of her old one. Giving her a wry smile, Windblade turned slightly to look down at herself. “Ratchet insists it’s the same, but I swear he made my fuselage bigger.”

Snorting in amusement, Amy reached for her legs. While it was possible to sleep in them, like she did the night of Leviathan’s attack, it wasn’t very comfortable. They were literally dead weight. She liked to keep them next to her bed where she could easily reach them.

As the sockets sealed with a hiss, Amy noticed the cup on her bedside table. Tea, milk, and one sugar. Ratchet’s ‘no coffee’ was still in effect and the Autobots were too scared to go against him.

Rewind was sitting next to the cup. Amazingly, the little robot had been pulled from Taylor’s armour with only a few scratches. Since then, he’d either stuck close to Amy or stayed in Taylor’s room.

“How does it feel?” Amy asked Windblade as she sipped her tea. “Being bigger, I mean?”

“It’s… different.” Windblade smirked. “Though Rattrap is much easier to keep in line when you can just pick him up.”

Amy snorted into her teacup and tried not to spill her drink.

“I suppose I should take a quick shower…”

“Shouldn’t you do your exercises first?”

Windblade laughed at Amy’s exaggerated groan.

##

After a grueling twenty minutes of exercise, Amy staggered into the bathroom attached to her room. Pulling off her workout clothes, she reached in to twist the shower valve, quickly pulling her arm
back to avoid the sudden spray of cold water.

Having to be lifted in and out of the bath by the nurses was mortifying. To make matters worse, they would never leave her unattended, even a few moments. At least here, she was allowed some privacy, though she wouldn’t be surprised if one of the Autobots was nearby ‘just in case’.

The water never took long to heat up, but while she waited, she compared the shower to the one at home.

The Autobots had been quick to modify the shower for her, adding handrails and a fold down seat so she could wash herself safely.

Her house had two bathrooms, one that Amy shared with Vicky and one attached to her parents’ room. How much would it cost to get rails fitted in the house? Amy wasn’t sure if anyone had mentioned it to Carol, or if she should do it herself. Would Carol even be okay with that?

Her prosthetics were waterproof and the soles were textured, so there was little risk of slipping, even on wet bath tiles, but she still had balance issues from time to time. Would she have to think about this everywhere she went?

Was this what it was like for other people, the ones she never met or healed? Did they constantly have to second guess themselves, accounting for their limits and safety?

*Maybe I should ask Ratchet about actual robot legs?*

With a sigh, she stepped into the shower and sat on the seat, her thighs aching slightly. She understood the need to exercise, to keep the remaining muscles in her thighs healthy, but that didn’t mean she had to like it.

Popping her prosthetics off, Amy closed her eyes and leaned back to let the water wash over her. She spent a few minutes like that, just twitching the muscles in her thighs. Maybe she was imagining it, but it helped ease the phantom sensations of her lost legs.

*Vicky should still be in her room, so it should be safe...* Removing her choker, Amy took a minute to wash it and her neck. It was comfortable enough that she could almost forget she was wearing the thing. Didn’t mean it wasn’t nice to get it off every now and then.

Looking at the plain black band, no one would ever guess it was more than a simple fashion accessory. Maybe she should try attaching one of the brooches. *Maybe the Autobot one?*

Amy’s hair was still damp as she went about what was becoming her normal morning itinerary.

First stop of the day was Lisa’s room.

She was still sedated, just like the other thinkers who’d been caught by the Fallen’s anti-thinker, her arms and legs restrained to keep her from thrashing in her sleep.

Rattrap - in rat form, of course - was curled up on her chest, his beady eyes watching the EKG readout.

“Hey, doc, any news?”
Taking Lisa’s hand, Amy shook her head. Despite the heavy sedation she was under, Lisa’s brain activity was still scarily high. “No, I’m sorry.”

“Isn’t it bad to keep her drugged like this?”

“Trust me, it’s far better than the alternative.”

Amy couldn’t read minds, but her power could interpret a lot of the activity. Adrenaline was flooding Lisa’s veins and her visual cortex was lit up like a Christmas tree. If she had been awake, the girl would likely be screaming at things no one else could see.

“I’m sorry, Rattrap, but there’s nothing we can do until she calms down. Dragon said the worst will be over in another week or so.”

Rattrap stood up on his hind legs, tail twitching in irritation. “Yeah, with another year of flashbacks! Meanwhile, that diode blown piece of slag gets to walk away! What I wouldn’t give to get my paws on her!”

Amy bit her lip. Seeing Rattrap so worried about a friend was touching; he tried so hard to act indifferent to the others after all. It was just a shame his beast-mode made his anger look closer to comical than threatening.

Pulling a box of energon treats from her pocket, Amy handed one to Rattrap. He snatched the glowing stick and started gnawing angrily at it.

“What are you smiling at?”

“Nothing.” Amy looked away quickly to avoid laughing. “Nothing at all.”

Leaving them alone, she checked up on Taylor, then made her way down to the breakfast table, where another cup of tea and some eggs on toast were waiting for her. At one end of the table, Mr. Hebert was nursing a cup of coffee and a breakfast of his own. Next to him sat Rhinox, a hologram with the latest news hovering in front of him and a cup of energon in his hand.

Arcee and Cyclonus were on patrol, but Amy could hear the Protectobots outside as they jogged past the window, Hot Spot’s voice clear as he barked orders.

Waspinator was sitting on the kitchen counter, his own energon in a miniature sippy cup. Chromedome was sitting next to him, his arms wrapped around Rewind.

After nearly a week, breakfast was no longer a surreal experience. Despite being mechanical, the Autobots were surprisingly human.

Amy had nearly finished eating by the time a bleary eyed Vicky stumbled into the room.

“Mrning,” she mumbled as she made her way over to the fridge and pulled out a carton of orange juice.

“Uzze a glazzz!” Waspinator said, making Vicky glare at him. Even so, she obligingly made her way to one of the cupboards to find a clean glass.

“Rough night?” Amy asked as Vicky slumped heavily into a seat.
“Yeah. Merchants hijacked an aid truck, so we spent most of the night looking for them.”

Mr. Hebert sighed. “That's the second one this week that went missing.”

“Yeah.” Vicky pushed her hair back. “The drivers were found dead by the side of the road. By the time we got there, the Merchants were long gone.”

“Did you find the truck?” Amy asked, suspecting she already knew the answer.

“Yeah, two blocks over. Looks like they got into a fight with the Empire; I found bits of Hookwolf all over the street. Rather than just give up the truck, the fucking Merchants torched it, along with everything inside.”

Mr. Hebert muttered something under his breath and Waspinator buzzed in irritation.

A couple of days after Leviathan, the water in the streets had finally receded enough that emergency aid could make it through in something larger than a boat or helicopter. They had been arriving two or three times a day since then with tinned food, rice, bedding, clothing, bottled water, and medical supplies.

But supplies were limited and safe routes through the city hard to find. Ruined buildings and cars blocked most of the streets and open pools of water still remained in the low-lying areas.

So of course, the gangs had been quick to take advantage of the situation. Even here, safely protected by the Autobots, Amy had heard stories of food and medicine disappearing from shelters and of trucks being waylaid and attacked.

“Can’t Dragon just fly the supplies in?”

Rhinox shook his head. “No. With multiple different aid groups and dozens of registered shelters scattered throughout the city, the logistics wouldn't work. As it is, Dragon is already carting supplies to the hospitals, police, and PRT.”

Amy bit her lip. “Speaking of the hospitals… I think it’s time I went back to work.” She hadn’t been back to the hospital since the day after Leviathan, and they hadn’t tried to contact her.

In fact, her phone had been suspiciously quiet all week. The only calls she’d received had been from Carol. And hadn’t that been an awkward conversation.

Windblade stepped forward. “Can I make a suggestion? The hospital can take care of itself. The people at the shelters are the ones who need help the most.”

Amy considered the idea. Windblade did have a point: the hospital could survive without her.

“You’re right. I’ll get changed.”

“I’ll come too!” Vicky said, jumping to her feet and nearly knocking the table over.

“You really should get some rest,” Rhinox said. “You look like you need it.”

“Shouldn’t you go back to bed?” It would be nice to spend time with Vicky, but Amy couldn’t help but notice the dark rings around her eyes.

“If you’re going to go traveling around the city, then I’m going with you!”
Before Amy could say anything, Vicky walked out of the room.

Windblade sighed. “Tell me, which of you is the more stubborn one?”

“Vicky,” Amy said with a grin, “definitely Vicky. But she’s getting better.”

The fact she’d walked out of the room, rather than flew out and possibly hit something, was a sign of that.

“I thought so. Still, having her along wouldn’t be a bad thing. A little extra protection never hurts.”

Windblade shrugged. “I’ll be coming too, by the way. Ratchet finally gave me the all clear and I want to ‘stretch my wings’, so to speak.”

##

It never took Amy long to get changed, and the Autobots had made sure her costume was always clean, charged, and ready for her at all times. She felt both guilty and a little flattered at the attention, to be honest. Putting a hand inside a hidden pocket, Amy brushed her fingers over the Matrix.

Rhinox had insisted she take it with her, for some reason and she hadn’t argued because she found the weight and warmth comforting.

Yeah, it gets like that.

Now standing on the roof of the building, Amy looked out over the edge.

She knew it was safe: Rhinox had spent the better part of an hour the other night explaining all the safety features Taylor had built into the flight system. It had everything from an emergency anti-gravity unit to a parachute that she could trigger at will.

Yet, she just couldn’t bring herself to jump.

Screwing her eyes shut, Amy gripped the rail and tried to force herself to move.

“We’re here!” Vicky came through the door with a crash, making Amy jump, again. A hot shower had apparently been enough to wake her up and the visor she was wearing hid the rings around her eyes. She wasn’t in costume though, only wearing jeans, a shirt, and a jacket. She was armed with gauntlets Taylor had given her, and her hair had been pulled up into a high ponytail.

Actually, now that Amy thought about it, she hadn’t seen Vicky in costume since the night they kissed. She considered asking about it, but decided against it for now. That night was a mess for both of them and they had both tried to avoid talking about it.

“Where to first?” Vicky asked, bouncing lightly on the balls of her feet.

“We should probably head to the northern camp,” suggested Windblade, who’d followed Vicky up onto the roof. “The Empire is really the only major player left, and they’re throwing their weight around to the south. It might be best to avoid them until we know they’ll leave us alone.”
“You really think the Empire would bother us?” Amy asked. Unlike Vicky, she wasn’t often recognised out of costume, so walking around the city was no safer for her than it was anyone else.

With the exception of those times she tagged along with Taylor or Vicky, she’d never actually been threatened while in costume.

“I think if two capes and an Autobot suddenly turn up in Empire territory, they might take it as a challenge. If we go north first and work our way down, they should know we’re coming and be less likely to react.”

“Makes sense to me,” Vicky said. “So, how are we going to get there?”

##

Being carried by Windblade, Amy decided, was nowhere near as comfortable as flying with Vicky.

The rule about them touching was still in effect, so Vicky had been unable to carry Amy, and she still couldn’t bring herself to use her flight pack. As such, she was now being carried through the air by Windblade. Thankfully, her wings and their turbines worked in both modes, so she was able to do the carrying in her robot-mode.

Now, if she could just get Vicky to stop smiling.

“Could be worse,” Vicky said. “You could be trying to sit on top of her like a carnival ride!”

Windblade chuckled, but otherwise stayed out of the conversation.

Amy felt her stomach drop at the sight of the shelter. Even from the air it had an atmosphere of desperation.

The main complex was a three story building with an empty lot on one side. Tents and communal areas were spread out in the lot, and Amy could see people dragging metal frames into place and covering them with tarps.

Some of the tarps had symbols painted on them, indicating what they were to be used for: dining hall, toilets, washrooms, and so on.

One of them even had a Red Cross painted on the side and a large truck parked next to it. The sound of a generator could be heard coming from it.

“What’s going on there?” Amy asked, pointing at a pair of large men who were standing in front of the doors to the main building.

Both men were dressed in matching black uniforms with body armour over the top. Each had a white symbol on their backs.

Standing between them and the shelter were a man and woman in orange vests. Amy couldn’t hear what was being said, but it didn’t look friendly.
“It’s a shakedown,” Vicky growled. “You wait here, I’ll deal with -“

“No, Victoria,” Windblade said. “There are better ways to deal with this. Follow my lead.”

Vicky scowled, but did as she was told.

The three of them descended, the noise of Windblade’s turbines alerting the men to their approach.

“Is there a problem here?” Windblade asked as her feet touched ground. The moment she landed, she put Amy down and gently but firmly pushed her behind her frame.

The men looked at them, their eyes flicking between Windblade and Vicky. They seemed to ignore Amy, which was fine with her: it meant they likely didn’t see her reaching back to grip the handle of her gun.

This close, Amy could see what the white symbol on their uniform was. It was a set of scales made out of guns.

One of the men smiled and Amy noticed an oddly shaped scar on the side of his face. “Not at all. We were just explaining to these people that we would be in the area and that we would do our best to protect them.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” Windblade said, giving them a slight bow. She sounded almost sincere, but her wings were raised in what Amy assumed was irritation.

“The world needs more people willing to help others, now more than ever. Especially those who ask for nothing in return.”

A glare flashed across the scarred man’s face, but he covered it quickly.

“Yes, of course, us heroes need to stick together after all,” he said. Looking at his partner, he jerked his head to the side and they both started to leave.

“Of course,” Windblade said. Her smile was bright. “If there are any problems, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Scar glared at her, but said nothing as they hurried off.

“You really think that’ll scare them off?” the woman in the vest asked.

“No, but I didn’t want to risk hurting you in the crossfire.” Windblade handed the woman a small, flat disk. “If they come back, press this and we’ll deal with them.”

The woman slipped the disk into a pocket, then rubbed her face. Amy couldn’t help but notice the signs of fatigue.

“Thank you. I’m Beth, by the way. Sorry if I sound ungrateful, but we’ve only been open a few days and that was the third shakedown so far.”

“I understand. I’m Windblade, and this is Glory Girl and Panacea. We’re here to help however we can.”
At the mention of her name, Amy stepped forward and Beth’s mouth fell open.

“The Panacea?” she asked. “Oh, thank God! We barely got the generators running when the sick started turning up. We’ve been doing what we can, but there’s just not enough medicine to go around.”

The sheer relief in her voice shocked Amy. Were things really that bad already?

“It’s fine. If you can show me to the medical tent?”

“Yes, of course, this way.”

Beth led them through the building and out into the lot. The people they passed all had the same wrung out look: pale, gaunt faces with dark eyes.

Amy could even hear children somewhere in the building.

“We’d barely opened the doors before we ran out of cots,” Beth explained. “We’ve converted the upper floors into priority bedding for people with children and families, but we’re running out of places to put them.”

“Things will get better,” Vicky said with a gentle smile.

Beth sighed. “I hope so.”

Here and there, Amy spotted signs and notices pinned up. Some were professionally made, while others were little more than pencil scribbled on wrinkled paper.

One of them, clearly professionally made in large print, was tacked up near the medical tent.

‘Priority Order: sick, injured, disabled, old, very young, families.’ In smaller print below was the message, ‘Please be courteous and give up your places to priority individuals.’

Around them, people stopped to watch them pass and Amy heard brief mutterings about their presence. She was thankful for Vicky and Windblade flanking her, keeping a buffer between her and the crowd.

Amy breathed a sigh of relief when she entered the medical pavilion. This was familiar ground.

Windblade and Vicky stopped outside to act as guards and give patients some privacy. Inside, there was a single doctor and a nurse with three people in orange vests helping them.

“Panacea, it’s good to see you,” the doctor said. “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but do you know how long you’ll be here?”

“I can only spare an hour, I’m afraid. I have to visit the other shelters.”

When she’d first started as Panacea, Amy had tried to project an attitude of professionalism. It had faded overtime, of course, but she tried to slip into that mindset again.

“We’ll start with the most critical cases first, then work down the list. I’m sorry, but minor injuries like cuts and scrapes will just have to heal on their own.”
The doctor nodded. “Of course, I’ll get everything organised.”

##

An hour later, the last of her patients walked out of the the tent. Stretching, Amy stood up from her chair.

“Thank you for all your help,” one of the volunteers - a girl with short brown hair - said as she passed Amy a cup of tea.

“Dont worry about it.” Amy frowned at the drink. Windblade must have told them not to give her coffee.

“Umm…”

“Yes?” Amy didn’t quite sigh. Something about her was kind of familiar.

The girl bit her lip, fiddling with her vest. “Is… is Taylor okay? No one’s seen her in over a week now and I’m getting worried.”

“You know Taylor?”

“We,” she hesitated briefly, “we went to school together. We weren't friends, but she helped me recently and, well…”

Amy frowned. Like most of New Wave, Taylor could be considered a local celebrity, and it wouldn’t be the first time she’d met someone who claimed to be a friend just so they could get some gossip.

Still, the girl sounded genuine and rumors were starting to spread on PHO that Matrix had died. The Autobots denied it, of course, but they were staying quiet about her actual status. Maybe a leak or two would help.

“Taylor’s resting. She got hurt in the fight, but she’ll make a full recovery.” I hope.

The girl gave her a sad smile that Amy couldn't quite understand. “I see, thanks. If you see her… no, never mind.”

With that, the girl hurried off, leaving Amy confused.

After finishing her drink, she threw the paper cup into the bin and walked outside. She wanted to reach two more shelters before she called it a day. Windblade was waiting for her, but Vicky was nowhere to be seen.

“Some of the people mentioned the Merchants being in the area,” Windblade explained, “so she’s taking a quick look around.”

“Oh, I see -”
There was a loud crash as one of the temporary buildings collapsed. One of the sides gave way under the weight of the sheet metal someone had bolted to the roof, putting stress on the sections next to it.

People were rushing forward, trying to keep the structure from giving way entirely.

Without hesitating, Windblade and Amy ran towards the commotion. Thankfully, it didn’t look like anyone had been hurt, but some of the volunteers were in disagreement about who was at fault and how best to secure the structure.

They couldn’t just pull it down, as they would have to take the ones on either side down as well. And they couldn’t lift the fallen section up as it was too heavy and badly positioned.

Before the argument could get out of hand, Windblade stepped forward and, gripping the collapsed section, lifted it back into place.

“Well?” she asked as she continued to hold it above her head. Around her, volunteers were already bringing in tools and extra metal to reinforce the tent.

Seeing as no one was hurt, and Windblade was sending her messages about not being allowed to do heavy lifting, Amy decided to give them some space to work and walked away.

Lacking anything else to do, and not being able to leave until Windblade and Vicky were ready, Amy found herself walking back towards the medical tent with the red cross.

The sound of the generator drew her attention to the trailer. It looked like a modified shipping container, with a door built into the side nearest the tent. There was even a code panel next to the door. Must be where they’re keeping supplies.

Amy turned to leave, but the sound of breaking glass stopped her.

Looking around, she noticed the door to the supply truck was open. Surely they would keep that closed and locked?

Approaching the truck, she carefully looked around. Nothing seemed to be out of place. Maybe someone had just forgotten to lock the door.

“Hello?” Opening the door, Amy went climbed the fold out stairs and went inside. Turning on the spot, she found herself looking down the barrel of a shotgun. “Fuck!”

“Don’t move. Don’t make a fucking sound!”

Chapter End Notes

AN: well Amy missed out on the bank job :D
Thanks to my Beta's as always SpiralAK and Essex
The inside of the trailer had been converted into a portable pharmacy. Counters, drawers and cabinets were stacked against the walls, stocked with painkillers, antibiotics, bandages and dressings. Amy doubted the trailer was stocked with more than those essentials. All the expensive stuff would still be at the hospitals.

There was a narrow walkway down the middle of the trailer that was just wide enough for two people to stand side by side. For the three men currently ransacking the place, it was outright cramped.

“Move away from the door!” the gunman said. Amy took a step back, putting some distance between them and leaving the doorway clear.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” he demanded, jerking his shotgun towards her with each question.

“I’m Panacea. I was helping people in the camp when I heard a crash.”

She’d thought that the men were related to the group Windblade and Vicky had chased off, but once she got a closer look, she realised that they weren’t. None of them bore the scale symbol the others had worn. Instead, they wore green armbands emblazoned with melted sunglasses in black.

Two of the men were dressed in regular clothes that looked like they hadn’t been cleaned in weeks. They were painfully thin, with that twitchy, furtive look she’d seen before in addicts as they dumped bottles of pills into duffle bags.

The gunman was different. His clothes were clean and well fitting, his eyes weren’t bloodshot and his aim was worryingly steady. He must have been the leader.

“You alone?” the gunman asked. He was keeping a careful watch on the door while the others worked.

“No, there’s a dozen more outside. They’ll be looking for me soon.”

He pulled back, like he was going to strike her with the butt of his gun, and she tried not to flinch. However, he seemed to think better of it, and lowered his arms. “Don’t push your luck! Get up against that wall and don’t fucking move!”

Past the looters, and slumped against the wall, Amy could see one of the nurses from the medical tent. The woman was deathly still, her chest rising and falling slowly in long breaths.

*Amy, we’re almost done here. Are you ready to go?*

Amy glared at the gunman, who hadn’t taken his eyes off her. “She’s hurt, let me help her!”

He appeared to consider it for a moment, his eyes flicking between Amy, the door, and over his own
shoulder. Finally, he grunted and jerked his gun to the side.

“Fine, but stay quiet and don’t try anything!”

Moving carefully, Amy edged past the gunman. His partners stopped to watch her as she passed. One of them was stuffing pills into his mouth when he thought no one was watching.

“Stop!” the gunman said.

Amy froze, slowly raising her hands into the air in an effort to calm the situation down. *Vicky is never going to let me live this down.*

“What’s that, some kinda weapon?” She felt him nudge at the small of her back with his shotgun.

[Vindoblade: Amy, where are you?]

Amy forced herself to stay calm, “It’s a baton. It’s for my protection… if you grab the handle, it’ll release from my suit.” *Try to take it, I dare you.*

[Vindoblade: Amy’s nearby, but she’s not answering her radio. Can someone access her visor?] [Waspinator: Yeah, yeah, Windy needs to wait… huh, why doezzz that man have a gun?] [Vindoblade: WHAT!? Transfer that feed to me, now!]

There was a grunt from behind her and she felt him tug on the weapon as it detached itself from her suit.

[Unauthorised user detected: Confirm user? 3… 2… 1.]

Amy tensed, watching the counter on her display.

[Unauthorised user detected: Activating counter measures.]

There was a loud zap as the baton discharged. The man made a strangled shouting noise and the shotgun went off in his hands. The blast hit Amy in the back, the impact flaring her shield and knocking her off her feet. The other two jumped back in surprise as she fell between them.

//Do not relent. Make them pay!!//

Rolling over, Amy kicked out, hitting one of the men in the knee. He howled in pain, his leg bending in the wrong direction. The sickening noise snapped the last man out of his shock and he turned to run, fighting to get past the still shaking form of the gunman.

Amy scrambled to her feet, her hands closing around a small, personal fire extinguisher. She swung it with a scream, and the man turned. The impact shook her arm and he fell to the floor, clutching at his face.

It was over. From start to finish, the fight couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, but she felt like she’d run a marathon.

“Amy!” Vicky’s voice was muffled as she barged through the door, and Amy realised there was a
faint ringing in her ears. Vicky only just stopped before tripping over the men and stared in opened mouthed shock at the scene.

“Are you okay?” She floated over the bodies, putting a gentle hand on Amy’s shoulder.

“No!” Amy shouted, still riding high on adrenaline. “Why do people keep trying to kill me? That mugger a few months ago, then those lunatics when fucking Leviathan attacked, and now this! When did my life get so ridiculous?”

Vicky looked on, concern clear on her face as Windblade slid carefully into the trailer. Her wings made it difficult for her to move in the tight space.

Amy continued to breathe hard, but her temper had already burned itself out. “… Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Windblade said with a smile. “A minor meltdown is practically a right of passage these days.”

Vicky snorted and Amy’s lips twitched despite herself.

“So, what do we do with these guys?” Vicky asked.

“Throw them back in the gutter and leave them there?”

“Amy, be nice,” Vicky warned with a grin.

“That was nice.” There were all sorts of ideas in Amy’s head at the moment, from modifying their livers so they couldn’t get any pleasure from drinking to permanent impotence. Sighing, she turned her back on them and focused her attention on the nurse.

As she kneeled by the woman, Amy was glad that the ringing in her ears was quickly fading. She took the nurse’s hand in her own and let her power go to work while Vicky and Windblade dragged the group outside. *Minor concussion, hairline fracture to the back of the skull and a broken wrist.*

She couldn’t do much about the concussion, but the rest of the damage was quickly healed.

Once it was safe to move her, Amy and Vicky carefully carried the nurse outside and into the medical tent. They would leave her on a bed with the doctor to keep an eye on her.

The thieves, however, had been dumped in a heap in the middle of the lot. Around them, the rest of the refugees had formed a loose ring and were watching the men warily. The mood, if Amy was any judge, was bordering on murderous.

“We should make sure they don’t lynch them,” Windblade said, looking at the crowd and sighing. She ignored Vicky’s muttered ‘do we have to?’

“Amy, are you willing to take a look at the three of them?”

She wanted to say no, to let them heal on their own, but that guy’s leg was bent ninety degrees the wrong way, and the guy she’d hit with the extinguisher was struggling to breathe. There was no way that would heal without help

“Alright, I’ll take a look…”
Windblade stood close as she worked. The gunman was more or less okay. He’d clearly had the shock of his life, but nothing that wouldn’t heal in time so she left him alone. The leg had turned out to be much worse than she’d expected. It wasn’t just broken, it was shattered.

Her stomach rolled with guilt. “Did I really hit him that hard?”

Windblade knelt down beside her. “Your bodysuit increases your strength, remember? And your prosthetics mean you’ll kick a lot harder than you used to. Don’t feel too bad, though. After all, they were stealing from sick people who had nothing.”

Nodding, Amy straightened his leg and mended the bone. He didn’t have enough mass for her to completely fix it, so he’d just have to live with a bit of a limp while it finished healing naturally.

The last man had a broken jaw and had bitten his tongue. He’d also downed a dozen tablets, and, from the way his body was reacting, she could guess what they were. It would be easy to ignore it, to just let him crap his pants as the laxatives took hold… but then, someone else would have to clean up the mess.

His stomach made a worrying gurgling noise and the man looked at her in horror as he realised what was happening. Amy let him sweat for a moment longer, then broke down the tablets and rendered the rest harmless.

“You’re welcome,” she said, standing up.

Before she could say anymore, the crowd parted and Beth came storming into the clearing. She was followed by the young girl that had given Amy some tea. She had blood running from her nose and the pair of them were half-dragging, half-marching a man between them.

“What’s going on?” Vicky asked as the pair shoved the man to the ground with the others.

“He’s the one who caused that shelter to collapse,” Beth growled. “Thankfully, my daughter caught him before he could get out of the camp.”

The girl shrugged helplessly, wiping some of the blood off her lip. “He’s been acting weird since he arrived. I heard him telling someone on a cell that capes were here and that they needed to cancel.”

Ignoring the new thief, Amy walked over to the girl. “Do you want me to fix that?”

“Um… you don’t have to! I mean, it doesn’t hurt that much -”

“It’s fine.” Rolling her eyes, Amy shared a look with Beth then and took her nod as permission. Touching the girl’s hand, she paused in surprise at what she saw. Very low body fat, signs of a recent and severe injury, couple of knife wounds, and…

The girl was a cape. And, by the looks of things, one that Amy had healed recently.

Deciding not to make a scene, Amy fixed up the girl’s nose and the cuts on her body without saying a word.

“Where did these guys come from anyway?” Vicky asked out loud. While Amy had been busy, she’d been zip-tying the men so they couldn’t get away. “I did two full loops, but I didn’t see gang
“tags or anything.”

“I know!” a voice in the crowd said.

A young woman walked forward. Her red hair was pulled back in dreadlocks and Amy guessed she was probably about Crystal’s age.

“They’re Merchants, there’s a group of them not far from here… They have my brother. Can you please help?”

##

Tired and reeking from the vomit on her costume, Amy stormed back into the Autobot base late that night. Vicky was floating behind her, taking care not to get too close.

“Come on, Ames, it wasn’t that bad.”

“He threw up on me!” Amy snapped. “Do you know when that last happened to me?!”

“It’s not like he meant to do it and he did say he was sorry.”

While dealing with the Merchants, they had found the girl’s brother curled up in a corner. Once the fighting was done, Amy had kneeled down to heal him, only for the boy to throw up on her the moment she touched him.

“Well, it’s been an interesting day at least?” Vicky said, shrugging.

“Interesting day? I was shot in the back! I got taken hostage and had to fight three Merchants on. My. Own! To top it all off, all the food in this place is sugar free, I still can’t drink coffee, my legs hurt, the city doesn’t have power, people are dying, the batteries for my vib—” Amy coughed as another wave of her own stink hit her “—you’re all working fourteen hour shifts, my best friend is in a coma, everywhere smells like shit, and our home has a hole the size of a car in it!”

Amy panted as weeks of frustration came spilling out. It had never really been one thing, just lots of little issues building up together.

“But—” Vicky began, but before she could say anything more, Amy spun on her heels and stormed off. Too tired to care anymore, she barely paid attention as she showered off the worst of the grime and pulled on some pajamas.

Flopping onto her bed, she was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

##

Amy walked through a world of metal. Unknown stars shone above her and there, in the distance, was the sound of a hammer hitting metal.
Not sure what else to do, Amy walked through the empty streets, letting the noise guide her. The source, as it turned out, was a small workshop. The door was open, light spilling out into the street.

Inside stood a tall, slim Autobot, the light from the forge shining on her body. The antennae on her helmet were similar to Taylor’s, but dozens of cables extended from the back of her head, falling like hair across her shoulders.

In her hand was a large hammer that she used to beat a slab of metal with a look of concentration on her face.

“Excuse me?” Amy called out, hoping she wouldn’t be too upset at the interruption.

The woman looked up and smiled warmly.

“Hello, child.”

Amy tried not to show the flash of irritation she felt at being called a child, but the woman laughed anyway.

“I didn’t mean to offend.” She used a pair of tongs to lift the slab off the anvil and returned it to the heat of a nearby forge. “When you get to my age, everyone is a child.”

There was something odd about her voice. It was soft, melodic, and oh so very familiar. Despite her friendliness, there was a hidden sense of power that radiated from the Autobot and an immense feeling of age.

Amy looked back out the door. “Where is … Where am I?”

“You’re here.”

Amy gave her a flat, unimpressed look.

“The better question is, ‘what brings you here?’”

“I…”

“Allow me. You lived your life from one day to the next. You went through the motions, each day blending into the next. It left you feeling tired, lost. You’ve dedicated your life to helping others, but it never feels like enough.”

“That… you’re right.”

“But now, something's changed. You took up arms and stood with your sister.”

*Vicky blew through the door first, grabbing the nearest Merchant and shocking him into senselessness with her gauntlet before he could even react.*

“This wasn’t like before, you didn’t just wait for the enemy to come to you. You attacked them.”

*With the doorway clear, Amy followed, gun in hand as two more Merchants entered the room. She’d stunned them before they even lifted their arms.*
“You put yourself between your attackers and those who couldn't defend themselves and returned a lost child home.”

*Vicky held the boy as Amy went to work, purging the drugs from his system and using what mass he could spare to heal his wounds. Her power ensured he stayed asleep throughout, not waking up until he was safely back at the camp with his sister.*

“And now you feel confused.”

“I could have helped more people at the hospital.”

“And yet you feel more satisfied than you have in a long time.”

Not sure what to say, Amy sat down on a nearby chair and stared into the forge as the smith pulled the metal out and resumed her work.

Amy watched in silence, the blows of the hammer taking on a rhythmic quality.

“What are you working on?” she asked eventually.

“I’m not sure. A gun perhaps, maybe a space bridge… sometimes, it’s nice to just work. No plans, no goal, just me, the metal, and raw creation. Don’t you agree?”

“I don’t… it would scare people if I did that. The things I could create…” she trailed off, thoughts of Nilbog filling her mind.

“Or they could be beautiful.” The smith sighed. “Creation is not good or evil, it simply is. It is your intent that matters. Like all things, it comes down to choice.”

Lifting the plate up, she inspected the edge, heedless of temperature. She turned it one way, then another, inspecting it for some flaw that Amy couldn't see.

“Ah! I think this will be a shield, something to protect and nurture.” Putting the metal down, she picked up another tool and began marking lines across the slab. That done, she picked up her hammer and started to work.

“If there is one thing I have learned in all my years, it’s that my tools can't fix every problem. Sometimes, it's not enough to wait until the battle is over to fix their armour and treat their wounds. Sometimes you need to be something more.”

The hammer glowed, light pouring from the decorative lines on its surface. The smith brought the hammer down, each strike shaking the room with the sound of thunder.

Amy watched in awe as the metal began to reshape itself, parts expanding, folding, or twisting with each strike until, with a final strike, it was done. The smith picked up the now finished shield, the light of the forge glowing on its white surfaces.

“You have a great and terrible power, child. You could have used it for evil. You could have chose to hide it away, keeping it secret and never using it. But instead, you chose to help others. Never forget that.” She held the shield out towards Amy. “Here, I think this will suit you well.”

Amy carefully took the shield. Half her height, it was still warm to the touch and lighter than it
appeared. Yet, there was a weight she couldn't identify, a hidden strength held within.

Amy opened her mouth to talk, but the smith and the forge were gone. Around her, the metal world was fading away, leaving only the shield.

As she finished her morning routine, Amy’s mind kept circling back to the Merchant camp they’d raided. The dozen or so Merchants inside the flooded out building hadn’t stood a chance against one cape, never mind two capes and an Autobot.

Reaching the kitchen the next morning, Amy was surprised to find Vicky talking on her phone, a half-eaten breakfast on the table in front of her.

“You should have seen her! She just walked in and bang!, down they went. Oh! She’s here, one second.”

Amy shook her head in panic but Vicky ignored her, putting the phone on speaker mode.

“So, Victoria tells me you two had quite the day?” Carol sounded tired, but amused.
Amy sat down at the table. “It was nothing really. I didn’t do much, just followed behind Vicky…” Besides, if she included herself, it was three hostages.

“Don’t sell yourself short. Tell me, how did the Merchants capture the boy, anyway?”

“They didn’t,” Amy said, forgetting herself.

Vicky rolled her eyes, but spoke before Amy could. The boy’s sister, Sierra, had told them the full story when they brought him to the shelter and Amy was busy flushing the drugs from his system.

“Turns out he had an argument with his parents. He stormed off saying he was,” Vicky made air quotes, even though Carol couldn’t see them, “‘staying with friends’.”

“And those ‘friends’ turned out to be Merchants?” Carol said.

“Yeah, though he insisted he didn’t know, and then they wouldn’t let him leave.”

He’d probably been telling the truth. Amy had heard that story plenty of times before. Kid makes some ‘cool’ friends, starts hanging out with them, doesn’t realise what they are really like until it’s too late, then ends up in over their head.

It was naive, stupid, and worryingly common.

“Regardless, I’m proud of you both.” Carol sighed. “Unfortunately, I’ve got some bad news, which is why I called in the first place. I’ve been speaking with a representative from Fortress Construction, and the damage to the house is worse than we suspected. Thankfully, it’s still covered by our insurance, but between that and the state of the city, it’ll be nearly a month before we can move back in.”

Vicky groaned and Amy felt a bit guilty. She’d enjoyed staying with the Autobots and had barely thought about going home.

“I know, I know, but it can’t be helped,” Carol said. “Anyway, I’ll being going to the house with Sarah and Mark later today to pack whatever's left and move it to Sarah’s place. So, if you have anything you don’t want us seeing, you should collect it this morning. We’ll be eating at her house afterwards... will... I’d like it if you could join us.”

Amy tried to find a reason to say no; she wasn’t sure she was ready to face the whole family again, but Vicky was giving her a pleading look and she could feel her resolve faltering.

“... Yeah, we’ll be there,” she said, ignoring Vicky as she did a little victory dance in her chair.

“Okay,” Amy wasn’t sure, but it sounded like Carol had let out a breath. “The PRT has asked for our help, so I’ll text you both a time later.”

“Oh, anything interesting?” Vicky sat up straighter in her chair. “You going after the Merchants?”

“I wish it was something that simple. No, the PRT has asked for our help with the Empire and there are rumours of gangs from other cities moving in. The Merchants, I’m afraid to say, really aren’t a priority.”

“What?!” Vicky jumped up so fast her chair fell over. “These guys are breaking into camps and
stealing medicine! How is that not a priority?"

“Because the Merchants aren’t openly recruiting in the streets,” Carol said sharply. “The Merchants haven’t started openly pointing weapons at ambulance or fire crews. The Merchants don’t currently hold a dozen city blocks where the police, or even a PRT squad, won’t enter without parahuman support.”

Crossing her arms, Vicky sat back down, floating unsupported in the air. Amy rolled her eyes at both the pout and the casual use of powers. It wasn’t like she didn’t agree with Vicky - the Merchants had shot her after all - but Carol had a point.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Amy asked.

Carol audibly paused, presumably thinking about it. “Not at the moment, but thank you, Amy. Will you be up for healing anyone if they get hurt?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you… I’ve got to go, but I’ll speak to you both later. And Amy, I know she’s too busy pouting to listen, but please try to keep Victoria out of trouble.”

Amy and her mom both laughed at Vicky’s indignant squawk before the call cut off.

Getting up, Amy left her sister sitting at the table and started fixing her own breakfast.

Dragon had supplies delivered to the building regularly, so there was plenty to choose from, but Amy couldn’t help but notice that all the options were either healthy, sugar-free, or low sugar options. And of course, no coffee...

“Are you going to sulk about this all day?” Amy asked as she sat back down with some cereal.

“No,” Vicky admitted with a roll of her eyes, “it just pisses me off. Sure, the Empire Eighty-Eight and the other gangs are bad, but if we just ignore the Merchants, they’ll get entrenched, and removing them later will be harder.”

“You’re not wrong,” Amy said around a mouthful of food, “but what can you do? Not like you can -”

Amy’s mouth closed with an audible click, but it was already too late. Vicky’s eyes shone with excitement.

“Amy, you’re a genius!”

“No!” Amy said quickly.

“But -”

“No Vicky, Mom would kill us both!”

“It’s not -”

“I’m not having this conversation!” Grabbing what was left of her breakfast, Amy stood and,
carefully, turned to leave.

“Oh come on, Ames, I’m not, wait a minute!” Vicky whined, following Amy out of the kitchen. Her pesterling continued all the way through the building, up the stairs, and into the common room before she finally gave up and grabbed Amy’s arm, steering her towards an empty chair.

“Will you just listen! Look, I’m not saying we should go running off alone. What if we just tried to find them? The PRT took out the Merchants once. If we can find where they’re hiding now, we can come back later with the rest of New Wave and finish the job!”

Amy rolled her eyes. “That still leaves the two of us travelling through the city, alone, looking for trouble. Haven’t we had enough of that already?”

//Sometimes, it's not enough to wait until the battle is over.//

Huffing, Vicky sat down in the air again. “Who said anything about going alone? We’ll take some of the Autobots with us. Between them, me, and your tinker gear, we can handle a little recon.”

Amy could feel a headache coming on. Vicky’s plan was going to get them both grounded for life, or worse. And yet… she couldn't deny that part of her wanted to do it, to go hunting across the city to find the Merchants.

“How do you even plan to find their base?” Amy asked in trepidation.

Vicky smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile. It was the sort that swam very quickly towards drowning sailors in the middle of the ocean.

“I have an idea.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: I was originally going to show the raid on the Merchant camp, but honestly it wasn’t interesting and added nothing to the chapter.
Huddling close to the building, Evans cast a careful gaze around at his surroundings. This was a bad part of town at the best of times, and being partially submerged by floodwater hadn’t helped matters. Once he was sure things were safe enough, he stepped out of the shadows.

On the other side of the street, a man was doing a bad job of looking relaxed as he leaned against a wall. Making eye contact, Evans nodded.

Nodding in return, the man moved forward and Evans eased back into a side street. It wouldn’t do to stay out in the open. Dealing this close to Empire territory was always risky, especially if your skin was a little on the tanned side.

It was especially bad lately, even before Leviathan came. The skinheads were being bigger shithits than normal, demanding more for lower prices and fighting over the silliest things. One dealer had ended up in the hospital with both arms broken just because he’d run out of product and his supplier was late.

A few of the better guys in the Empire had, with the offer of a little extra, admitted that something was happening. The rank and file were getting fed up with the capes getting beat all the time. Some were even talking about a possible change in leadership.

Not that Evans really cared. As long as they kept paying, the Empire could fuck itself with a shotgun. It was no skin off his nose, but orders were orders. The boss wanted the Empire guys coked off their tits and happily rewarded any information found while doing so, so that’s what Evans would do.

As the buyer got closer, Evans was distracted by the sound of pounding feet as someone came running towards them.

The buyer stopped, turning to watch the approaching newcomer while Evans reached for the gun he kept at the small of his back. The two men argued quietly for a minute before the buyer stormed over, obviously in a bad mood.

“Can you double the order?” he asked, close enough to speak without being overheard.

“Why?” Evans asked. He could do it, he had enough, but he’d be out for the rest of the day.

The buyer nodded towards the newcomer. “His supplier didn’t show up, cops or something must have got him, and he’s got customers waiting.”

Evans smirked. Brockton Bay was lousy with capes on both sides of the fence. A supplier who got careless was likely to vanish, either arrested or dead in a gutter depending on who got him. “Of course, I’m always willing to help a friend out.” ‘For a price’ went unsaid. “Who’s his supplier?”

“Vinny. Y’know, with the weird teeth.”

“Yeah, I know him.” He waved the newcomer over. It sucked Vinny was gone, he could cut a batch with just the right amount of fillers so no one could ever tell. He’d even bragged once that he’d sold someone a bag of 100% ground up plasterboard and the buyer had come back the next day claiming
“Okay,” Evans said, “I’ve got what you need, but it won’t—”

A girl hit the street behind both men hard enough to crack the pavement and knock him of his feet. Standing up, Evans had a brief view of a pretty young face, with blonde hair and a black jacket, before she put her hands on both buyers’ shoulders and casually pushed them in opposite directions. Both men went flying, hitting the ground with a thump and sliding to a stop.

She smiled sweetly as he pulled his gun, the first shot plinking harmlessly against her stomach. He pulled the trigger again and again as he backed away from the cape, but her expression never changed. She simply stepped forwards, moving closer. With one hand, she pulled the gun from his grip and crushed it. Her other hand lashed out, grabbing Evans by the front of his jacket.

Evans screamed as she took off, the ground disappearing under them as she lifted him up above the rooftops. He lashed out in blind panic, punching and kicking at the crazy bitch. He might as well have punched a mountain. Pulling him close, she spun them both around so fast that he lost all sense of direction.

Then she let go.

His scam rang in his ears, time seemed to slow and he hung in the air. It almost felt like he was floating. He hit the roof with a crash, knocking the wind out of him as he skipped and rolled to a stop.

Groaning, Evans managed to roll onto his back, looking up at the cloudy sky above him as he tried to catch his breath. A small, distant part of him noted that he was unhurt, but it was being drowned out by the part that was still gibbering about being thrown through the air by crazy capes.

He hoped that was it, that she’d lose interest in him now and maybe go after the other two, but before he could even consider getting back up, she was on him again.

“Fuck!” he wheezed, scrabbling backwards in an effort to get away, but she was faster. Picking him up, she spun him around so his back was to the edge of the roof. The light flashed on her visor, and she wasn’t smiling now.

“Y-you’re crazy!” Evans shouted, finally finding his voice. “You could have killed me!”

“You’d be surprised what you can live through. I’ve got some questions about your boss, do you mind answering them?” As she spoke, she pushed him backwards with the same casual ease until Evans felt his feet hit the edge of the roof. He waved his arms, trying to keep his balance, and for one horrifying moment he thought she was going to push him off.

Instead, she let him go and took a step back. “Well? It’s a long way down.”

Blonde hair, strong, can fly… recognition hit him like a hammer. The crazy bitch was a hero, part of that cape family that was on the news. “Go to hell! You wouldn’t dare! I know who you are, you can’t touch me!”

She gave him a disappointed look. “You’re right, I wouldn’t… but he would.”

Evans had been so focused on Glory Girl that he hadn’t noticed the large, evil looking robot that was
standing on the roof with them and the black robot dog standing next to it.

Stepping forwards, the robot picked up Evans with the same casual ease that Glory Girl had and held him off the roof.

“You can’t do this!” Evans shouted.

“Funny thing,” Glory Girl said with a smile, “the autobots are a bit of a legal grey area. No one’s sure if they would count as minions, tools, or Tinker creations. Either way, a group of Merchants were caught raiding a shelter yesterday. No one’s going to care if Cyclonus drops you. You’ll be just another dead body.”

The dog, cat, thing snarled and Cyclonus leaned forward, his red eyes glowing. “I would advise you to start talking.”

##

“Oil Slick! His name’s Oil Slick!”

Five feet below on the roof of an adjoining building, Amy watched Vicky and Cyclonus scare the daylights out of the Merchant dealer.

“He’s holed up near the train yard, he’s been gathering men and weapons for weeks!”

“Should we really be doing this?” she sub-vocalised.

[Probably not, but some people only respond to threats.] Windblade’s shoulders dropped in a silent sigh. She’d originally protested the plan, insisting they try a gentler method first.

“I don’t know! He keeps saying he’s got a plan. He thinks he can make the other gangs respect him!”

The first, and only, dealer they had tried that with had just laughed in Windblade’s face. Amy had tazed him for that, but the entire thing had been a wash. So now, they were trying again with a more forceful approach.

[Just remember.] Arcee said, amusement heavy in her voice as she watched the interrogation with interest even while she was on patrol on the other side of the city, [These are the people who shot you in the back.]
“Nowaitdon’t!”

Thinking of it like that, Amy didn’t feel so guilty when Cyclonus let go.

The dealer fell two feet, then the modified gravity disk they had stuck on his back kicked in again and he floated to a stop in front of her. Too shocked to move, he hung there, gently rotating in the gravity field until he was facing Amy.

She quickly schooled her features, trying not to laugh at the look of horror on his face and instead projecting the disdain she felt for the Merchant who had shot her.

“Anything to add?” she asked, putting two fingers to the man’s forehead.

“…n-no…” he squeaked.

Amy rolled her eyes, not bothering to hide her irritation. “Where can we find your boss?”

“It’s a warehouse near the trainyard. Westside, Blue roof…”

“Was everything you said the truth?” Sure, they were all wearing lie detectors, but using her powers to double check never hurt.

“..yes…”

“Good.” A quick change to his blood chemistry put the dealer sound asleep. He’d probably feel like crap when he woke up in a couple of hours, but Amy was finding it hard to care.

//A little humiliation can be a good thing, child.//

##

“We should have asked for better directions,” Amy muttered as Windblade put her down on another rooftop nearly two hours later.

The trainyard was in no better shape than the rest of the city. Large pools of water still covered the ground, along with ruined buildings, wrecked cars and other rubble, creating a maze that would have been impossible to navigate on foot.

Unlike the rest of the city, however, the trainyard wasn’t considered a priority. Clean up here probably wouldn’t happen for a long time, if they even bothered at all.

That made it an excellent place to hide, if you could pick your way through the maze of rubble and
sinkholes.

In the center of it all was a large building, three or four floors high with a long narrow box shape. It had once been the main office for the trainyard. Anything that came through here - people, freight staff, and so on - would have been based out of there. It was also the only place in the area that was still standing and had a blue roof.

“No argument from me.” Vicky landed next to her, putting down a box that transformed back into Ravage. “What part of this looks like a warehouse?”

“It looks like a trap,” Cyclonus rumbled. “No way for vehicles to approach, navigating the ruins on foot would be dangerous unless you already knew a safe route, and you could easily be seen by sentries.”

Windblade rolled her shoulders. “Good thing we don’t need roads.”

“Hm… If they’re smart, they’ll have people watching the sky.”

“Isn’t that why we brought this guy along?” Vicky said, bending down to scratch Ravage behind his ears.

Ravage turned to look at Vicky with an air of indifference. Amy suspected Vicky might have been annoyed with the attitude if she didn’t find it so funny.

“Should we send him in from here, or should I carry him closer?”

Shaking himself, Ravage stood up with a small growl of annoyance before jumping off the roof of the building. Amy watched as he slunk into the shadows, quickly vanishing from sight.

“How does he do that?” she asked. Ravage’s ability to go unseen was uncanny.

Windblade smiled. “Wheeljack said it’s his spark. It radiates a kind of ‘you don’t see me’ effect. It’s not perfect, but it works.”

“Bullshit!” Vicky spun to face Windblade, her ponytail wiping around as she turned. “You’re telling me he has a stranger power?”

“Not exactly, but close enough. Try to keep it quiet, though.”

Amy chuckled as Vicky opened and closed her mouth wordlessly. She loved her sister, she really did, but seeing her speechless would always be funny.

“He’s in,” Cyclonus said, his stern voice breaking the relaxed atmosphere.

A small window appeared on Amy’s visor, showing what Ravage was seeing.

The inside of the building was cleaner than she expected, with sandbags pressed up against doorways and scaffolding scattered around to reinforce the ceiling. Amy could even see discarded tools.

“Are they repairing the building?” she asked quietly, forgetting the Merchants couldn’t hear her.
“Possibly,” Cyclonus said, “or making fortifications.”

Vicky snorted. “Like some wood and nails could stop me.”

Ravage continued to move through the building’s upper floors, checking each one in turn. Most were empty, but some had been converted into store rooms. Small boxes were piled up in corners and some had medicine bottles balanced on top of them, while others had clothes hanging out over the top.

One of the rooms had been converted into a bedroom. It was, by comparison, lavishly decorated, with a large bed taking up the majority of the space. The windows were all boarded up, so lamps had been brought in to brighten the place up and a thick shag rug sat in the center of the room.

Against one wall was a large mirror and a men’s dresser. Needles and other things were scattered across it.

“Think we’ve found Oil Slick’s room? Oh my God, is that a glitter ball?” Vicky said in disgust.

Amy had been too distracted by the semi-nude body on the bed to notice, but a glance at the ceiling confirmed there was indeed a glitter ball. The woman was very still and Amy was almost sure she caught a glimpse of a needle sticking out of her arm.

“Ravage, is she breathing?”

Ravage moved around the room, stretching his neck up so Amy could see the steady rise and fall of the woman’s chest. Satisfied that the woman was in no immediate danger, they directed Ravage further into the building.

His progress slowed as he descended to the lower levels and the number of people increased, all of them wearing the same green armbands. Some were huddled in corners, smoking, snorting, or injecting some drug or another. Others were patrolling the building, improvised weapons in hand as they looked through gaps in boarded up windows.

Eventually, Ravage found a balcony that overlooked what had probably been the main office on the ground floor. If there had been any doubts about this place being the Merchant HQ, it was gone now.

The room had been cleared of everything and filled with row after row of tables. On each table sat anything and everything that could be used to prepare drugs. Stills, lamps, bunsen burners, hot plates, pots and pans, even a centrifuge that was likely looted from the bombed hospital.

There were dozens of Merchants working at the tables in their underwear. Each row acting like a production line, with each Merchant performing a different stage in preparation before passing the product on.

Around them were six fully clothed Merchants, holding guns.

“Um… Where are their clothes?” Windblade asked.

“It’s so they can’t steal any drugs,” Amy said. She’d never been involved in a drug raid, but she’d heard of the practice.
“Who’s that?” Vicky said suddenly as a man in hospital scrubs walked into the room. The guards barely reacted to his presence as he walked between the tables, stopping occasionally to give direction to the workers. He was wearing the same green scrubs the memorial hospital assigned to nurses.

He was adding something to a pan on a hot plate when a woman in dirty clothes came in at a run. The guards stopped her before she could get more than a few feet, but the commotion got his attention.

“What’s wrong?” He walked closer and the guards stepped back.

“I-it’s Nick! He’s not breathing right!” She sounded almost hysterical and was visibly shaking.

The nurse sighed and lead her out of the room. “Alright, let’s take a look.”

“Ravage, can you follow him?” Cyclonus said, his dour expression darkening.

Ravage made no sound, but began to move quickly through the building, staying just out of sight as they entered the other wing of the building. A large room that had once been a loading area had been converted into a makeshift hospital, with rows of beds spread out across the room.

Most of the beds were occupied by Merchants in various states of injury. Some had visible bloodstains and bandages, while a couple had been tied to their beds. A few just stared lifelessly at the ceiling.

Scattered around the room, healthier looking Merchants moved from bed to bed, tending to the wounded.

“Those poor people,” Windblade said quietly, her wings dropping.

“They’re just Merchants,” Vicky said quickly, but Amy could tell her heart wasn’t in it. She might have even agreed, the Merchants were trash after all. And yet…

“Windblade’s right, no one deserves this…” Not even Merchants.

In the room, the nurse was checking one of the Merchants, Amy assumed that he was the ‘Nick’ the woman had spoken about. His breath was coming in short, sporadic bursts, his chest jerking harshly each time. Eventually, the nurse pulled a syringe out of his pocket and injected the gasping man with it.

Gradually, the man’s breathing evened out and his eyes drifted shut.

“He’ll be alright,” the nurse said. “You should go up stairs and get some rest.”

The woman hesitated, looking between the door and Nick.

“It’s alright,” the nurse insisted. He took something from his pocket and gave it to the woman. “Give this to James. Tell him I said you can have something to help you sleep.”

Clutching whatever it was tightly to her chest, the woman all but ran from the room. Once she was gone, he pulled out his phone and dialed a number.
“It’s me. I’ve got another death… No. He’s breathing, but unresponsive. Whatever that batch was, it’s definitely no good… just send someone to pick him up… no, no one’s going to miss him. You got anything new you want me to test?… Fine, speak to you later.”

Hanging up, he waved one of the other Merchants over.

“We’ve got a pickup coming. Gather up anyone who won’t survive and move them to the doors. Try to keep them breathing, but don’t worry if you have to get rough.”

“We need to get in there!” someone said. It took Amy a moment to realise it was her.

Vicky smirked, crossing her arms under her chest. “I thought we were just here to find them?”

“Oh shut up!” Amy snapped, “We both know you never planned to just ‘look’.” Vicky’s grin just widened.

“We don’t have time for bickering,” Windblade said quickly, standing up to her full height. “I’ve already told the PRT and the police what’s happening, but it will take them time to get here. Those people need help now.”

“Victoria and I can handle the guards,” Cyclonus said, sharing a look with Vicky. “We’ll go in the main door and draw their attention. Windblade, you and Amy enter through the side and secure the patients. Amy, Ravage will assist and guard you should anything happen.”

“R-Right!” Amy felt a small thrill run down her spine as Windblade picked her up and they all rose into the air.

Cyclonus and Vicky hung back, hovering in the air and giving them time to get into position as Windblade circled around the building to approach from a blind spot and landed as quietly as she could next to the loading bay doors. Amy couldn't help but notice how clean and new they looked compared to the rest of the building.

“Ready?” Windblade asked as she crouched by the shutters.

“Yeah.” No. Regardless, Amy drew her baton, switching it to gun mode.

At the front of the building, there was a crash as Vicky punched through the doors, followed by Cyclonus.

Windblade stood, her glowing purple sword bursting into life. The cheap, flimsy steel of the shutters parted easily as she cut her way through and charged into the room. Amy followed close behind, gun held tightly and raised to fire.

The Merchants inside panicked. Those that had any sense dropped to the floor, hands in the air. Others ran out of the room, only to be stopped by a snarling Ravage.

One of the guards, the only one with a gun, took a shot at Windblade, but the bullet bounced harmlessly off her chassis. A blast from Amy sent him sprawling across the floor, where he lay groaning.

Amy could still hear fighting elsewhere in the building, but the ‘hospital’ was at least secure.
“Windblade, take this and watch the corridor!” Amy handed her gun to Windblade and turned her attention to the injured.

Most of the Merchants didn’t have the mass for proper healing, but she could ensure they were stable until they reached a hospital. The majority were fairly minor injuries that she saw on most gang members, such as bullet and stab wounds. Others were so severe that they wouldn’t survive the night without her help.

The worst ones were those like ‘Nick’. He was almost totally brain dead, with just enough autonomous activity left to keep him breathing and residue of a drug she’d never seen before in his system.

The sounds of fighting were dying off, and once Amy was sure none of the Merchants were in immediate danger, she started digging through the few cupboards and drawers that were in the room.

Most just had odd bits stuffed into them, but one of them had a used epipen sitting in it. Carefully picking it up, Amy turned it over in her hands. There were no brand markings or labels on the plastic casing, just a single sticker near the top with a small drawing of a flame on it.

*We’ve got everyone tied up down here!* Vicky chirped over the radio. *I might have hit one of them a little too hard, though. Ames, you think you can check him over?*

“I’m on my way.” Sighing, Amy put the epipen down and left the room. Windblade stayed behind to keep an eye on the patients while Ravage guided her through the building.

Amy found Vicky and Cyclonus in the ‘production’ room. The Merchants had been gathered up and sat against one of the walls, hands bound with zip-ties. Vicky was keeping an eye on them while Cyclonus was carefully turning off any heat sources in the the drug lab.

The man Vicky had hit was on the floor, and his arm bent at the wrong angle.

“In my defence, he tried to stab me in the eye!” Vicky said when Amy glared at her.

Shaking her head, Amy got to work fixing the man's arm, shoulder and ribs. To be fair, Vicky was getting better. She’d dealt with more than a dozen people today and only one of them needed healing.

There was a clatter from the other side of the room as Cyclonus suddenly reached under one of the tables and pulled out a small scrawny man by the scruff of his neck.

Not saying anything, he carried the man over to the wall. Vicky shared an amused look with Amy. She opened her mouth to speak when the man suddenly exploded in size.

Nearly tripling in height, the man was almost twice as tall as Cyclonus, a wall of flesh and muscle. Spinning around, he drove a meaty fist into the Autobot’s face, sending him flying through a wall. The building shook from the force of the impact and bits of plaster rained down from the ceiling.

“Amy, get down!” Vicky screamed, shooting through the air like a missile. She hit the man at the waist, doubling him over and lifting him off his feet.

With a grunt of effort, Vicky turned and threw the man out of the building, through the already broken doorway.
*Windblade! We've got a cape here!* Vicky shouted over the radio as she flew after him.

*I’m on my way! Amy, stay with the prisoners!*" 

Looking over her shoulder, Amy realised several of the Merchants were trying to stand up. She quickly pushed them back to the ground. “Don’t move!” she ordered, Ravage’s growling adding to the threat.

Rubble moved and a dented and scratched Cyclonus stepped back through the hole he’d made. Amy pointed in the direction Vicky had gone and Cyclonus ran past her, growling in rage.

##

Grabbing the giant man by his wrist, Victoria spun in the air, throwing him further from the office. The old building wouldn't survive many more hits.

The Merchant climbed to his feet, charging at Victoria with a wordless yell.

“Heads up!” Windblade shouted, dropping out of the sky, Amy’s blaster held in her hand. The Merchant ignored the blast, swinging a meaty fist that Victoria deftly avoided.

“Hold still!” he screamed, punching again and again. Victoria easily dodged his blows. The giant had power, but no real speed.

*Vic-!* Amy’s cut off shout made her stop. Victoria never got a chance to answer. The giant’s fist closed around her ankle and he launched her in the opposite direction.

Victoria crashed into, and through, a pile of discarded carriages that had been stacked on top of each other.

“Ow...” she muttered as the stack toppled down.

##

There was a snort of laughter from the man in nurse’s scrubs.

“You think this is funny?” Amy asked.

“A little.”

Somebody or something hit the side of the building, rattling the walls, but Amy couldn’t see anything collapsing.

“You don’t recognise me, do you?” he said.
“Should I?” She looked down at him. Average height and built with a fairly unremarkable face. If he hadn't been wearing hospital scrubs she wouldn’t be able to pick him out of a crowd.

“Ouch.” He chuckled. “Seriously? I spent hours escorting you around the hospital a few months ago.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “I meet a lot of people. -Now be quiet.” She turned and started checking the rest of the Merchants for injuries in an attempt to distract herself from the sounds of fighting outside.

“Oh please,” he snorted, “don’t act all high and mighty with me. I saw the look on your face that day. You don’t care about the people you heal any more than I do.”

“I said -”

“Always whining, always wanting you to make things better. They never care what you want. You’d be happier if they all just fucked off and left you alone.”

“And what?” Amy snapped. “We’re so much alike and I should just let you go? We are nothing alike.”

He laughed. “No, you're right. For one, I’m smart enough to get paid for dealing with assholes all day.”

Eyes narrowing, Amy spun on her heel and walked away. “Ravage, if he moves, bite him!”

She’d barely made it a few steps when the smell of burning plastic made her nose itch. She looked back to see the nurse smiling broadly at her. Something about it made the hairs on her neck stand up.

“Ravage!”

The nurse brought his hands around, a thick black substance covering his arms. It sprayed forward like a hose, clipping Ravage’s side and making the panther howl in pain as his legs collapsed on one side.

Amy stepped back as the nurse stood up, the substance quickly covering his body and dripping onto the floor.

//MOVE!//

Amy threw herself sideways, the spray of acid missing by inches. Rolling to the side, Amy scrambled to her feet and tried to run past him and out the door.

“Vic-!”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Oil Slick shouted, another spray of acid hitting the ceiling above the door and pouring down to the floor.
Yelping, Amy ducked behind one of the larger tables to avoid another spray as it coated the nearby hotplate and chemicals.

“Boss! Please, get us outta here!” one of the Merchants shouted.

Oil Slick looked at him, then sent another spray of acid at the wall the were lined up against. The acid ran down the wall and touched the Merchants, making them scream.

“What you going to do now, hero!” he called.

Without thinking, Amy stood up, grabbed a jar off the half-melted table and threw it. The movement drew Oil Slick’s attention and he turned in time to take the hit to the face, the chemicals spilling onto him. Amy stood in shock, amazed that she’d actually hit him.

There was a flash as the cloud of powder reacted, either to his acid or the air around him, and exploded. Oil Slick screamed, dropping to his knees and rubbing at his eyes.

Amy ran past him, pulling the captive Merchants away from the wall and snapping the zip ties.

“Get out of here, go, go!”

On a nearby table, the acid sat on a hot plate, smouldering as the temperature rose until finally, it ignited with a pop. Thick black smoke started to rise from the table, fire spreading quickly across the surface.

With the last of the Merchants gone, Amy tried to follow them, but Oil Slick had recovered. A jet of acid just missed her shoulder and she was forced to go in the other direction.

“You’re not leaving!” he shouted, sending another blast at her.

Behind him, the fire spread from table to table, following the trails of flammable acid left by the villainous parahuman. Open pans and bottles of chemicals started to smoke as the room temperature rose.

With no other option, Amy moved further into the building. Oil Slick followed slowly after her, smoke and fire following in his wake.

##

Punching through the thin metal side of a train carriage, Victoria pulled herself out of the twisted pile of metal.

Windblade was in the air, peppering the Merchant with shots from Amy's gun while Cyclonus kept his attention focused on him, dodging nimbly around the giant's fist. The man clearly wasn’t the brightest cape in the world, pounding relentlessly at the fast moving Autobot.

Reaching under the carriage, Victoria grabbed one of the axles and tore it free with the sound of
tearing metal. She knocked one of the wheels off, checked the balance and took off.

“Hey, big guy!”

The Merchant turned at her shout, just in time to take the full force of her swing to the face. He spun in the air, landing face first in the wet ground.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet, spitting blood, teeth and profanities as Victoria dropped the bent weapon.

“It’s not hard to knock him down,” Windblade shouted, dodging the half a train car the Merchant had just thrown at her. “It’s getting him to stay down that’s the trick!”

“I could hit him with something bigger!” Victoria shouted back.

“I’ve got a better idea, can you hold him still?” She switched Amy’s gun back to a stun baton.

Victoria pulled back, readying another charge as Cyclonus ducked under another wild swing, driving his fist into the back of the giant’s knee and making him stumble.

Seeing her chance, she charged forward at nearly full speed, driving her fists into the giant’s stomach and breaking his ribs. He folded over her, sliding across the floor until they collided with more debris where she held him in place.

He was still bent forward, struggling to catch his breath when Windblade landed on his back and slammed the baton into his shoulders. It discharged with a sound like a thunder clap and Victoria felt the current dance harmlessly across her shield.

Pulling back, she watched as he slowly tipped forward, hitting the ground like a felled tree. He groaned as his body started to shrink.

“Holy… what did you do!?”

“I overloaded the capacitors.” Windblade dropped the smoldering remains of the weapon. “Rhinonx will have to make a new one, I’m afraid.”

Victoria laughed. “It’s fine, I’m sure Amy wont - Amy!”

Spinning around, Victoria realised with horror that they had lost sight of the building. Flying up over the maze of debris, she saw the roaring flames as they licked at the walls and black smoke rising into the sky.

“Oh my God, AMY!”

Amy tried to simultaneously gasp for breath and not make a noise. Sweat was pouring off her body from the heat and exertion, and smoke was rolling along the ceiling.
“Do you know how hard this was?!” Oil Slick shouted, stalking down the corridor. “Taking over the Merchants, making them something worthwhile!”

Amy pressed her back against the wall in an empty office, trying desperately to go unseen. The building was a confusing mess of corridors and Oil Slick had chased her all the way to somewhere on the second floor. If she had to guess, it was on the wing furthest from the impromptu hospital the Merchants had set up.

“Make this easy on yourself! When Colossus is done smearing your friends across the pavement, you’re next!” The wall next to her started to bubble as Oil Slick tried to melt it and her together.

“Fuck!” Pushing herself away from the wall, she ran through the connecting office and up another flight of stairs, barging shoulder-first through another door.

Amy stopped in her tracks at the mess of wood and brick she found blocking the way. Part of the floor above had collapsed down sometime in the past and the Merchants hadn’t bothered to clear the way.

She could hear Oil Slick coming up the stairs, his breath sounding heavy in the smoky air. Looking around, she pulled a piece of tarp away from the wall, revealing an opening that lead to some scaffolding.

With no other way out, Amy scrambled through the hole and up the scaffolding, her prosthetic legs flailing as she tried to climb a ladder that had been bolted to it. Gritting her teeth, she thrust her leg down, forcing it to stay on the ladder.

Amy gasped as the cold evening air whipped at her face. Once she reached the rooftop, she pulled herself away from the ladder and stood. She moved towards the far edge, away from the smoke as Oil Slick crawled up after her.

He emerged from the smoke like a monster in a movie, stalking across the roof towards her.

“What are you going to do now, hero?” The thick smoke continued to rise and the roof groaned under his feet as his acid ate away at it. Amy could hear sirens in the distance.

The roof groaned and shifted, the damaged timber below them succumbing to the flames. Amy kneeled down in an effort to keep her balance. The fear that had kept her going was quickly giving way to anger at the unfairness of it all.

In her pocket, the Matrix glowed.

“Improvise!” Amy screamed, pulling a tile loose and throwing it at Oil Slick. Her aim was wide, but he raised his arms on instinct.

“What?” Oil Slick jerked in surprise.

Spinning on her heel, Amy dove from the roof.

On her back, her flightpack whirred into life, the wings snapping out and a small booster firing. Amy spun sideways in the air to dodge the acid spray, then splayed her wings to slow her fall. Behind her, she heard Oil Slick bellowing in rage as the roof collapsed under him.
Amy hit the ground hard, mud and water splattering her costume as she rolled to a stop. She’d barely got herself breathlessly to her knees when Vicky was there, pulling her into a hug.

“Amy! Oh my God, are you okay?!”

“Vicky, what?” Amy shook her head in an effort to clear it. “Oh God, the Merchants! They’re still inside!”

“It’s alright,” she said. She was trying to sound confident, but her face was pale and Amy could feel her arms trembling. “Windblade and Cyclonus are getting them out.”

Amy nodded. “Good.”

“Are you sure you're okay?” Vicky asked, pulling back and checking Amy for any visible wounds.

“N-no.” Amy looked up at the burning building. “But I will be.”

And for the first time in a long while, Amy realised she meant it.

##

Nearly an hour later, Oil Slick pulled himself out of the storm drain with a grunt. He’d barely survived the fall through the building, and his only way out had been to melt down into the storm drains.

This wasn’t over, not by a long shot. He was going to make that little bitch pay. He just needed some painkillers, then find Colossus, assuming he wasn’t in prison. After that, the two of them could round up some Merchants and start -

The blast hit him square in the back, knocking him into a wall. His head spun, spots flashing across his eyes and his headache tripled in intensity.

“Allright,” he shouted, spinning around to face his attacker, “who wants... to... die?” His voice trailed off as he took in the sight before him.

Panacea, filthy but with a gun held firmly in her hands, stood behind him. Glory Girl floated in the air next to her. Behind them stood four Autobots, and between them, a golden lion-like robot prowled. Glowing force fields protected them all.

“I’d stay down if I were you,” Glory Girl said, cracking her knuckles.

With a groan, Oil Slick dropped to his knees, the acid on his body evaporating.

“Fuck, me.”
"Yes, thank you. Let me know if anything changes," Dragon finished, cutting off the radio.

"Problem?" Narwhal asked, eyebrow raised in question.

"Hmm? Oh! No, sorry. Rhinox was just giving me an update on everything happening back... back home. Panacea thinks Matrix will be waking up soon." After all the years she'd lived in Canada, it felt strange to consider anywhere else home, but there really was no other word for the base in Brockton Bay.

Her family was there, after all.

Narwhal nodded. "That's good. Hopefully, we can have this all wrapped up before that happens." Leaning back in her seat, she frowned, then shifted her weight from one side to the other. "Did you do something to these seats? I don't remember your last shuttle being this... soft."

Dragon laughed. "I thought the 'dragon-flight' could use some creature comforts."

In her earlier days, Dragon had focused more on function than form. Most of the craft she used to move the Guild around also doubled as cargo ships, so they tended to be a bit spartan. After her upgrade, she found herself putting more effort into considering comfort, especially now that the Guild's roster was being bolstered by unpowered troopers.

That had been Narwhal's idea.

After Narwhal left the PRT, the Guild had taken a more proactive stance against major threats. Part of that included recruiting people to back them up on missions, and a support staff to carry out investigations.

Currently, the transport Dragon and Narwhal were riding in was one of two making their way to El Paso, on the border between Texas and New Mexico. Each ship carried a squad of Guild troopers, jokingly called Dragon's Teeth by some.

They were equipped with the latest technology from Dragon's Lair R&D: personal shields, body suits under their armour, weapons derived from Matrix's Null-Ray tech, and anything else Dragon could mass produce.

Today was going to be their first official action with the Guild since Narwhal had recruited them.

"Are we sure about this information?" Narwhal asked, twisting in her seat to look at a monitor showing the outside of the farm. The movement drew stares from a few of the troopers.

Ignoring them, Dragon hummed to herself. She could understand Narwhal's concern. If this place was a Fallen safehouse, it was extremely well hidden, showing a level of sophistication she wouldn't have expected from them.

The original owners had died and, with no immediate family, the land had fallen to squatters for years.
Then the Fallen had moved in.

They had been subtle about it. They had bought the land legally and the squatters had been removed without violence. After that, there were no outward signs of the Fallen, no people standing outside preaching about the glory of the Endbringers. No markings or tags, no rise in missing people, just a large number of people living quiet lives away from the hustle of a city.

Dragon had checked thoroughly through the landowner's records and found nothing too suspicious. Her rebuilt - and improved - Manhunter VI had been crawling through the landowners banking history, finding only a few tangential links to the Fallen.

"The information came from an anonymous source. I spoke to the local PD, but beyond a high number of visitors, nothing really seemed out of place. They did mention some of the people on the farm might have gang tattoos possibly matching those of the Fallen but..." Dragon trailed off.

"That's not much to go on."

"No, but with the banking data, it was enough for me to send in a couple of drones. Outside surveillance only, but I did manage to catch this."

A flat holographic image appeared in the middle of the craft. It was a picture of a short man with broad shoulders and well defined muscles, giving him a stocky build. His head was bald, either genetic or shaven she couldn't tell, with a large tattoo of an eye covering much of his forehead.

There was only one Fallen cape who matched the man's appearance: Belial.

One of the nearby troopers whistled.

Whatever else they were, the Fallen were a cult at heart and, like all cults, information on their inner workings was hard to find. Attempts had been made in the past to infiltrate them, but the upper levels were extremely insular. Rarely, if ever, did they allow someone new into their inner circle.

Popular rumor was that they preferred inbreeding over allowing outsiders to join the fold.

At best, the Guild knew the Fallen consisted of three families, each championing a different Endbringer. The head of each family was always a cape, and Belial was believed to lead the 'Behemoth' congregation. He was often seen in the company of the pyrokinetic Xaphan.

"You think they're sheltering Valefor?" a trooper asked.

"No," Dragon shook her head, "I'd say Valefor is long gone, if he ever was here to begin with."

"I agree -" Whatever Narwhal was going to say was cut off by the beeping of her phone. Sharing a worried look with Dragon, Narwhal answered the call.

"Narwhal… yes, that's correct… I don't… If your people meet us we can coordinate… I really don't recommend - no, you can't! They what? Tell them to - … Hello?"

Dragon blinked as Narwhal swore, thumping the hull next to her.

"What's wrong?"

Holding a hand up, Narwhal tapped her radio.

"Attention everyone, I've just been told that Department 19 has dispatched forces to the Fallen's location. They are already en route and are expected to arrive before us."
While Narwhal spoke, Dragon patched herself into the PRT systems. From what she found, it wasn't too hard to guess what had happened.

The Guild had contacted the local PRT office, which would have been Department 19, also known as Protectorate El Paso. It was standard policy to warn the PRT when they moved against a major threat after all. Of course, to avoid information leaks, the warnings typically came only a short time before they arrived. Barely an hour after the message, Director Westfield had dispatched two squads and a number of capes.

Dragon mentally swore. What was the man thinking? His branch was one of the larger ones, but they lacked heavy hitters. On the few occasions that they did recruit more powerful capes, they tended to be transferred to other locations almost immediately. She doubted they really had anything that could fight one, possibly two of the Fallen's leaders.

Quickly pulling up his file, she skimmed through the data. Director Westfield was young, promoted only two years ago, with a history of taking risks. So far, those risks had paid off with a number of high profile arrests under his name before his promotion.

Young, arrogant and a risk taker... It probably didn't help that the PRT had been facing strong criticism once news of the Fallen's attack went public.

Flagging the information for a full review later, she disconnecting from the system and returned her attention to Narwhal.

"... I know some of you were expecting time to set up, but it looks like we'll be dropping into a combat zone. Remember your training and expect trouble!"

##

On the way in, Camouflage had been surprised by just how normal the farm had appeared in the aerial photos they'd managed to secure. Two large buildings with a two story barn behind it sat on a vast plot of land. Most of the fields were empty, holding nothing but dry grass, and there had been a few horses grazing in one the fields as the PRT transport passed.

It was almost idyllic.

Her heart moved to her throat when, halfway up the mile long driveway, the driver of the transport had turned the sirens on and accelerated hard. The PRT vans surrounding them did the same thing.

She gripped her seatbelt. This was it, no turning back now. The director had said the the Fallen were here. His orders were to bring them down hard, even if that included killing them.

Opposite her, Firebolt smirked in excitement while next to him, Replay stared calmly ahead.

Before she could say anything, there was a tremendous crash as something tore through the side of the van and into one of the PRT officers. Camouflage screamed as the man's torso exploded, covering them all in blood.

The driver swore, swerving hard to the side as another explosion went off in the distance. Camouflage screwed her eyes shut and tried to block out the sounds of bullets hitting the armoured van as it skidded sideways.

"Out!" someone shouted. "Now! Move, move, move!"

The officer nearest to her pulled her belt off and dragged her to her feet while Replay and Firebolt
dove out the back door.

The moment they were outside, the officer threw them both to the ground. Camouflage went still, allowing her power to activate.

So long as she didn't move, her power let her blend in with the surroundings. In this case, she likely looked like a small bush or maybe a rock.

Around her, everything had gone to shit.

The Fallen must have known they were coming. Dozens of men and women were at the farmhouse, shooting from the windows, the rooftops, behind makeshift barricades on the porch.

On top of the barn, she could see a large rifle that looked longer than she was tall. As she watched, it fired with the sound of thunder. The front end of the final transport crumpled as the massive bullet tore through the engine.

Throwing a hand out, Firebolt summoned a glowing ball and sent it towards the Fallen. It flew slowly through the air, burning anyone it touched.

From behind one of the vans, Replay created clone after clone, sending them running towards the Fallen as a distraction. The short lived clones would vanish after a few seconds, then reappear behind the van to try again.

Further ahead, the first of the vans was already in flames, the PRT officers it had been carrying taking cover behind the burning remains or scattered across the clearing. One or two were lying face-down on the ground.

That rifle on the barn boomed again and one of the officers went down in a spray of blood.

*Camouflage! Can you get on that roof?* Replay shouted over the radio. *We need to take out that gun!*

"I'll try!"

Cursing to herself, she gently stood up. Once her feet were under her, she sprinted sideways away from the farm. Something clipped her leg and she dove to the ground, landing in a small vegetable patch.

She looked at her leg as her power took hold. There was a shallow graze across her right calf that burned like hell, but it didn't look too serious.

*Camouflage, stay down. I'll get it!*

Firebolt's sphere drifted slowly up into the sky, passing the rifleman on the roof. He disappeared in a flash, turning into a glowing bolt of light that shot across the clearing, punching through the front of the rifle and melting it from the heat he was giving off. When he reached his sphere, he re-appeared in another flash.

The rifleman dropped his weapon and jumped to his feet, but Firebolt was already on him. Ramming his shoulder into the man's chest, the Protectoate cape sent him tumbling off the roof.

With the rifle gone, the PRT broke cover, using heavy metal shields to protect themselves as they pushed towards the farmhouse.
"Hah! How do you like that you -" Firebolt's words were cut off as a jet of blue-white flame burst through the barn roof. He screamed as the fire engulfed the right side of his body.

Camouflage could only watch in horror as he fell to the ground below and a man made of rock broke through the barn doors.

He was tall, nearly reaching ten feet. His body looked like it was made of rock, the same colour as the ground beneath his feet, and pressed together into the rough shape of Behemoth. Stepping forwards, he ignored the bullets whizzing through the air and stopped next to Firebolt. Lifting a large foot, he stomped on her teammate's head with a sickening crunch.

Behind him, another man stepped out of the barn. He was small, no taller than Camouflage, but he looked like a mass of lava and flame in a vaguely human shape.

The Fallen were cheering now. Whoever these capes were, they were clearly important.

The rock-man charged forwards, bullet wounds healing as soon as they happened, his attention focused on Replay. Knocking clones aside, he lashed out, forcing Replay to dive away to avoid being crushed.

The fire-man ambled forward more slowly, bullets passing harmlessly through his body. A grenade exploded above him, showering him in rapidly expanding foam, but his body flashed white hot and the foam vaporized.

Raising his arms, jets of fire shot towards the PRT officers. Their uniforms were fire retardant, but at those temperatures it didn't matter. Men fell, screaming as they burned.

Replay mistimed a dodge and the rock-man's fist closed around his leg. Camouflage didn't hear the bone break, but she heard Replay's scream as he was picked up and slammed into the ground over and over.

*Attention PRT forces, pull back! We'll handle this!*

A shadow passed over her and Camouflage looked up to see men falling from the sky. Ahead of them, a winged shape roared as it dove towards the ground.

###

Dragon soared through the air, Narwhal riding on her back.

Just behind them, Guild troopers dropped from the sky. Anti-gravity systems in their uniforms slowed their falls just enough to ensure safe landing, but let them drop fast enough to be hard to hit.

She focused her attention on Belial, who was too busy toying with Replay to notice her approach. Reaching forward with her claws, she roared.

Dragon hit him with the force of a speeding truck, her claws digging into the rock on his back and her jaws closing around his neck. Thrashing her head to the side, she tore his head from his body and shattered anything her claws could reach.

###

Narwhal jumped off Dragon's back, scooping up Replay and shielding them both from a jet of white hot flame from Xaphan.
Guild troopers were hitting the ground now, shields shining as they deflected bullet after bullet. They quickly returned fire, Null-Rays on high power blasting through barricades and crippling the men behind them.

Those with regular weapons held up hardlight shields, using them to cover the fallen PRT forces.

Narwhal blocked another blast from Xaphan. She could feel the heat, even through her shields. Two glowing rectangles appeared in the air beside her, and a flick of her hand sent them flying through the air, severing Xaphan's arms.

With a laugh and a burst of fire, his arms regrew as he sent a wave of fire in all directions.

Creating more shields, Narwhal surrounded Xaphan. With a clench of her fist, they moved, trapping him in a box barely larger than he was.

"You think this can hold me!" he screamed, shooting jet after jet of blue-white flame, but Narwhal simply layered more shields on top of the first.

Belial was already reforming, rising up out of the ground like the Endbringer he aspired to copy. With a roar, he charged forwards.

Tutting, Dragon rolled her eyes and Transformed. Belial was almost as tall as her, but much more bulky. A lance unfolded from her back and she intercepted his clumsy charge by driving it through his chest.

Laughing, Belial stepped sideways, pulling the lance from his body in a spray of dirt.

Still shouting in rage, Xaphan continued his attacks against the box Narwhal had trapped him in, but he was started to slow, the glow of his fire dulling as the box filled with smoke.

"What.. what have you done!" His voice sounded weak and he staggered like he was drunk, his fire fading. As his body returned to normal and he fell to his knees, Narwhal spun the box over with a twist of her arm and slammed it into the ground several times for good measure.

Dragon growled as another shattered limb reformed. Belial and Xaphan weren't particularly versatile, but their ability to regenerate and lack of vital organs meant they were near impossible to permanently hurt and containment foam was useless.

As she dodged another wild swing, it was also clear that neither of them had any actual training and instead just relied on their powers to win their fights.

Stepping to the side, she lashed out at his legs with her tail, sending him to the ground as the limb shattered. As he went past, she slapped a small silver disk onto his back. Dodging his next punch, she grabbed him by the arm and pulled, lifting him off his feet and swinging him overhead, holding him in the air as the disk activated.

Stepping back quickly, she left him hanging in the air.

Belial bellowed in rage, thrashing his legs around, causing him to rotate gently in the zero gravity field. More importantly, his broken arms weren't regrowing.
Narwhal walked over, Xaphan out cold in a glowing box. Despite her calm expression, her voice was hard.

"We need to get the injured to a hospital, then you and I will be having a long discussion with Director Westfield."

Looking around, Dragon made sure to save all the images she could. Guild troopers were split between rounding up the remaining Fallen members or giving what aid they could to the PRT officers.

Mentally, she sent a command to the circling Dragon-craft to land so they could load up the injured. Whatever else happened, she was going to ruin Westfield for this.

###

"Never forget, when darkness falls, you are not alone. We will be with you."

/Until the day... when all are one./

"...tay... up... ylor"

Who?

I tried to bury my head in my pillow, but whoever was talking gave my shoulder a gentle shake. Nuuu let me sleep!

"Come on, Taylor, you need to open your eyes." Their voice was soft, but I couldn't place where I'd heard it before.

"Maybe we should..." Other voices drifted in and out of my hearing but I couldn't make out what they were saying. Why do I need to wake up? It's comfy here.

I could feel something nearby. Warm and caring, shining like small stars. Sparks. They were all around me.

Things were coming back to me. The hospital, the fight, Leviathan. I couldn't lay here, I needed to get up. My hands twitched and I tried to force my eyes open. My body felt like lead, like I hadn't moved in years; everything was slow to respond.

Finally, after an age, my eyes cracked open. They stung in the bright light of the room, but I could make out Ratchet and Amy looking down at me. There were tears in her eyes.

"Wha -" A coughing fit interrupted me and Ratchet quickly had a glass of water in front of me with a straw.

"Easy, take small sips," he said gently.

Leaning forward, I did as I was told. My throat relaxing as the cool water worked its way down. My head felt fuzzy, like I'd had too much sleep, and my body felt stiff, but beyond that, I felt fine, so I took a moment and tried to take stock of where I was and what was going on.

I was in the base, that much was clear. My Autobots were packed into the room and I could see dad hovering behind Ratchet, looking about ready to push the Autobot out of his way.

"What happened?" I managed to say. The last thing I remembered was climbing into a spare dragon suit. *Leviathan was attacking a shelter?* After that, nothing.
"What happened!? What happened was you trying to fight Leviathan by yourself!" Amy snapped, smiling despite her harsh tone.

"Oh… Did I win?"

##

Eyes closed, Valefor let the sun wash over him. The streets below were almost empty, only a few desperate people moving through the rubble. From here, if he cared to look, he could see the home of the toys, of the tin men who dared challenge the Endbringers.

The plan had been simple. Disrupt those trying to stop the Endbringers and leave them to their fate. One attack now, another at the next, and eventually fear and paranoia would put an end to their desperate attempts to stop the inevitable.

It had almost worked, it had almost been perfect. With Raum, it had been easy gathering those that wouldn't be missed. It didn't matter what language they spoke, his power would control them all the same.

Then one of those tinker-made toys had emerged from the portal and put everything at risk.

Opening his eyes, he glared at 'Autobot City', as some called it. Even through the grimy windows, he could see the faint shimmer of a forcefield in the air around the base. Occasionally, the shield dropped briefly to allow the toys and other fools access, but the intervals were far too short to be of use.

During their first assault, Raum had opened a portal right inside the courtyard. They'd tried again the very next day, but to no avail. Whatever that tinker had done, they could no longer open a portal inside the forcefield.

Whatever was blocking Raum's power was also protecting the PRT offices downtown, New York, Boston, and the Birdcage.

The old wooden floors behind him creaked and Valefor looked over his shoulder to see the armoured bulk of Eligos.

"The PRT has Belial and Xaphan."

Valefor smiled. "I'm sorry to hear that. Do please be sure to let the McVeays know we'll be only too happy to return all the help they gave us."

Eligos shifted awkwardly, prompting Valefor to sigh and remind himself who he was talking to. Eligos had come to him from a trade with the McVeays after all.

"Don't worry. The McVeays will be fine. Mama will make sure they survive. We just needed to trim some of the fat."

Like that fool Belial who had refused to aid their mission.

"Have you found any more recruits?" he asked, looking to distract the other man.

"Yeah. It wasn't easy, but once we started offering food to anyone who came and listened, things went much faster."

Valefor nodded. They had to be careful right now. The PRT and other heros were out in force, with
armed patrols making regular contact with the refuge shelters. It was the same after every endbringer fight, the hero's would parade around, trying to convince themselves that they had achieved something and coming down hard on anyone who caused trouble.

Of course, there was no way they could sustain it. Sooner or later, the forces on loan or the random heroes that were helping out would need to leave. When that happened, he could really go to work. *There's a shelter not far from here. Likely hoping the Autobots will protect them.* He could start there, taking the desperate and showing them the truth.

"Go keep an eye on them," Valefor instructed. "I'll be down shortly."

Once Eligos was out of sight, Valefor moved to a small small room off to the side, passing Raum as he went. The dark skinned man was meditating in the corner, his bullroarer spread out on the floor in front of him.

In the next room, a small personal shrine had been created out of some boxes covered in cloth. Pictures decorated the altar, blurry photos of the lady in all her glory, children's drawings and professional renditions. Candles and feathers covered almost every flat surface.

Reaching the altar, Valefor knelt and removed one of the feathers from his head. He had dozens of them woven through his hair, but this one was different. It was special.

He'd found it last year, just before he met Raum.

Valefor had never believed in the Endbringers, not really. They might have been gods, aliens, parasites. He didn't know and he didn't care. All that mattered, all he cared about, was having as much fun as possible.

Perhaps that's why Mama had sent him away? It had been her idea for him to travel to Madison, to see the quarantine zone for himself. He'd done as she'd asked and got as close as he could, before giving up and traveling to Milwaukee for some fun.

It was on the shores of Lake Michigan that he'd found it.

It was heavier than it looked, and when the light hit it, it shone like glass, but it was strong enough to cut through flesh. He'd known what it was as soon as he'd seen it, and from the very first moment he touched it, he heard her voice.

That was when he'd finally realised the truth. The Endbringers were gods, and it was his duty to carry out their will.

Holding the feather in his fingers, he pressed it to his forehead and bowed in supplication as her song filled his mind.

\*\*Destroy Brockton Bay!*\*

Chapter End Notes

AN: so, while writing this chapter I went back to worm and looked up Valefor. I had intended to make sure I got his personality right, only to find out he has like 10 lines
total and gets flattened by Imp very quickly.

As such, I had to create a personality for him.

It also made me realise something else that I need to make clear. This fic WILL NOT be Ward compliant. So if something crops up in Ward that contradicts what's happening in MTMTE, it will be ignored.

Also, for the sake of others, please try to avoid discussing Ward or posting Ward spoilers in this thread.
"Okay, now follow the light," Ratchet said, shining a small flashlight in my eyes.

"Is this really necessary? It's been three *days*. I'm *fine*! Even Amy thinks so!"

Ratchet made a 'hurump' sound. "You've been in a coma for two weeks. *I'll* decide when you're *fine*." 

He looked over his shoulder at Amy who raised an eyebrow in amusement. "No offence."

"None taken."

I tried not to glare at them both. After I'd first woken up, I'd drifted back to sleep for the rest of the day. After that, it had taken me another day to really catch up on everything that had happened. The city was in ruins, power was out, only a few places had water, thousands of people were homeless and Windblade was now taller than me.

None of it made any sense and all I wanted to do was hole up in my workshop and get to work.

The light clicked off. "Okay, thanks to Amy's care, you're mostly fine. You're still showing signs of elevated stress and you need to eat a little more, but otherwise, you're cleared for light duty. That means tinkering *only*," Ratchet said, a finger pointed threateningly.

Rolling my eyes, I followed a giggling Amy out of the room.

"Not so funny when you're on the receiving end, is it?" she said, bouncing a little.

As we walked onto the main floor, I closed my eyes and let the familiarity wash over me. The smells of oil, grease, and energon greeted me, the sound of machinery whirring away, of the waves crashing down, the sensation of cold slowly seeping through my body -

I opened my eyes with a start and shivered, rubbing my arms to drive back the chill.

I could handle the flashbacks, since they didn't happen often, but that feeling of cold was always there, just on the edges. More than that, I felt tired, disconnected, like I was a step behind everyone else. I was sure if I mentioned it, Amy or Ratchet would say it was all in my head.

*I'll have to see if Rung is free later.*

"Hey, you okay?" Amy said gently.

"Yeah… though I could kill for a cup of tea."

Her eyes shone with amusement. "Sorry, no tea, coffee, or soda. Doctor's orders."

She had barely left my side since I woke, following me almost everywhere. It was touching, though I had a feeling it would soon get annoying. Dad had been just as bad, hovering over me all day yesterday. He'd probably still be here today if I hadn't all but forced him to go to work. I could also feel one of my Autobots hidden nearby at all times.
I know they meant well, they all did, but right now I really needed some time to myself to just think. Maybe I should build something; that always helps me relax. Actually...

I turned to Amy. "So… how do you feel about helping me with an experiment?"

##

Two hours later, I was alone in my workshop staring at Wheeljack's spark in my hands. Amy had left with Vicky to attend a 'team meeting' that they couldn't miss. I'd have gone with them, but my armour was beyond repair.

It'd take Teletraan days to build a new set.

I huffed in frustration and Wheeljack's spark pulsed in sympathy. He wasn't aware of what was going on, not really. It was more likely his spark was just responding to my emotions.

Regardless, I was glad he was okay. He'd stabilised just before I woke up. Ratchet called it a subconscious use of my power. The problem was that he was still too weak to risk putting him in a new frame.

That's what the experiment had been meant to determine. I held the spark, and Amy put her hand on top of it while wearing the Matrix.

It had taken a few minutes of careful concentration, but Amy managed to empower Wheeljack like she did Windblade. Now all I had to do was scale his body up to match and carefully put his spark into its new casing.

As we'd worked, Amy spoke about some of the things she'd done. Like jumping off a roof! And I couldn't help but notice that she'd changed. She was… different than I remembered. She seemed happier somehow, her eyes were brighter and her shoulders weren't hunched over.

I wasn't sure what had brought about this change, but it seemed like a good thing.

Meanwhile, Vicky is being quiet...

"You okay, boss?"

I looked down to see Rattrap crawl out from underneath a desk.

"Yeah, I'm okay… I just… I don't know, I feel like I'm still half asleep… maybe I'm just a little overwhelmed…” Sighing, I sat back in my chair and put a hand out for him to climb up.

"What about you? Lisa still asleep?"

"Yeah… lousy, stinking Fallen. When you find them, I wanna be there. No one messes with my friends but me!"

With a huff, Rattrap sprawled across my lap, saying nothing as I gently stroked him. The fake fur that covered his body was surprisingly soft and fuzzy.

The Fallen… That was something else I needed to deal with. My memories of the Leviathan fight were still spotty, but I could still remember the people Valefor had sent at us, mastered victims who died by the dozens.

How many of them did I kill?
It was odd. I could remember being mobbed, but I couldn't remember their faces. The memory was just an indistinct blur.

I felt... well, I regret having to kill them, but I didn't feel as guilty as I should have.

*One more thing to mention to Rung, I suppose.*

In an effort to distract myself, I pulled up the designs for Amy's gear. I was glad the flight pack had been so useful, but she really needed some more options, especially if she planned to fight another cape anytime soon.

First things first, I designed a bracer on her left arm with a hardlight shield, and gave it the ability to change shape to suit Amy's needs. Next up was her gun. The taser function was useful, but it required her to be up close to work. Messing with the design slightly, I added a hardlight projector to the baton mode so that it could extend a hardlight flail from the tip.

It didn't have much mass, so the impact wouldn't really hurt, but it could carry a current. *She'll need some practice, but Vicky could always play target.*

Eventually, I sent the updated design to the fabricator and moved on to my own armour. As I worked, it got steadily harder to ignore the elephant in the room.

The 'elephant' was a large, misshapen mess hidden under a tarp. Perceptor had very carefully avoided talking about it earlier. When pressed, he told me that it was best if I ignored it for now. But he wasn't here and the sight of it was really starting to bug me.

I closed my terminal and walked over to the tarp. I had an idea about what it was, but the shape was far too large for me to be sure. Cutting through the string, I gripped the plastic sheet tightly and pulled.

*Oh God!* Staggering back, my legs gave out under me and I fell on my ass.

It was my armour, or what was left of it, and it was fused with one of Dragon's suits. The wings and dragon theme gave that away, but it looked like it had been pushed through a blender. The helmet was open, the faceplate was missing, most of the chest had been carved open, the edges of the tears were jagged and sharp. Someone - likely Perceptor - had clearly tried to clean the armour, but I could still see the blood stains.

"Taylor? Taylor!?"

The room started to spin as memories of the water crushing down on me filled my mind. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe*chest was on fire!*LET ME OUT!

Metal arms wrapped around me, pulling me close to a large purple chest. One clawed hand gently turning my head so I couldn't see the ruined armour.

"Shh, you're safe, nothing can hurt you now." Cyclonus spoke quietly, his deep voice resonating in his chest. Slowly, the images faded, leaving only the chill of the water.

"I..." I quickly wiped away the tears that were running down my face. "I'm okay... it was just... I remember everything."

Transforming the Dragon suit, fighting Leviathan, the water echo. It had all come back to me at once.
Slowly, I turned to look at my armour.

"Help me up… I, I want to see the suit's telemetry… "

"I do not think -"

"Cyclonus, please. I need to see it."

He still didn't look convinced, but he helped me to my feet anyway. I moved to a spare seat and pulled up a terminal so I could examine a hologram of the armour. Every detail was mapped out, including how I'd fused both suits and miniaturised some of the weapons. Part of me was already thinking over how to replicate it, like through an extra 'suit' that could latch onto and power up my armour when needed.

The rest of me was more concerned with the other readouts.

"How am I still alive?"

"That isn't important," Cyclonus said. "You survived, that's all that matters."

He was right, of course, but it still bothered me.

Looking through the suit's 'black box', I found that most of the video had been lost, with only a few bits recoverable.

I knew I should just leave it. I should walk away and deal with this mess when I was in a better state of mind. But then I'd just keep putting it off. Huffing at myself, I uploaded the video and hit play.

Another hologram appeared, this one showing the video feed. From the time stamp, it was after the fight and the footage was hard to make out, rife with visual glitches. It looked like I was laying on the floor and a dark shape was approaching me. Eventually, it kneeled down next to my armour.

"Not so tough now, are you, bitch?" a familiar voice said.

Sophia!?

##

Sophia hit the ground with a grunt. Taking aim with her crossbow, she entered her shadow state for just long enough to fire.

The smoky black bolt buried itself in Leviathan's leg, but the monster didn't even seem to notice as its claws tore into the pavement.

It was luck and stupid timing that let her be on this roof just as Leviathan arrived, and now she'd give anything to be somewhere else.

There was a shelter under the Endbringer filled with thousands of people, all of them helpless.

Survival of the fittest, fight or die. Those words sounded so hollow now. How did anyone fight something that could shrug off hits from the most powerful capes in the world?

Sophia wasn't stupid, she knew the other Wards had called her a bitch. Fuck, she'd be the first to admit she wore the title proudly. She'd never really cared about people, but this was different. No one deserved to die like this. Even she couldn't pretend that this was what those weaklings deserved.
Shifting again, she fired another bolt, this one at the monster's head. It was no more effective than the first.

As she fought to reload her crossbow, the sounds of jets filled the air and she dropped out of the sky, hitting the ground with a crash and skidding to a stop behind the Endbringer.

"Leviathan!" Her voice echoed off the buildings, making Sophia's breath catch. In that moment, Hebert seemed as implacable as the Endbringer.

"This. Ends. NOW!"

Bolts of energy slammed into Leviathan and he jerked sideways as Hebert took to the sky.

She fought like a woman possessed, ducking and weaving through Leviathan's attacks while blasting chunks out of his hide.

Sophia could only stare as Leviathan fell, one of his legs collapsing under him. This was Hebert? The same useless bitch that had let them walk all over her? How?!

The cannon on Hebert's shoulder roared with purple fire, the light blinding Sophia.

When the glare died out, Leviathan had formed a new leg out of water, claws shielding his head as he pushed forward towards Hebert. His flesh peeled away under the relentless onslaught, and a blast from the fusion cannon shattered his clawed hand like glass. The affected skin turned black as blood flowed from the open wound.

"I am going to end you or die trying!"

Hebert glowed like a sun, the weapons on her armour firing non-stop, but before Leviathan could fall, he moved.

Claws like swords carved through Hebert, cutting her in half and tearing the cannon from her shoulder. Before she could hit the ground, Leviathan's tail slammed into her, throwing her down the street.

[Scion sighted, A-1]

Rolling to a stop, she lifted her remaining gun, firing again and again until Leviathan's echo slammed into her, the water picking her up and carrying her down the street.

[Matrix down, I-24]

Other capes were arriving now, trying to buy time for Scion's arrival. Not sure what else to do and unable to hurt Leviathan, Sophia left them to the fight and headed down the road.

##

Three blocks, that's how far the water echo had carried Matrix. The trail of destruction left in its wake made it easy to follow.

It had taken her away from the fight, into areas that had been mostly untouched by the fighting until now, so Sophia was able to move quickly across the rooftops.

She found Matrix partially buried in the rubble of a building. From what she could see, Matrix wasn't moving, and there was blood leaking from the suit. Sophia approached carefully, in case the armour had some kinda automatic defence. Once she was sure it was safe, Sophia reached
for Matrix's helmet. There had to be a release catch somewhere, the PRT insisted on it.

The faceplate fell off in her hands and Sophia could see Taylor's eyes were open, staring lifelessly at the sky.

"Not so tough now, are you, bitch."

Something deep inside Matrix's armour flashed, startling Sophia as Matrix's body jerked and let out a ragged gasp.

*Motherfucking tinkers!* Sophia leaned closer. Matrix had closed her eyes and was breathing again, but it was pretty weak, with the bubbling sound of a punctured lung. She wasn't going to last much longer.

They were out of sight of everyone else. The fight was over now, with Scion chasing Leviathan off. Sophia could see search lights from Matrix's drones as they combed the wreckage closest to the fight.

They probably wouldn't find her in time.

"No one would know… " She snorted to herself. "You hear me, bitch? I could let you die. I could walk away and no one would ever know…"

Reaching out, she turned Matrix's head slightly to let the blood drain from her mouth. Sure, it wasn't a good idea to move someone who probably had spinal damage, but everyone knew the bitch was fucking Panacea.

Standing up, she pressed a button on her wristband.

"I've found Matrix. She's alive, but barely -" Three small drones dropped out of the sky so quickly Sophia could have sworn they teleported. They quickly used glowing beams to pick Matrix up.

As they rose into the sky, a fourth drone reached them. It stopped for a moment, hovering beside Sophia before it spoke in Dragon's voice.

"Thank you, Shadow Stalker."

"Whatever, just tell her… tell her she owes me."

"I'll pass it along. If you leave your wristband here, I can promise that no one will attempt to follow or arrest you."

Scoffing, Sophia dropped her wristband and walked away. She wasn't stupid, she knew about the truce. It would be at least a week, if not more, before the heroes arrested anyone.

Floating up to the rooftops, she headed towards the hostel she'd been staying in. Hopefully it was still standing. She just wanted to go home and try to forget that tonight ever happened.

##

Sitting in her Aunt Sarah's house, Amy tried not to squirm. This was the first full team meeting since her fight against Oil Slick and the first chance to tell them what had happened.

They'd told Carol already, of course. She'd been told everything that very same night.

After hearing the full story, Carol had gone strangely quiet, giving Amy the occasional odd look. She did tell both girls not to mention anything until the next team meeting.
From the look Eric was giving her, Amy guessed Vicky had already told him. Which meant Crystal, Dean, and most of the Wards probably knew.

Putting a tray of drinks down for everyone, Aunt Sarah took her own seat.

"I'm glad everyone could be here tonight. I know things have been a bit crazy since Leviathan, but I'm just glad we all made it through."

"Mostly," Crystal muttered, rubbing her newly regrown arm.

Aunt Sarah ignored her daughter and continued the meeting. For the most part, it was the same as last week, with Sarah asking if anyone had any issues they needed to discuss (no) or if there was anything happening that needed to be shared (not since the Merchants were wiped out again).

Eventually, the discussion turned to Oil Slick and his capture.

"Now, Carol has refused to tell me anything," Aunt Sarah gave Carol a dark look, "and all the PRT will say is that you were both involved. Could you please tell me what happened?"

Amy gave Vicky a pleading look. She did not want to be the one telling this story. Thankfully for Amy's sanity, her sister decided to take pity and recount everything.

It was no secret that Vicky liked being the center of attention and that she could often get carried away, so it came as a surprise to Amy when Vicky gave a detailed and honest description of the day's events with no embellishments. "That's when I turned around and saw the whole building in flames. I don't know what happened inside, Amy would have to tell you that."

With a shrug, she gave Amy an apologetic look.

Amy sighed, there really wasn't any way of getting out of this, so she picked up where Vicky left off, starting with fighting Oil Slick and finishing with her jumping off the roof.

"You did what?" Sarah demanded.

"There was fire everywhere! I had no choice!"

Groaning, Sarah sat forward and rubbed her forehead. She looked up briefly to glare at Carol, who just smiled sweetly and continued to sip at her drink. Amy got the impression that there was an entire conversation that she was missing out on.

"Didn't Mark say that back when he...?" Aunt Sarah asked eventually.

"Word for word," Carol said cheerfully.

"What are you talking about?" Vicky said, looking between the adults. "What did dad do?"

"He... you know what? Never mind, it's not important. You can ask him about it later," Sarah said, giving the quietly smiling man a glare.

"Amy, when we asked Miss Hebert to create a more protective costume for you, we didn't actually mean for you to get into one-on-one fights with supervillains or jump off rooftops! Do you even know how to fly?"

Amy shrugged. "Not really, but I didn't need to. My suit has a gravity harness. It acts like a parachute, so no matter how high up I am, I'm always safe!"
"It's true," Vicky said. "Taylor showed it to me weeks ago. Her and Kid Win both use them in their suits."

Aunt Sarah looked between them both before sighing. "Fine, I'll trust your judgement as you clearly know more about your equipment than I do." She pointed at Vicky. "But I'm still not entirely comfortable with you dragging your sister into danger. You really need-"

"She didn't!" Amy jumped to her feet and everyone went silent. Blushing, Amy forced herself to continue. "Vicky didn't drag me into danger, I chose to go. I knew she wouldn't be able to just find the Merchants and leave, I knew she'd fight them." Sorry, Vicky.

"If you really knew that, why didn't you stay behind, or better yet, call one of us?" Sarah asked.

"Because I can't do this anymore!" Amy practically shouted. She paused, took a deep breath. "I spend every day at the hospital, healing one person after another and I'm sick of it! I feel like every second I take to myself is a second I've failed somehow. For two years, it's been this… pressure."

Vicky went to stand, but was stopped by Carol, who stood up and pulled Amy close.

"The last two weeks… patrolling with Vicky, fighting Oil Slick… it's the most alive I've felt in years!" She stopped herself, searching for the right words. "I can't go back to the hospital. I can't just stay there waiting for the next time one of you is carried in on a stretcher. I want to do more. I'll still go to the hospitals, I promise, but I want to be out there, alongside everyone…"

/If you can fight at their side, you can be their shield./

Everyone in the room glanced at each other, refusing to meet Amy's eyes. Aunt Sarah stood up. "Amy, listen-"

"It's fine," Carol said. "If this is what she wants, then we will add her to the patrol roster." She looked down at Amy and gave her a firm look. "But there will be NO solo patrols. You will be with one of us at all times, at least until you're more experienced. Is that clear?"

Amy wrapped her arms around her mom and pulled her into a tight hug.

"Yes!"
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(same day as 14.6)

The wind whipped at her hood as Rune shot through the streets, a dozen bricks trailing through the air behind her. The snowboard she'd taken to riding just felt right underneath her, and she'd painted it red and black so everyone would know whose it was.

Up ahead she saw her target and thumbed the phone in her pocket, muting the music and removing her headphones. Only a fucking idiot would leave themselves unable to hear while doing this.

Slowing down slightly, Rune sent the bricks flying ahead of her. They smashed through the building's windows, sending glass everywhere and creating an opening that she could easily fly through.

She shrugged her bag off her shoulder and started scooping things off the shelf with practised ease. The nigger who ran the place was cowering behind his counter. He rose up briefly, shotgun in hand, but ducked down again the moment she sent a brick his way.

This shop was one of the few that had not only managed to survive Leviathan's assault, but had also avoided getting looted afterwards. That made it a gold mine, as far as Rune was concerned.

Her board was only inches off the ground as she flew down the next aisle, bottles of drink vanishing into her bag. Flipping end over end, Rune changed direction and made for the counter. She ignored the nigger, instead grabbing a large box of cigarettes.

Spinning around, she flew out the way she'd came, letting out a whoop of joy as she rocketed into the sky.

In and out without getting a scratch. This was a good day.

##

"Hey princess, you're late," Hookwolf growled as Rune stormed into Kaiser's office.

"Fuck you," she snapped. "I'm five minutes early."

She'd been halfway home when she'd gotten the message from Purity. All Empire capes were to report to Kaiser's office for a meeting. She hadn't even had a chance to stash her take from her smash and grab.

Dropping heavily onto a spare chair, she put her bag down next to her. In her temper, Rune dropped it with more force than she intended, and the loud clinking of bottles was clearly heard by everyone.

"And just what do you have in there?" Hookwolf asked with a knowing smirk.

"Nothing_-"

Menja, or possibly Fenja, Rune could never tell them apart, was already there to snatch her bag. She pulled it open and tipped the contents out onto the small coffee table in the middle of the room.
"Nice haul."

Rune knew better than to complain as Cricket picked up the cigarettes, splitting them between everyone while Hookwolf and Stormtiger helped themselves to the alcohol. One of the bimbos even took the snacks she'd grabbed, looking down her nose at Rune as she walked off with them.

The only thing that stopped her from lashing out was the look Othala gave Rune as she pocketed some of the chocolate and a pack of cigarettes. At least she'd be able to enjoy some of the things she stole.

Hookwolf was examining the label on an aged bottle of single malt whiskey. "I gotta say, princess, I didn't know you had such expensive taste."

Springing to her feet, Rune tried to snatch the bottle out of his hands. Her fingers brushed against the it as Hookwolf laughed, lifting it higher out of her reach. Using her power, she pulled it free and sent the bottle flying across the room where it landed neatly on Kaiser's desk.

"That one's not for you," she snapped. If they weren't gonna let her keep what she worked for, she'd at least score some points with Kaiser.

Before anyone else could say anything, Kaiser strode into the room, with Purity, Wehrmacht and three unpowered men following close behind.

"Thank you Rune, your thoughtfulness is appreciated. Though I hope you didn't inconvenience anyone important?"

Rune had to wonder if he'd been standing outside waiting for the perfect moment to enter.

"Just the nigger who ran the place. He's still alive." Technically, the Endbringer truce was still in effect. The PRT wasn't really going to care about a smash and grab or two, but murder or assault would likely bring the heat down on the Empire.

"Very well." Kaiser stood behind his desk. "In about a week's time, the Endbringer Memorial will be unveiled. Twenty four hours after that, the truce will officially end. When that happens, I want us to be in position to take as much of the city as possible. How is recruitment going?"

"Good," Stormtiger replied. "I've had people selling medicine or food at 'discounted' prices to one of the shelters, and a few of the men have converted some abandoned buildings into stores. The PRT is watching them, of course, but they haven't made any attempt to stop them. I figure we've managed to gather a good number of people from that alone. Even if only half of them truly support our goals, we should have more than enough to push what's left of the Merchants out."

"Good, though from what I've heard, the Autobots may have done that for us already."

Hookwolf grunted. "There's something going on near the Boardwalk. I've been seeing men with tinker weapons walking around, and a group of idiots with guns on their shirts keep cropping up."

"The tinker weapons are likely Coil's men. Does anyone know who the others are?"

Rune couldn't see his face, but she was sure Kaiser was frowning when no one said anything.

"I see. Is there anything else that needs to be said?"

"Actually," Othala bit her lip in indecision, "I think something's wrong with Panacea… she hasn't been by the hospital much. The nurses keep saying it's a good thing, but patients have noticed and
aren't happy."

Rune rolled her eyes under her mask and let out a snort.

"Do you have something to add, Rune?"

"Panacea's probably sulking because her girlfriend got hurt. No one's seen Matrix since the battle. The Autobots keep saying she's alive, but Panacea's always going in and out of Autobot-city. The ones with the gun shirts are vigilantes. The website's called 'Justice For All'."

"And just how is it that you know all of this?" Wehrmacht said, speaking for the first time.

"It's all over PHO," she said, speaking slowly and enunciating each word carefully as if she was talking to a child. The speculation threads were running rampant about the possible 'relationship' between Panacea and Matrix, no matter how much the mods complained. As for the vigilantes, well, there were posts from them but she'd never have seen them if Kid Win hadn't mentioned it. Not that Kaiser needed to know that.

Kaiser held up a hand, stopping Wehrmacht from saying anything more. "I see, very well. That brings me to my next point. Richardson, Feltham, Hood, step forward."

The three unpowered men moved from the back of the room where they had been trying to go unnoticed and stood in front of Kaiser's desk. Rune noticed that they were both pale and that one of them was trembling slightly.

"Thank you for coming, gentlemen," Kaiser said, his voice friendly. "Now I just have a few questions for you."

Both men paled further. "Sir?" one of them said.

Kaiser didn't shout, his voice remained calm and level. "Richardson, you were seen poking around the safehouse on 43rd. Would you kindly tell me what you were doing?"

Rune racked her memory, trying to remember all the safehouses and drop points, but nothing came to mind. Either she'd forgotten, or she wasn't supposed to know what was there.

"I," the one called Richardson said, hesitating briefly. "I thought I saw some Merchants nearby. I tried to follow them, but they gave me the slip. I didn't know where I was!"

Kaiser stared, unmoving as Richardson continued to sweat. Eventually, he turned to the other man. "Feltham, you've been heard asking the wrong sort of questions... so, both of you, tell me. Who were you selling the information to?"

Richardson said nothing, choosing to stare straight ahead. Feltham, however, dropped to his knees.

"Please, I didn't know! I owed Lee a favour, I don't know why he was asking about the docks, I swear!"

Kaiser's hand twitched and blades burst out of the ground, impaling both men and killing them before they could even scream. Only Hood, who had been standing between them with his eyes screwed shut, was left unharmed.

Rune flinched but forced herself not to turn away. She could see Wehrmacht staring at her.

Kaiser turned his focus to the capes.
"I will say this once. Brockton Bay is at a turning point, and for the first time since Allfather, the other gangs are all broken or crippled, we now stand as the greatest force in this city! Once the truce ends, we will crush the other gangs. The police are already marginalised or bought off and the PRT will be stretched too thin while dealing with the Fallen. This city is ours to conquer and revitalise. But for this to work, we must stand as a united front. That means each and every one of us, Rune."

Rune didn't bother hiding her confusion. She would be the first to admit she'd been a bit of a pain in the ass, but she hadn't actually done anything that could hurt the Empire.

*Except for making out with a Ward,* a small part of her said, but she forced herself to ignore it. There was no way Kaiser knew about that. If he did, she'd already be dead. Instead, she decided to take it as a warning to tone down the misbehaviour.

"Yeah... I mean, yes, sir."

He nodded, "Good. Hookwolf, deal with the bodies, I don't care what you tell their families. Hood, you can leave. I want you to tell the others the price of treachery. The rest of you, get ready. One way or another, we are taking this city!"

Hookwolf held a beer up with a cheer, Stormtiger and Cricket joining a moment later. The moment was ruined by Wehrmacht clapping loudly.

"Bravo!" he said. "I have to say, you might have some fire in you yet." The two men stared at each other and Rune got the feeling there was more going on here than she knew about. "I can deliver two capes here by morning." The smile on his face made Rune feel sick. "And a third by the time the truce ends, possibly six more over the next couple of weeks, if all goes well. As an added bonus, I can have the first shipment of guns here in two days. Standard payment, of course."

He held a hand out. Kaiser stared at it, and for moment Rune thought he would attack the man. Instead, he reached out and shook it.

"I knew you'd make the right decision," Wehrmacht said.

As the mood in the room became jubilant, Rune sunk lower in her seat.

This fucking sucked!

##

(carries on from 15.1)

My eyes stared unseeing at the ruined remains of my helmet in my hands, and my thoughts had been chasing each other endlessly since I saw the video. *I should be dead, Sophia saved my life, I died!* *How am I still here? Sophia saved my life! I was dead*…

My knuckles whitened as I gripped my helmet tighter and tried to still my thoughts. I tried to tell myself that it was just a system failure, that the telemetry was wrong, but I knew it wasn't. My bodysuit, Amy's, and even Madison's all had a health monitor built into them that downloaded information to a small black box, and the readout from mine was clear.

I'd died.

From the very moment I transformed Dragon's suit, my heart *stopped* and didn't start again until after Sophia had found me.
Cyclonus put a hand on my shoulder, the tea he'd brought me had long since grown cold. Aside from fetching me a drink, he hadn't left my side this entire time. Around my neck, the Matrix hung heavy on its chain, pulsing warmly.

*I'd died.* The thought filled me with a cold dread and yet...

"Taylor… you okay?" Amy's voice startled me and I looked up to see her standing in the doorway. My workshop was dark and the light from behind made her seem to glow.

I pushed the fear, the cold, to the back of my mind and stood up.

"Yeah… just thinking."

I gave her a quick smile, then turned away and put the helmet down, using the movement to mask me closing the readouts. I didn't know if Amy could understand them, but I didn't want to risk her seeing them.

A pair of arms wrapped hesitantly around me and I realised that Amy was trying to hug me.

"You're a bad liar…" she mumbled. "What's wrong?"

"I… I died." The words were barely above a whisper and Amy's arms tightened around me. "It wasn't long… a few minutes maybe, but my heart stopped. I wasn't even fucking breathing! If Sophia hadn't found me -" I forced back a sob and tried to block out the rushing in my ears. I didn't want to think about it. What would have happened if she hadn't found me?

"Sophia?"

"Yeah… she's the one who told Dragon where to find me. How fucked up is that? Sophia fucking Hess, the girl who made my life hell for nearly two years, is the one who found me! If she hadn't, I'd have drowned in my own blood!"

Turning in her arms, I put my arms around her and pulled her closer. I'd come so close to losing my Autobots, Dad, Amy, everything. What would have happened to them if I never came back?

After what felt hours but was likely only a few minutes, she spoke. "It hurt… When they brought you in and I saw you, I felt so sick. You were so pale, so still… I'm still not sure how I'd have acted if, if you'd… I don't want to think about it."

Looking down at her, it struck me just how much smaller than me Amy was. It wasn't just her height, almost everything about her was smaller. There was a faint blush on her tear-stained cheeks.

Without thinking, I gently lowered my head until our faces were almost touching. I hesitated, unsure if I should continue, but Amy closed her eyes and raised herself up on her toes.

The world fell away as her lips pressed against mine. This wasn't how I'd intended to tell Amy how I felt, but somehow, it felt right. Gradually, her lips parted and the kiss deepened.

The city was broken, my armour trashed, and I'd nearly died. Yet here, with my grumpy medic in my arms, I was warm.

##

Victoria followed Amy and Windblade through the Autobot base. Strictly speaking, she had only
come along to make sure Amy got here safely after her rather emotional display at the family meeting. She trusted Windblade, but she did kind of miss the days where she carried Amy around.

By unspoken agreement, neither of them had mentioned the events of the meeting since leaving. Not that it mattered much. What could Victoria say? She knew working at the hospital was tiring, that Amy was letting it stress her out. She just never knew how much of a strain it had become.

_Just like you didn't notice your aura fucking her up._ Victoria quickly squashed the thought and pushed it to the back of her mind and double checked her aura. She knew she'd fucked up, and was determined to do better.

The three of them reached the door to Taylor's workshop just as Cyclonus was leaving, a cup of tea held delicately in his hands. Victoria refrained from commenting as he walked past. Ahead, Amy stopped suddenly, looking into the workshop.

Leaning forward, Victoria looked over her sister's shoulder.

Taylor was sitting in the dark, the room being lit only by the glowing holograms. In her hands were the broken remains of her helmet, and she was gripping it so hard that Victoria could almost hear the creak of the metal.

She went to say something, but Amy beat her to it.

"Taylor… you okay?"

As Amy entered the workshop, Windblade gently held Victoria's arm to get her attention and shook her head.

Confused, Victoria stayed still and let Amy handle whatever was upsetting Taylor. When her sister suddenly wrapped her arms around the taller girl, Victoria had to bite her lip to keep herself quiet.

The two in the workshop had apparently either forgotten they were there, or hadn't noticed them.

As Taylor leaned forward, Victoria quickly grabbed Windblade and lifted them both off the ground. She flew silently down the hallway. After everything she'd suffered through, Amy deserved some privacy.

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**Chapter End Notes**

AN:
Yeah, so that kinda happened. Honestly, I didn't plan for them to kiss for another 4/5 chapters. Seriously, I just derailed this entire chapter! Oh well, it's not a major problem.

So, this is something i've been considering for awhile now.

I've been working on mtmte and various other fics for years now and while i'm not struggling, there are times when money can get a bit tight.

As such, I've decided to create a Ko-fi account; https://ko-fi.com/metallix

For those who dont know/havent see it before, Ko-fi is a tip jar system for creators but unlike sites like patreon this is not a subscription system. Payments are one off (unless
you decide to pay again) and there are NO paywalls.

What does this mean for my fics? Nothing really. I will still continue to write chapters and will post them as soon as they are finished, i’m not going to pester or lock things away and there is no 'premium' content. if you enjoy my content, I’d be thankful for a few tips. My update schedule remains unaffected.
Three days after 15-2.

Groaning, Madison put an arm over her eyes and tried to block out the light. *It's too early for this shit.*

The days were getting lighter now and her room at the shelter only had thin curtains on the windows that let far too much light in. *I suppose I should be grateful I have curtains.*

Through the thin building walls, she could hear the sounds of others going about their day. This was the third week since Leviathan’s attack, and while things weren’t back normal, life was falling into a routine.

Her phone buzzed from its location near the window and Madison eyed it warily. Not many people had her number these days. Giving up on getting any further sleep she rolled out of bed, her shoulder aching in protest.

No one had complained when she’d been given a small room to herself. It wasn’t very large, just big enough for her bed and a chair, with a single window on the wall.

*Can’t complain about the privacy I guess.*

The shelter had been divided up by floors. The ground floor was dedicated to the day to day running of the shelter with supplies being stored on the next floor up. The rest were converted into housing that was mostly reserved for people with young children.

Grabbing her phone, Madison quickly checked her messages.

[Mom: are you up? I need your help.]

Sighing, she quickly sent back her reply and reached under the bed for her small bag of toiletries. Whatever her mom wanted, it couldn’t be urgent or she’d have come upstairs. It could wait for her to grab a shower. *Hopefully there’s still some warm water left.*

Before she left the room, Madison took care to hide her phone charger. Small, easily stolen electronics or valuables were disappearing all the time, and it was causing some tension in the shelter. The charger itself wasn’t much, just a battery pack connected to a solar panel, but in a city where large sections were still without power, it was worth its weight in gold. Besides, Arcee had given it to her and she didn’t want to lose it.

Once she was sure everything of value was hidden, Madison made her way to the communal shower.

There were three of them in the shelter. One in the building on the same floor as Madison’s room, and two in a small portacabin that had been set up outside that were currently out of order. As such, Madison had to wait another five minutes before she could take her turn.
Locking the door, she quickly stripped down and stepped into the lukewarm water. While she cleaned herself, Madison also checked her body for any bruises or cuts from last night’s fight. All she found was a large bruise on her thigh and another on her back, but nothing that wouldn’t be hidden by jeans and a shirt, and the ache in her shoulder was already starting to ease.

Aware that other people were waiting, she quickly finished up and turned off the water. The water heater was old, and keeping the showers short and just warm enough to bear was the only way to ensure there was enough hot water to go around.

Quickly getting dressed in some loose fitting clothes, she stuffed her bag in her room and went downstairs. As she expected, her mom was already at work and shouting at a man from the national guard.

“You told us you could keep us safe! And now we’re missing a generator and a week’s worth of food!”

The man in a military uniform held his hands up, trying to say something, but he was quickly cut off by her mom’s anger.

“I don’t care how it happened, what I want to know is what you are doing about it!”

Sighing to herself, Madison hopped up onto a counter to wait.

The theft had happened two days ago. A generator and several boxes of military ‘ready to eat’ rations had just vanished in the middle of the night. Which didn’t make any sense. The food Madison could understand. People were always trying to sneak off with a little extra after all.

The generator however? That had her confused. It wasn’t anything special, just a large diesel thing that powered the portacabins, and it had just vanished. It was too large for a single person to lift and the ‘soldiers’ would have noticed a group of men carrying it out of the gate. And why would they leave a slab of concrete?

That meant it was likely a cape. Off the top of her head, Madison could only think of a few capes that would have the ability to lift the generator and get it out without making a lot of noise, and one of them was a fucking hero.

And the Empire hasn’t been seen in this area.

On a nearby wall was a large laminated map of the city. Wipeable markers had been used to highlight various sections, showing roughly where the gangs had been seen last, floodwater locations, street closures, and other shelters.

Most of the information had came from people who went out exploring, but then the big purple transformer had stopped by and dropped off the two way radio that was currently clipped to her mom’s belt. Thanks to that, the shelters could communicate directly with each other, trading what supplies they could spare (very little) or information.

Madison had been using it to help plan her nightly patrols.

“Excuse me luv?” a balding man with glasses and a British accent walked over to her, “I don’t want to make a fuss, but I think someone’s trying to set up a still behind one of the cabins?”
Groaning, Madison rubbed her face. “Okay, thanks. I’ll tell Mom once she’s free.”

Nodding, the man shot her mom a worried glance, then hurried out of the room.

In the end, it took her mom another twenty minutes of arguing before she was finally satisfied and Madison was able to tell her about the still.

While her mom went off to deal with that, Madison was sent back upstairs to help look after the younger children.

So, this is my life now, Madison thought to herself as she wiped another running nose. Get up, work in the shelter, go on patrol, sleep. It wasn’t glamorous and most of the jobs she was asked to do were dull and monotonous, but it let her feel useful.

##

*You’re staring again* Vicky said in a sing-song voice, and I felt my face heat with embarrassment.

“I’m just making sure she’s safe!” I snapped quickly, thankful Vicky had used a private comm line.

*Sure you are,* Vicky drawled.

Seeing the city from the sky, really brought home the scale of the devastation. Even now, three weeks later I could see the path of destruction Leviathan had carved through the city and the huge crater formed when parts of the ground gave way.

It was too big to fill in. it would cost millions and take years to even try. Some had suggested turning it into a lake, but it would still take time and money to clear out the debris and clean the water.

This was my first flight since my armour was repaired, and Amy had suggested I come with her and Vicky on their daily rounds. Now, not only were the three of us flying through the sky, but Amy was actually using her own wing pack. It was her idea, and beyond a few wobbles, she was doing well.

Speeding up, I ignored Vicky’s laugh and drew level with Amy. She glanced at me briefly, but mostly kept her attention straight ahead.

“You’re doing fine,” I said, unable to keep the goofy grin off my face as she blushed. Really, most of the work was being done by her costume, the built in systems would help keep her flight stable and level while the gravity harness made sure she never had to worry about falling. She still had to concentrate though. The safety systems wouldn't do her any good if she chose to fly right into a building.

*Five bucks says she flubs the landing* Vicky said on a private line. She was flying slower than us both as she was holding onto the straps of a large shipping crate and didn’t want to risk damaging anything.

*Oh, like you were perfect when you first learned to fly!* I said back. It was only after Amy laughed that I realised I’d said that on an open channel.

Amy laughed, her eyes sparkling as she leaned into a turn. *Remind me to tell you about what Vicky did to Aunt Sarah’s car later.*
Ignoring Vicky’s protests, we started to circle downwards as we had finally reached the shelter.

The National Guard had been brought in to help maintain order, but their numbers were limited. To make matters worse, Bakuda’s crystals were still causing radio interference in parts of the city, which was making it hard for the soldiers to keep in contact or respond to issues. Some criminals had even taken to carrying chunks of the crystals around with them, using them as portable interference or piling them up in contested areas to create dead zones.

Because of this, the soldiers mostly focused on the main areas like the Boardwalk or town hall. Small groups were still sent to some of the shelters, but they had to be careful not to provoke a reaction from the villains as there was no guarantee of reinforcements.

Nothing had happened yet, but Empire members were visibly patrolling the southern parts of the city, a shelter in the area was actively turning minorities away, and there were rumors of Empire men making new shelters and handing out supplies to anyone who joined up.

*A problem for tomorrow,* I told myself.

Six armed soldiers had apparently not been enough to keep this shelter safe. Sometime in the night, someone had stolen the generator that was being used to provide light and heat to the portacabins.

When everyone had woken up the next morning, there had been a large slab of concrete where the generator had stood. They’d also taken a large amount of food and some of the soldiers’ weapons. *Sounds like someone’s showing off...*

Putting the thought aside, I focused my attention on Amy as she spiraled slowly towards the ground. She wasn’t ready to try a steep dive and three point landing, so she was taking it carefully.

I went on ahead, landing in the middle of the shelter and turning to watch her land, ready to catch her if she needed the help.

She was low enough for me to see the contraction on her face as Amy brought her feet forward, flaring her wings to reduce her speed.

For a moment, she hung in the air armour shining, wings spread, hair and costume flapping in the wind, the white of her costume standing out against the greys of the shelter around us.

Then her wings folded up and she dropped the last few feet. She wobbled slightly, but managed to keep her balance. She was positively beaming as she walked towards me.  

“You owe me five bucks Vicky!” I said, putting my arm around Amy’s shoulder and watching as her sister gently put the crate down.

“Yeah, yeah.” Despite her tone, Vicky was smiling.

##

Sitting down outside with a quick lunch in hand, Madison was already planning her nightly patrol.
Maybe she could push into Empire territory. Just because they hadn’t been seen in the area didn’t mean they couldn’t have stolen the generator.

*I suppose Rune could have lifted it out of here in seconds.*

She was still thinking about that when a shadow passed overhead and she looked up in reflex. She nearly choked on her lunch as Matrix landed in the middle of the courtyard, her brightly polished armour gleaming in the midday sun. Madison quickly swallowed her lunch, looking for a place to hide. Sure, Taylor had given her that cool costume, but Madison still wasn’t sure how to deal with the Autobot leader. That is, she was glad Taylor was okay, but she got the strong impression Taylor would rather have nothing to do with her.

It was just Madison’s luck her mom came out of the office at that moment and waved her over with a look that made it clear she wasn’t asking. Cursing silently, Madison drew level with her mom just as she reached the capes.

“Glory Girl, Panacea! It’s good to see you again,” her mom said with a tired smile, “Matrix, it’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Thank you Mrs. Clements. I…” Taylor trailed off; around them, people were starting to gather, children pushing to the front so they could see the heroes, and Madison realised this was likely the first time Taylor had been seen since the battle.

“Excuse me, Matrix?” a woman stepped forward and, without a word of warning, she pulled Taylor into a hug. “I-I was at that shelter you saved! My whole family was there when that monster tried to get in. I never thought I’d get a chance to thank you personally.”

“Yes... um?” Taylor’s mask was expressionless, but her head was turning quickly between the woman and Panacea, one of her arms gently patting the woman on the back.

Madison got the distinct impression she was trying not to panic as the crowd pushed forward. People were shouting over each other in an effort to be heard or get close enough to thank Matrix personally.

Panacea and Glory Girl reacted quickly, moving close in an effort to act as a buffer, and Madison quickly clambered on top of the crate Glory Girl had been carrying to avoid getting crushed while her mom shouted for calm.

Eventually, the crowd started to pull back, gradually falling quiet.

“I… thank you, all of you, I...” Taylor took a deep breath and Madison couldn't help but notice that Panacea was holding Taylor’s hand.

Coming to a decision, Madison jumped down off the crate. “Oh Matrix? I know you’re, like, super busy, but our hot water heater is dead. Do you think you could fix it?”

She nodded towards the office to help get her point across.

Taylor seized it like a lifeline.

“Yes! I mean, sure, I’ll take a look.” she nodded to Panacea, who smiled at her, then walked off
toward the first aid station. “V- Glory Girl, can you handle unpacking that generator for me?”

“Sure!” Glory Girl chirped, picking the crate up like it weighed nothing. “Where do you want me to put this?”

As her mom showed Glory Girl through the shelter, Madison lead Taylor through the office and upstairs to the bedrooms as they were usually empty this time of day.

“You okay?” Madison asked, coming to a stop.

“Yeah,” Taylor sighed, parts of her mask folding away to expose her mouth. “I just didn’t expect… that.”

“Didn’t Panacea or Glory Girl warn you? You’ve been missing for weeks, rumors and stories about what you did have been flying all over the place.”

“What rumors!?”

“Certainly nothing bad, just… okay, the short version is that you created that glowing wall that stopped the tidal waves,” she ticked the stories off with her fingers as she spoke, reciting one rumor after the other and watching with amusement as the visible parts of Taylor’s face paled further.

Some of the stories Madison could almost believe, like Taylor protecting people in the streets. Others had been so obvious that no one could miss them, like Taylor putting a shield over the hospital or creating a giant glowing wall.

People didn’t like to talk about Endbringer battles, but the few capes Madison had met in the medical tent had all seen Matrix at some point or another, and if not her, then one of her Autobots.

As Madison finished talking, Taylor had her head in her hands.

“I-I never really thought about it,” she said quietly. “Everything was happening so fast, but when you list it all out like that, even ignoring the stuff I didn’t do…”

“I know, it’s pretty overwhelming.” Her own attack on Leviathan had nearly gotten her killed, but she’d barely stepped out of the medical tent when people had started thanking her for saving this friend or that cape. It wasn’t anything as big as what Taylor had done, but it had still been overwhelming at the time.

They stood in silence, Madison letting Taylor get her thoughts in order. Eventually, Taylor looked up.

“I guess there’s no point worrying about it. I’ll just have to get used to it.”

Madison smiled. “If it helps, people think you’re a total badass.”

Laughing - the first honest laugh Madison had heard her make - Taylor shook her head. “You wanted me to look at that water heater?”

“You don’t have to, really. No one expects you to, you just looked like you needed a minute.”

Taylor nodded, “I know, but I might as well while I’m here.” She gestured with her hand and
Madison lead her downstairs to the heater. “Oh, and Madison, thanks.”

“No problem.” Madison felt something in her chest, a tightness she’d had for months easing if only a bit. Then, her mouth moved without her, “just… tell me one thing, you and Panacea, when did that happen?”

Taylor’s face instantly coloured, but she didn’t stop smiling. Madison laughed as she led Taylor to the water heater.

##

“Is Matrix okay?” Mrs. Clements asked as Victoria lifted the new generator out of the crate. Thankfully it wasn’t really tinker tech, just a really high end one that Taylor had built. It wouldn’t need any more maintenance than a store bought one.

“Yeah, she’s fine. Just a bit overwhelmed I think. Give her a minute and she’ll be back to normal.”

“That’s what I thought.” Mrs. Clements sighed. “I’m surprised she even came here, given the things my daughter did to her…”

Putting the generator down, Victoria picked a pair of cables up off the ground and snapped them into place with a click. It was already fueled up, so all she had to do was hit the big green button and…

The generator whirred into life and there was a cheer from elsewhere in the shelter.

“For what it’s worth, Matrix is trying to be better than that.” Though if it had been Victoria, she’d have probably punched the little bitch by now. Shoving the irritation aside, she wiped her hands on her jeans and focused on keeping her aura suppressed as she walked back through the shelter.

Suppressing her aura was like tensing a muscle, it took constant effort, and while it was getting easier over time, it only took a small distraction for her control to slip.

Lacking anything else to do, Victoria decided to make herself useful, helping to lift or move heavy items around the shelter for people, user her flight to help hang a washing line, and so on. It wasn’t long before Amy left the medical building and Taylor emerged from the office.

Victoria was a little surprised to see the bitch with her - Victoria cut the thought off and reminded herself that she needed to be better than that. She was surprised to see Madison laughing at something, but nothing in Taylor’s posture said she was upset.

“Okay, I’ve managed to put some life back into your heater. It’ll never be great, but it’ll run for at least a couple of months and you should get a bit more hot water out of it,” Taylor said as she reached them.

“Thank you so much, it means a lot to all of us that you’re willing to help,” Mrs. Clements said, holding a hand out.

“It’s nothing, really,” Taylor shook the woman’s hand, then reached behind herself to pull a small red and yellow radio out of thin air.

“Here, I’ve been sending these to all the shelters to help keep people's minds off things. It’s
waterproof so it can be placed outside, and it’s got a small solar panel and wind up handle to power it.”

“No, I can’t do that! Between this and the generator, it’s too much, it must have cost you a fortune.”

“It’s fine, honestly. The radio isn’t tinker-tech, you can buy it in the store, and I’ve got collections running online to help people, it’s paying for everything, I promise.”

Reluctantly, Mrs. Clements took the radio and put it on top of the crate the generator had come in.

“Alright, thank you.”

“Really, don-”

*Cyclonus just went down! He’s still alive, but he’s not responding!* First Aid said suddenly over the radio, panic clear in his voice.

*Shit!* As one, all three girls stood up straighter.

“I’m sorry, there’s an emergency, we’ve got to go!” Taylor said quickly.

There was a brief, unspoken discussion between Amy and Taylor before Amy stepped away from everyone, her wings unfolding as she jumped into the air. As the small booster on her back fired, sending her into the air, Taylor and Victoria followed along behind her.

##

Madison watched as the three of them took off. She briefly considered following them, but at the speed they were moving she would never be able to sneak away, get changed, and then catch up.

“What do you suppose that was about?” her mom asked.

“No idea, cape stuff I guess.” Lacking anything else to do, Madison picked up the radio and fiddled with it until it turned on, a slow jazz tune coming through the speakers.

The sound quality was pretty good and the music wasn’t bad, so she decided to leave it playing, turning the volume up so everyone could hear it. After a few minutes, the song finished and the DJ started talking.

*Look out, and shout, ow!* The voice was male, but with that unmistakable electronic echo that Madison had come to associate with an Autobot.

*This is Autobot Radio, here with the mop and bucket this city needs! You’re listening to me, Blaster, your master of ceremonies, coming at you live from Autobot City with the sweet, sweet sounds to keep you going! And if you’re a first time listener, don’t worry, I play more than just The Electric Slide and Mr. Roboto.*

He certainly sounded energetic. Even as he spoke, Madison could almost picture a broad grin on his face.

*But first, here’s our eyes in the sky with the traffic!*
... itzz thizz on? Ah! Thizz is Wazzpinator! Roadzz are zztill clozzed over- BIRD!* An angry squawk cut Waspinator off, *No! Wazzpinator sorry, Wazzpinator not touch nest, don’t eat Wazzpinator!* The sounds of panic, flapping and the enraged bird ended suddenly and silence filled the air. Madison looked around, taking in the surprised expressions on everyone's face.

*I'm sorry folks, it looks like we are experiencing* - Blaster chuckled - *technical difficulties… if anyone happens to spot Waspinator, please do let us know, hashtag Waspinator. Now let's go straight to Windblade with the news!*

*That was Rattrap’s fault, I just - Oh! Thank you Blaster! I’m currently outside the remains of the Dockworkers Association, where they’re trying to gather people for volunteer work across the city-*

As Windblade spoke, Madison shook her head. She wasn’t sure who’s idea this had been, but the radio was quickly drawing attention from the others. Some had dragged boxes or old chairs over to sit on and some of the younger children had chosen to sit on the ground and listen.

Even her mom was smiling. “I think we’ll leave this here, it will do everyone some good.”

“Yeah, I guess so… I’m going to go up to my room and do some school work, text if you need me?” At her mom’s nod, Madison walked back inside the building. She hadn’t been to school since Winslow expelled her, but she was expected to start at Immaculata when the new semester started. In preparation for that, she had been sent a number of assignments to complete so they could gauge her current level.

Of course, the schools were still closed following the attack, but the excuse would buy Madison an hour or two uninterrupted. She felt a bit guilty about lying, but she doubted Mom would like the truth any better.

Ducking into her room, Madison pulled a cheap locket out from under her shirt and placed it on the bed and activated her power. As she shrank her wings grew from her back, letting her fly up and land on the bed.

Opening up the now giant -to her- locket, Madison pulled her costume out and quickly got changed. *Who needs secret compartments and lose floorboards?*

A few minutes later, she flew out of the window. Madison doubted whatever emergency had called Matrix off was close by, but a check of the area wouldn't hurt.

##

Madison landed on a rooftop. This was as far as she could go today if she wanted to get back without anyone noticing she was gone.

Still, it seemed the rumors were right. There, on the wall of a four story building, someone had painted a top hat. What’s more, she’d seen at least a dozen armed men walking around with black bandanas as she flew.
If they mark borders, then that’s nearly six blocks all under one gang. Madison told herself. Now… who to ask…

Circling around the building, she found a man with a black armband having a quiet smoke in the shelter of an empty doorway.

Moving quickly, she flew past him, turning in the air, then growing to ten feet tall. She didn’t like going big, it made her feel slow and clumsy, but it had some advantages.

Grabbing the man, she picked him and held him upside down by one leg as she thumbed the voice changer in the helmet Taylor had given her, it made her voice sound harsher, adding an odd echo that sounded like hundreds of insects talking at once.

“So,” she said as the man swore, frantically grabbing for the gun that had dropped out of his jacket. “Quick question, are you really payed enough to deal with this shit?”

The man twisted in her grip, trying to get a good look at her, but all he could likely see were her feet.

“Cause, seriously, I doubt you guys get health care. All those broken bones and missing teeth can’t be cheap and I know Panacea won’t heal you guys-”

She continued to talk, saying whatever came to mind, pausing occasionally to change arms. Her prisoner meanwhile continued to struggle. After a few minutes of this, just as she was talking about his horrible fashion choices, he let out a strangled scream.

“Alright, alright! Fucking hell, don’t you ever shut up!”

She turned him right way up, letting him look her in the ‘face’. She found herself grateful for the full face mask that kept him from seeing the smile on her face.

“Well?” she prompted.

“It’s Trickster,” he said, now that she looked, Madison could see that he’d gone a worrying shade of red, though it was slowly receding as the blood drained from his head.

“He came by last week, started throwing money around, said he had more for anyone who worked for him.”

“And did he?”

“Yeah, but not enough for this shit.”

“Where can I find him?”

“I’m not telling you that! He’d kill me!”

Madison sighed and the world suddenly grew around them as she activated her power. When she stopped, both of them had been reduced to just under three inches tall. Letting go of the man, Madison flew up into the air.

“So,” she said calmly, as he looked around frantically. “Here’s the thing. At this size, the world is a very different place.”
“You bitch! What did you do to me!”

“See, insects, birds, rats. To them, we’re just another meal. Of course, I’ve got stingers and can fly. You on the other hand…”

She trailed off as something moved in the shadows.

“What was that?!” He turned, looking between the shadow and her frantically.

“You don’t want to know. Now, tell me. Where. Is. Trickster!”

A large rat emerged from the shadows, its nose twitching as it cautiously sniffed the air.

“He’s on 18th Avenue in an an old motel, I swear!”

“Thanks, bye!” Turning, Madison flew away.

“Waaaaait!... YOU BITCH!”

Flying away, Madison laughed. Shrunk objects or people always turned back to normal once they got far enough away from her.

##

Cyclonus circled high above the city. Below him, a large truck had been driven off the road, its front end destroyed. An armoured transport was parked nearby with bodies littering the floor. A woman with short hair and a large four legged creature were pulling boxes from the ruined truck and passing them to a group of waiting men.

A supply truck and its escort.

*This is Cyclonus, I’ve found the convoy.*

*I’m twenty minutes away. There’s too much interference here to risk teleporting and the roads are nearly impassable,* Arcee said, her voice tense. None of the usual gangs had been spotted in the area, that made this an attack by an unknown group.

Several men in the crowd split off, pulling a man from one of the ruined vehicles and shooting him.

*Very well. I can’t wait for you, get here when you can.* Dropping the connection, Cyclonus went into a dive. The air screamed as he dropped out of the sky.

Alerted by the noise, the woman looked up and shouted something. The gathered men raised their weapons and started firing into the air.

Cyclonus banked hard, using the buildings to break line of sight. The street below him was a blur as he turned again, entering the street from the eastern end. Ahead, the looters were already raising their weapons as he raced towards them.

Unlocking his own weapons, Cyclonus opened fire and two missiles streaked through the air. At the
back of the group, the woman raised her arm and hundreds of little lights appeared in the air.

The missiles exploded on impact, creating a rain of containment foam that was quickly blown off course by the wind.

Cyclonus was too low and moving too fast to avoid the field. The first one hit his wing, scratching the paint, then another and another. It was like he was suddenly flying through hail, hundreds of little impacts, each razor sharp, slamming into him.

Warnings flashed up as control surfaces failed and he was forced to transform, covering his face as he ploughed through whatever it was.

Hitting the ground, he rolled to his feet and drew his sword. Around him, the rest of the looters were running, taking whatever they could carry. All of them were dressed alike, in costumes bristling with blades, spikes and spines. Teeth, eyes, desiccated body parts, and bones were worked into their costumes.

The woman - a cape - still hadn’t moved. She was short, with close cropped hair. Her costume was similar to the others, but the quality was better, with subtle hints of actual armour beneath the trophies. There was also a phone held tightly in her hand.

With a painfully loud howl, the large creature ran towards him. It was big enough for a man to ride, furless with exposed skin and bone like armour plates. It looked like an unholy mix of a dog and a particularly nasty reptile.

It was also fast. It reached Cyclonus in a matter of moments, tackling him to the ground. They rolled briefly, with the monster pinning him to the ground. It’s teeth scraped uselessly across his armour.

With a growl of his own, Cyclonus drove the pointed tips of his fingers into the beast’s sides. It howled in pain, but he refused to let go. As it tried to pull away, he tilted his head forwards and pulled, driving his own horns deep into the creature’s face, puncturing an eye.

With a shout, he tossed the animal backwards, ignoring its howls as it hit the ground, thrashing in pain.

As he grabbed his sword, glowing lights filled the air between them, trying to separate Cyclonus from the beast. Ignoring the field, he marched forward as it staggered away. The glowing lights pushed against him, scratching against his armour and gradually slowing him down. More lights were appearing behind Cyclonus in an effort to box him in.

Still whimpering, the creature transformed, bone and flesh receding to reveal a bleeding man in the same bladed armour as the woman.

Cyclonus hesitated. Killing a trained animal or master projection was fine, but there were rules when it came to humans. Before he could make a decision, a screaming crowd burst from a side street, improvised weapons held tightly in their hands as they charged him.

Cyclonus turned to face them, just as sounds of a minigun warming up came from the ruined truck.

“...scrap...”
“What’s the situation!?” I demanded. Cyclonus’ emergency beacon had triggered only a few minutes ago and he wasn’t responding to my call.

*A gang attacked one of the supply convoys, we don’t know more than that!* Wheeljack responded quickly. He was back on his feet, but I was keeping him on light duty.

Growling, I urged Divebomb to move faster. The emergency beacon was an automatic system I’d added to all my bots. If it had been triggered, then Cyclonus was badly hurt and there wasn’t much left in the city that could do that.

*Is my booster armour ready?*

*What! No! The armour is functional but the fusion cannon is nowhere near ready. Anyway, you can’t be planning to use that! You built it for Endbringers!* I snapped, rising up higher. “This isn’t about the firepower, it’s about making a statement.”

*... alright, sending… now!* There was a flash in the air ahead of me and a small red and blue trailer appeared. As I disconnecting myself from Divebomb, the trailer opened up, wrapping itself around me as I collided with it.

I’d based it on the armour I’d created while fighting Leviathan, but adjusted to be more fitting to my own look. It added nearly two extra feet of height, extra armour and more guns than I could actually hold. It also included a built in flight pack.

*Vicky! Look after Amy!* I ordered the moment the wings opened. Leveling out, I fired the boosters, accelerating across the city.

*Show off!* Vicky shouted as they fell behind.

The world below me was a blur as I flew. The booster armour could go transonic for short bursts, and when finished would even have a miniature fusion cannon mounted on the back. Of course, due to its size, ammo and power were much more limited, so I couldn’t use it for as long as my normal armour.

Spotting the attack site, I went into a dive. I hit the ground hard enough to shatter the pavement, throwing dust a debris everywhere. Sensors in my suit were already scanning the area, ready to lock onto any potential threats.

There was only one target. A heat signal in one of the nearby buildings. Before I could turn to face it, the signal flared brighter, fire flashing in a window as something exploded. Then, it was gone. 

*Damn it!*

Leaving the suit’s defenses on automatic, I turned to Cyclonus.

He was slumped against a ruined car, his eyes dark and armour riddled with scratches, dents and bullet holes. Around him lay dozens of bodies, all in identical armour of spikes, bones and limbs.
Stepping over the bodies, I knelt down next to Cyclonus while I checked him over. This close, I could feel his spark burning brightly. He was alive, but damaged enough that he was in stasis lock. Putting a hand on his head, I used my power to shore his systems up until I could move him.

Confident he would be okay, I focused on one of the bodies as Amy and Vicky landed quietly behind me, I could hear Vicky quietly curse.

“Amy, Vicky, check the trucks. There might be survivors,” I said quickly.

“Is he going to be alright?” Amy asked, her voice soft.

“He’ll be fine,” I said, sounding calmer than I felt as I rolled one of the bodies over. My breath caught as I saw a very familiar face.

*Multiplayer!?*

Chapter End Notes

An: so, yeah. Lots happening this chapter. There was going to be more, but I decided to move it into the next chapter
Also, the multiplayer thing? I've been planning that one since the fight at the mall
Patrolling through the city had never been easy at the best of times, and Leviathan’s ‘visit’ certainly hadn’t improved matters. Many of the city’s roads were still flooded; debris and trapped water helped to hide sinkholes and other hazards that had to be navigated carefully.

It was almost enough to make her consider getting refitted for flight.

Then again, if she did that, who knew what she’d miss if she was flying over the city instead of going through it? Her wing mirrors twitched in a shrug as she dismissed the thought. She liked being a motorbike, after all.

Rounding a another deep puddle, Arcee slowly made her way towards the docks; there were some people she’d been meaning to check up on.

As the flooded remains of ‘Full Throttle’ came into view, Arcee slowed down. She’d first found the biker bar while investigating Uber and Leet, but she’d stopped by regularly afterwards because she liked the atmosphere.

What surprised her were the trio of men standing outside, crowding around the bartender and an older man with a wild, white, hair and beard.

Before she got a chance to listen in, one of the men looked at her and nudged one of his friends.

Arcee had ‘Sadie’ - her holographic driver- wave in greeting.

“Hey, Ben. You doing alright?”

“Just fine,” Ben grunted with a nod in her direction.

The trio glared at them both, but left without saying anything. As they rounded the corner, Arcee shut off her hologram and transformed.

“Friends of yours?”

“Not really.” Despite his gruff manner, he smiled at her and waved her inside. “What brings you by?”

“What, a girl can’t check up on a friend?” Inside, she leaned against the bar while Ben continued to use a long handled squeegee to push water out of the door. The older man followed them both inside, leaning over the bar to grab himself a bottle of drink before sitting on one of the few remaining stalls.

“I’m honestly surprised this place is still standing,” she said, looking at the drenched floor and walls. “Will your insurance cover the repairs?”

“I doubt it. They sent a suit down here last week, and he made it clear I was at the bottom of the pile.”

“That can’t be legal,” she muttered. *Soundwave, can you have someone investigate Brockton
Central insurance? I think they’re withholding payment.*

[Acknowledged]

“Welcome to the docks,” the old man said with laugh, “where ‘legal’ has a loose definition.”

Despite his age, his eyes shone with life and regarded Arcee with barely concealed amusement.

“Y’know,” he said with a chuckle, “I’ve been riding bikes for nigh forty years, caught myself talking to them more than once. Never thought I’d hear one answer back.”

Arcee smiled and held out a hand. “Guess that makes you lucky. I’m Arcee.”

“Father Torque,” he said with a grin.

“Cape name?”

He laughed again. “Nah, old tradition. Isn’t that right, Throttle?” he called to Ben, who just smirked.

“You capes aren’t the first people to use nicknames, y’know. Plenty of us did it, back before the world went crazy.”

“Like the Hells Angels?” Arcee asked. The Hells Angels were now one of the big two ‘motorcycle clubs’, notorious all over the country for their activities.

Father Torque snorted. “There were MC’s around before the Hells Angels, y’know. They weren’t the first, just the first to recruit capes.”

She couldn’t help but notice the bitterness in his voice, and the way he flexed the fingers on his free hand.

The arrival of capes had changed the world, and nowhere was more obvious than organised crime. The old organisations; the Mafias, unions, families, street gangs, or whatever they called themselves, were quickly running up against parahumans. The older, more traditional groups had been quickly crushed underfoot by the newer, cape-led groups, or subsumed by them.

Ben had told her the name of his own club once, and that they had disbanded years ago. She suspected the ‘angels’ were involved, but from the look on Father Torque’s face, she decided to leave it alone.

“So what did those guys outside want?”

##

Walking through the base, I looked at the tablet in my hand. From the information Cyclonus provided, it was fairly easy to identify Animos and Vex as the capes Cyclonus had fought. That meant it had probably been the Butcher who had ambushed him with a fucking minigun.

*The Empire, Coil and now the teeth. Doesn't the city have enough gangs?*
Knowing it was the Teeth that had attacked, it hadn’t taken Streetwise long to work out what had likely happened to Multiplayer. He’d escaped from the Wards the night we’d taken down Uber and Leet and fled to Boston. There was even an eyewitness report about a cape with a cloning ability saving a couple from some muggers, then fighting the Butcher. From all accounts, it hadn’t ended well for the unknown cape.

*And now the Teeth are here...* They would need to be handled quickly and carefully. Assuming they had come in Leviathan’s wake, they’d already had two weeks to dig in. I needed to push them out before they could get further entrenched.

Sighing, I closed the screen. Well, there was no point worrying about it today. It would have to wait until later, as I had a memorial service to attend.

Stopping outside of Dad’s room, I knocked on the door and waited. When there was no answer, I carefully opened the door.

“Dad?”

I quickly double checked the time as I entered the room. Not needing to sleep did mean I occasionally lost track of time in the mornings, but it wasn’t like Dad to sleep in late.

Inside, Dad’s room looked a lot like his room back at the house, with clothes scattered about and his bed unmade. I could also hear the shower in his ensuite bathroom. Well, that explained where he was; I’d just have to wait until he was finished.

As I turned to leave, a sound made me stop. It was a woman’s voice, and it was coming from the bathroom.

Looking around again, I realised that not all the clothes were Dad’s. There was even a bra amongst them. Before I could even think about leaving, there was a click of a lock and the door to the bathroom swung open.

Time seemed to slow as I turned my head and Miss Militia, no, Hannah, burst out of the bathroom laughing, Dad following close behind her. Both of them were as naked as the day they were born.

Hannah saw me first, her smile instantly replaced with look of wide-eyed horror. She stopped just past the door, Dad all but running into her. Thankfully, Hannah kept most of him hidden.

“Taylor!?” one or both of them said, I wasn’t sure who. I quickly looked away, my face burning so hot it was almost painful.

“I-I, I’m just gonna wait downstairs!” Spinning on my heel, more or less ran from the room.

“Taylor!”

##

I was in the kitchen, a cup of tea in my hands and trying to banish the images from my mind when
Dad finally caught up with me. Thankfully he’d pulled on a shirt and some pants.

“Taylor?” he said gently.

“Oh! Right, you’re here!” I said quickly, hoping to get this conversation over as quickly as possible.

“Taylor-”

“With the Teeth and the Fallen out there, I don’t think it’s safe for you to go around unguarded. I know you wear that armour, but you really should think about carrying a weapon or letting one of my Autobots-”

“Taylor, please.” He put a hand on my shoulder and I forced myself to look at him. “I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to make you-”

“Dad, stop.” I held a hand up and took a deep breath. “I understand, I really do. Mom would want you to live, it was just… it was a shock, okay?”

Over his shoulder I saw Hannah stop in the doorway and step back out of sight. Thankfully she’d also pulled some clothes on, though I was fairly sure she was wearing Dad’s shirt.

Dad sighed, “Are you sure? We never wanted to hurt you, and I wouldn’t want you to think I was trying to replace Annette.”

“I promise you I’m not hurt, and I’m not angry. I just… I didn’t need to see that! Give me some time to adjust, okay? Now I need to get going, Vicky insisted on doing my ‘make-up’ before the memorial.”

###

Leaving Full Throttle, Arcee frowned. Groups of people going round offering food and money to anyone who agreed to listen to them and attend some meeting? That smacked of a recruitment drive. The only question was, which gang was it?

Checking the time, Arcee sighed. She was due to be at that memorial service soon, checking out the address would have to wait until later.

###

“So… they were actually…” Amy at least tried to look sympathetic. Vicky, however, was laughing so hard that she was struggling to breathe.

“Yes!”

I wasn’t entirely truthful when I told Dad that Vicky was doing my makeup. I had made plans to meet up with Amy and Vicky, but not until later in the day, just before the memorial was due to start. Thankfully, Amy had been happy to meet up earlier. It was just a shame she’d brought Vicky along.
“For what it’s worth”—Amy shrugged helplessly—“I think that's happened to everyone at some time or another.”

“I suppose… it’s just… well…” Pulling Amy closer, I lowered my voice. “I might have had a bit of a crush on her when I was younger.”

“Oh—oh! Yeah that's… squick?”

Vicky, who had finally calmed down, fell into another fit of giggles. Without looking, I put my foot against her back and gave her a hard power-armour-assisted shove, knocking her off the roof we were standing on.

She let out a strangled squawk, but quickly started giggling again from a few feet below us.

Smiling faintly, Amy shook her head at her sister’s antics before focusing on me again and gently putting a hand against my cheek.

“Really though, are you okay with it?”

“I… I don't know. I mean, I’m happy for Dad, I wasn’t lying about that… it’s just… I think I just need time to get used to it? Though I don't think I can ever unsee that!”

“Well… maybe you just need a distraction?” Blushing bright red, Amy rose up and gently pressed her lips against mine.

We stayed like that for awhile, just lost in each other until Vicky floated back up to the roof.

“Huh… are Dean and I as bad as you two?” she asked, with a grin that only got wider as we pulled apart, our faces flush with embarrassment.

“Come on, lovebirds, we need to get going or we’re going to be late.” Laughing, she turned and began floating off slowly.

##

The event was being held in memory of all the capes that had died fighting Leviathan, and was being held on Captain's Hill, at the base of the mountains to the west of the city. A large black obelisk had been erected there, made from polished marble with stainless steel in the core so that the letters etched onto it stood out.

In front of the obelisk, a temporary stage had been built with a podium at the front. Clearly, the Mayor or someone else would be making a speech.

In the past, efforts had been made to hold mass funerals for the capes who took part in the fights. It hadn’t ended well. It was impossible, of course, for the government to speak out in support of the criminals and supervillains who had died fighting Endbringers. One heroic act didn’t erase all the bad after all.
Then came those seeking glory and recognition for their part in the fight, and the more the powers that be tried to keep things quiet, the louder they shouted.

Fights broke out until, in the end, a memorial had become the norm. The thought made me feel sick. So many people dying on a three or four month cycle that it had become ‘normal’.

Still, the memorial itself looked good, with names carved on all four sides.

Escutcheon / Tyrone Venson
Erudite / Mavis Shoff
Fierceling /
Frenetic /
Furrow /
Geomancer / Tim Mars
Good Neighbor / Roberto Peets
Hallow /
Herald / Gordon Eckhart
Humble /

The list went on and on, cape name first, then their real name. I assumed the ones without names hadn’t given permission or still had people they needed to protect.

//from the well we are born and to the well we return.
We commend their sparks to the well of allsparks
Till all are one.//

“Till all are one…”

“Did you say something?” Amy asked suddenly, her voice making me jump.

“Hmm? What? Oh, don’t mind me, just a dream I had once.”

Amy looked sideways at me, but Vicky interrupted her before she could say anything.

“Don’t tell me you two are about to start kissing again!” She rolled her eyes, but made no effort to hide her smile.

Amy stuck her tongue out at her sister and we carried on.

In front of the stage, people were already gathering. Right by the stage stood the Protectorate and other heroes, and behind them were civilians. Off to the side, much smaller in number, stood a collection of villains who were either local, or hadn’t left the city yet. Defensor, Cyclonus, Arcee and Rhinox were also there, either talking to people or just keeping an eye on things.

Windblade was circling overhead, reporting on events for Blaster’s radio broadcasts.

The gathering crowd was being watched over by a mix of police and PRT troopers, with additional forces being supplied by the national guard. All of them were clearly armed and watching people carefully.
Not wanting to risk upsetting people by flying over their heads, Amy, Vicky and I chose to walk through the crowd to reach the others. The gathered people parted easily to let us through and I could feel dozens of eyes on my back as we walked.

I could hear people muttering as we passed, my suit picking up the occasional mention of my name, but I tried to ignore it.

None of us spoke as we moved forward and we soon found ourselves at the front of the crowd with the rest of New Wave and the Protectorate. We positioned ourselves between the two groups, standing with the Wards as we were all close in age.

I noticed the two new Wards, but I was more relieved to see everyone again. I’d known that they had made it through with only minor casualties, but seeing them all together lifted a tension I hadn’t even realised was there.

“You okay?” Gallant asked quietly. Some of the other Wards were throwing glances back in the direction we had come.

“Yeah, I just didn’t expect that.”

“I bet. Oh, let me introduce you.” He gestured to the new Wards, specifically the boy who looked like he was made of metal. “This is Weld, he’s the new leader of the Wards team; this is Flechette, who’s just transferred in from the New York Wards.”

The other Ward, a girl almost the same height as Amy, waved. She wore a skintight, deep purple costume with a visor and armoured panels.

Weld nodded, but held a hand up. “It’s probably best we don’t shake hands,” he said with a wry grin. “Metal tends to stick to me.”

I had a brief image of how that would look. “Yyyeah, that might be best. Rewind, can you warn the others?”

Before I could explain myself to Weld, there was movement in the crowd. The Mayor and a number of others had walked up onto the stage. Director Piggot was among them, looking tired but determined as she leaned on a cane.

The Mayor, the police commissioner, a woman in a firefighter’s uniform, a soldier, Director Piggot. It wasn’t hard to see the theme, and I realised, to my surprise, that Armsmaster wasn’t among the people on the stage. In fact, I hadn’t seen him at all. Instead, it was Mouse Protector standing next to the Director.

One by one, they all took a seat, except for the Mayor, who stepped up to the podium.

He paused briefly, letting the crowd go silent. “Director Piggot, the chief of police, outstanding members of the Protectorate, gathered capes, and most of all, survivors of the battle for Brockton Bay and the families of those we lost.” It sounded like the Mayor had finally hired a new speech writer.

“Monuments like this are symbols. They are enduring signs of character, of lessons we should all learn. We come together now to honor the courage of those who risked everything to save people they never knew. And even as we mourn their loss, we find the strength to carry on.”
I tuned him out as he spoke. The Mayor had been one of the first to leave the city on a private helicopter when the sirens had started. I didn't want to blame him for trying to keep himself and his family safe, but it still bothered me to hear him talk of sacrifice and duty when he hadn't even been here.

Dad had certainly had a few choice words to say when that had come out. That was probably why the Mayor was making such a big show of this memorial event when other cities avoided mass funerals or were much more subdued about such events, if they even had one at all.

It was all damage control for his career.

“And what about us?!” a voice shouted from the crowd as the Mayor's speech was winding down. A man pushed his way forward, unshaven, his clothes dirty. He looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks.

“What about our families, what about my daughter!?” he screamed. “She was taken, controlled by some sick fuck, and you bastards killed her! You didn’t even try to save her!”

Murmurs spread through the crowd. The morose atmosphere was shifting.

“I-I’m sorry for your loss,” the Mayor said quietly. “What hap—”

“And now we’re starving! There’s no food, no water! Criminals are looting everything they can get their hands on and all you care about are the fucking capes! What about us? What about those don’t have homes, who don’t have families!?”

As he shouted, police tried to push their way through the crowd to reach him. Up on stage, Director Piggot and the others had gotten to their feet, which was probably why the bullet went through her stomach and not her head.

The gunshot echoed over the suddenly-screaming civilians. On stage, men in dark suits were pulling the Mayor to safety while Mouse Protector put herself between the unknown shooter and the director.

Vicky took off, flying straight up and activating the shield I’d given her to cover everyone on stage. Two more shots rang out, but the bullets slammed harmlessly into the shield.

Around us, people panicked as they tried to push and shove each other out of the way. Some pushed forwards to the stage as they drew hidden weapons. “Autobots! Weapons free, get everyone out of here!”

Movement caught my eye and I turned to see a Molotov cocktail sailing through the air. Without thinking, I shoved Amy to the side. The glass bottle smashed against my helmet and the liquid went up in flames.

Gritting my teeth, I tried not to scream. The fire couldn’t hurt me, it was nowhere near hot enough, but it was still terrifying as the flames filled my vision. Whatever was in that bottle, it was sticking to me like tar. A hand closed around my upper arm as I struggled to clear my vision.

“Matrix! This way, come on!” Gallant shouted, pulling me in the direction of the others. Behind me, I heard the sound of weapons fire.
Giving up on my sight, I switched purely to sensors. Gallant was leading me towards a small lake near the edge of Captain’s Hill. Pushing him away, I ran forwards and dove in.

I stayed under for a few beats to make sure the fire was out, then surfaced.

The first thing I noticed was that the stage was on fire, the wooden frame billowing smoke. Most of the crowd was gone by now, leaving only the rioters.

*Taylor! Are you okay?!* Amy’s voice was the first one I heard as the pounding in my ears receded.

“T’m fine. Are you safe?”

“She’s with the others,” Gallant said, helping to pull me out of the water. “Now come on!”

I let him lead me away from the fighting and towards a trio of PRT vans. As soon as we got close, one of them opened up and Vicky waved us forwards.

Climbing inside, I found myself sharing a van with all the underage members of New Wave and Gallant. Not caring about the water, Amy pulled me into a hug.

“What’s going on?” I asked Gallant as he shut the door and the van started to move.

“We’ve been ordered back to the base.” he said with a shrug. “Whatever’s happening, we’re not to get involved.”

I wanted to argue, I wanted to go back and find the bastard that had tried to set me on fire, but I didn’t. I’d just have to trust that my Autobots could deal with the situation. In the distance, I could see smoke rising into the sky.

##

It started at Captain’s Hill but spread quickly.

Before the dust had even settled, another riot had started at the Captain’s Hill shelter, violent protesters smashing windows and burning the surrounding buildings while the police and national guard struggled to regain control. All the while, scared people were caught in the middle.

The violence lasted well into the night, only to start up again the very next day.

A protest outside City Hall quickly turned violent, morphing into a running battle that moved between the PRT HQ and the largest national guard camp.

The internet and news channels had exploded with comments and interviews, but the message, if there was such a thing, was never the same.

Many blamed capes for the state of the city, saying that we were the reason the Endbringers had attacked. More rational minds resented the favoritism capes on both side seemed to receive. Others were just scared, tired, and hungry. The city was in a bad shape, most of the shelters were struggling to get by, and there wasn’t enough food to go around. And of course, some just wanted to break shit
because they thought it was fun.

Throughout it all, the man who’d started it all by confronting the Mayor at the memorial service was being held up as a martyr. His name had been Michael Seebach and he’d worked as a reporter before Levithan had crushed the office and everyone inside.

He’d been found dead after the first riot, gunshot to chest. Needless to say, the Mayor was being blamed for that as well.

Now, after nearly three days, things were finally calming down. It had been hours since the last riot; maybe whatever anger was driving them had finally burned itself out?

Growling in irritation, I threw my tablet aside. It landed on the table with a clatter, startling Predaqueen, who’d been curled up on a large doggy bed. Blinking, she looked roughly in my direction, sniffing the air, then put her head down and went back to sleep.

No one could get a confirmed casualty list from the riots except only that it was in the double digits.

The sofa shifted as Amy sat down next to me and pressed herself against my side. Without thinking about it, I put my arm around her and pulled her into a hug.

“You okay?” she muttered.

“Yeah, just frustrated.” Letting myself relax, I kissed the top of her head. “It’s been a long time since I felt this useless.”

“Some things you can’t fix,” she said with a shrug.

She was right, of course, but it still sucked. Given how so many of the riots had been about or against capes, the PRT had ordered the Protectorate and Wards into hiding, warning any allied capes to do the same.

Even Amy’s offer to heal the director had been met with silence.

Dragon had agreed with them, telling me it was best that the Autobots and I stay out of sight to avoid provoking the situation. I didn’t like it - I hated it - but I couldn’t really argue.

Even now, nearly two dozen people were gathered outside the base holding signs like ‘We matter!’ and ‘Would you shoot me?’, or ‘Are we next?’

“Is your family alright?”

“Yeah, Ca-mom isn’t happy about moving out of her home again, but she doesn’t blame you for that. She’s actually grateful you offered to put them up. Their only other option would have been the PRT, and, well, Mom doesn’t like owing them favours.”

When it had become clear the riots were not going to stop, Dragon and I had converted one of the base’s hangers into a sleeping area and offered it up to any cape that needed a safe place to stay.

So far, New Wave had been the only takers, and had the entire building to themselves. Most capes could, and apparently had, taken their masks off and kept their heads down. New Wave, of course, didn’t have that option. Their faces, identities, and even addresses were publicly known, after all.
They’d made a point to arrive by air and in costume yesterday. The idea was that if people saw them arriving and knew where they were, no one would attack their homes, which were still under repair.

Having Amy’s parents so close by felt weird and I had to wonder if she felt the same way around Dad. Amy just smiled when I asked.

“What about your Dad?” Amy let go of me, sliding down so she was lying with her head in my lap, looking up at me.

“He’s staying with Hannah.” I tried not to think too hard about what they might be doing. He had been at work when the riots started and Hannah’s place was closer than the base so, he’d taken shelter there. After that, with the gathering crowd outside, he’d argued that it was safer to stay away from the base, rather than risk going through the protesters.

I didn’t agree. Personally, I thought he was just trying to give us both some space after I found out about his relationship. I knew he was worried I’d be upset about him dating Hannah, but it hurt more that he was trying to put distance between us.

“I thought I was the moody one?” Amy said, reaching up to touch my cheek.

“No, you’re the cute one.” I was so lost in my thoughts that the words had left my mouth before I knew it and it took a moment for my brain to catch up. When it did, my cheeks felt like they were going to explode.

Amy looked up at me with a blush, stunned for a moment before she broke down laughing.

“I’m sorry,” she said between giggles, “but the look on your face!”

“Oh yeah?” Reaching forward, I pressed my fingers into her sides and her giggles soon turned to into shrieks as we fell into a tickle fight.

Somehow, we ended up on the floor, tangled together and still giggling when Blaster’s voice came through the PA system.

“Taylor! Fighting just broke out at the Dockworkers Union building!”

##

Listening to the noise, Danny called himself seven different types of stupid.

Hannah had warned him to stay away from work, Taylor had all but demanded he go back to her base, but no. He had to be stubborn.

Outside, a large crowd had gathered, signs and flags in their hands. They pushed against the old metal fence, making it bend and shake. Some of the dockworkers were gathering with whatever whatever weapons they had. If this turned violent, it was going to do so in a big way.

“Gather up anyone who’s in the office,” he said to his secretary, “and get them out the back way and away from the dock!”
There were a couple of ways in or out of the docks; so long as the trouble was focused on the main office, everyone else should be fine.

As she hurried off, Danny looked out the window. A pair of men pushed through the crowd and started wrapping a heavy metal chain around the iron gates that marked the Docks main entrance. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Danny pulled a window open, shouting at the workers to run.

Behind the crowd, a car engine roared and a pickup truck charged away with a squeal of tires. The workers were already running as the gates were torn free with the screech of tortured metal.

The gates hit the ground with a clang, the crowd beyond surging forward, weapons in hand. Something, probably half a brick sailed through the air. Either through luck or good aim, it smashed into Danny's head.

##

High above the union office, Warpath and Rhinox appeared in the sky. The air whipping at them as they fell.

Pulling his chainguns from storage, Rhinox bellowed in warning while Warpath transformed. Hovering in the air, his first shot smashed into the pickup that had destroyed the gates.

Hitting the ground with enough force to crack the concrete, Rhinox rose out of a crouch and opened fire. The first wave of rioters went down in a hail of lights as bolts of energy either broken bones or stunned them senseless.

Behind them came more, these ones with improvised shields. Rhinox couldn’t risk punching through them without killing someone, but Warpath was free to launch containment foam grenades at the rioters.

Some of the rioters threw Molotov cocktails and other projectiles, while others opened fire with guns.

In all the chaos, no one noticed several of them sneak into the union building while up in the air, flashes heralded the arrival of more Autobots.

##

Danny sat up with a groan; his thoughts felt sluggish and head hung heavily. There was a dampness on his forehead, and reaching up, his blurry fingers came away red. He stared at the blurs of colour for a while, trying to work out what it meant.

Finally, his brain started to catch up and he realised he was looking at blood and everything was blurry because he wasn’t wearing his glasses. Looking around, he eventually found them on the ground; one of the lenses had broken, but he only really needed one to see where he was going.

As he climbed to his feet, he realised that the smell of smoke was getting worse. He was about to
leave when he heard the sound of smashing wood and voices from downstairs.

“If you find anyone, make sure they *never* leave!” someone shouted.

Cursing and wiping blood out of his eye, Danny hurried back into his office. Reaching under his desk, he pulled the crowbar he kept stashed there free. He wasn’t sure if he was imagining it or not, but he could already hear people coming towards him.

Moving behind the door, he pressed himself against the wall and held his breath as two men stormed into the room.

He got a glance at them as they passed. Both of them wore red and black, with Empire tattoos on the back of their necks. As such, Danny felt no remorse as he stepped out of hiding and brought his weapon down.

He hit the closest man in the shoulder with a wet crack of breaking bones. Stepping forward, he held the crowbar in a double handed grip and swung hard at the second man’s head.

Stepping back, the Empire thug reached out, catching the weapon mid-swing and pulling it from Danny’s hands. His free hand drove into Danny’s stomach, doubling him over. Danny struggled to catch his breath and the thug reached forward, pinning Danny against the wall.

“You shoulda just did what Kaiser asked,” he hissed and brought the crowbar up.

The wall to his right exploded in a shower of masonry as Matrix smashed her way through it. In one movement, she grabbed the thug, pulling him off Danny and slammed him face first into the far wall.

“##

“That,” I growled at the bastard who’d hurt my dad, “was a mistake!”

Pushing his head against the wall, I honestly considered shooting him a couple of times when the bastard put his hands against the wall and *pushed.*

The muscles on his arms strained, veins standing out as he tried to fight against me. My jaw dropped as inch by inch, his head started to move away from the wall. Lashing out with my foot, I kicked hard against his leg with a crunch. He bellowed in pain, distracted, and his arms went slack.

Not giving him another chance, I slammed his head forward against the wall again and again until his body went limp. Stepping back, I let him drop to the floor. He was still breathing, but I honestly couldn’t bring myself to care.

“Come on Dad, let’s get out of here.”

“M’sorry about this, kiddo,” he murmured, his words slightly slurred.

Resisting the urge to shoot the Empire bastard again, I put my dad’s arm over my shoulder and gently lifted him up. Leading him out of the office, I pushed him to move as fast as he could, as smoke was starting to fill the building. I kept the Null-Ray on my left ready to fire, just in case
someone tried to be cute.

Outside, the Autobots had pushed the riot back, breaking their advance and sending most of the rioters running. Defensor was standing ahead of the others, a large glowing shield providing all of us with cover and letting us move without risk of being shot.

In the wide clearing that was normally used by trucks sat one of Dragon’s ships, with its loading ramp down.

Dad looked around, squinting into the distance. “What about the others?”

“Don’t worry, Dad, everyone’s fine.” Keeping an eye out for any stragglers, I led Dad up the ramp and into the ship. It was cramped inside; nearly every available space was taken up with every dockworker we could find.

Amy was there too, treating the minor injuries. Seeing me half carry my dad onboard, she quickly rushed over and took his hand.

The wound on his head closed almost immediately, but his eyes remained unfocused. “Minor concussion, he’ll be fine after some rest,” she said as we sat him down and the Dragon craft took off.

Rhinox, Arcee

[Taylor, you okay?]

“Yeah, Rewind, I’m fine…”

[I think you should know that... people online are talking about this. They’re saying you came in and attacked a peaceful protest.]

“Already?” Amy said, she turned to look at me, her eyes wide. “Oh come on! It normally takes longer than that!”

“Not when it was expected,” I clenched my fists and forced myself to count slowly to ten. This wasn’t like the other riots; this one had nothing to do with Seebach.

“Rewind, can you access the union’s CCTV? I want you to post everything online, make sure everyone knows who started this fight. Blaster, can you hear me?”

*Hey boss, I’m always live, you know that!*

“Good. Put me on air, I want to make a statement.”

*Y’sure you don’t wanna wait a bit? Maybe calm down a touch?* he chuckled. *Of course not. I just hope you know what you’re doing.*

Closing my eyes, I opened my mouth and started to speak.

“Brockton Bay, my name is Matrix. And while I know you have little reason to trust me, I ask you to listen to me now. I know that things have been hard, and I know you’re scared, but what we all need right now is **solidarity**. We need to start **trusting** each other to solve the problems ahead of us. We cannot let the violence of the last few days drive us further apart. We need to remember that even
when things are their darkest, we are all one.”

//Till all are one//

In my head, I heard the echo. Thousands of voices reaching back beyond history and speaking as one.

“Of course, there are always people who hold themselves above all others. People who care for nothing and no one but themselves. The incident at the docks was not a peaceful protest, it was an outright attack. Kaiser, if you or one of your capes are listening, I know you were behind it. The attackers were wearing your colours, wearing your tags. For a man who claims to believe in blue collar workers, you're certainly quick enough to disregard them.”

I paused a moment, debating if I should say this or not. In the end, I felt like I had to, just to make a point. “Your men just tried to kill my father… you have my attention.”

I cut the connection before I said anything else. Poking the Empire was one thing. Calling Kaiser a coward on a citywide broadcast was another entirely. Either way, hopefully this would undermine some of Kaiser’s support and maybe even calm things down.

Or it’ll all blow up in my face.

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After nearly two hours, my anger had mostly burned itself out. Don’t get me wrong, I was still angry, but I wasn’t about to hunt Kaiser down and butcher him. At the very least I was calm enough to sit down and think about what had happened as I watched Dad sleep off the concussion.

I knew he’d be alright since Amy had checked him over twice, but I still couldn’t bring myself to leave the room.

That it let me avoid Dragon was just a bonus.

“This isn’t healthy you know,” Rung said quietly. He was sitting at the end of Dad’s bed, giving me a patient look. “What happened to your father wasn’t your fault. The Dockworkers’ Association has a long history of conflict with the Empire Eighty-Eight that goes back long before you were even born.”

“I know that!” I snapped. Huffing, I pushed my hair out of my face. “Anyway, I’m not about to go downtown and shoot everyone in Empire colours, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“And if Danny had died?” His tone was soft, his expressive face a picture of understanding. It helped to take the sting out of his words.

Even so, I reflexively clenched my fists. I didn’t even want to think about what I might have done if I’d been too late. Dad was the only family I had left, and if anything happened to him, my Autobots, or Amy… I had enough firepower to level what was left of Brockton Bay.

Rung sighed, but gave me a gentle smile. “Taylor, there is nothing wrong with being angry. Given everything that’s happened, you should be angry, but don’t let that drive you to do something you’ll regret. Do you really think the city needs another war?”

“No really…” Maybe I’d let my temper get the best of me when I made that speech, but I couldn’t bring myself to regret it. As long as the Empire was focused on me and me alone, I could keep everyone else safe. However, I was grown up enough to admit that threatening the largest parahuman gang in the city wasn’t exactly going to help de-escalate the situation when the city was already tearing itself apart.

There was a soft knock on the door frame and I looked up to see Amy in the doorway, Miss Militia standing behind her, hesitating to enter the room.

“Sorry, we can come back later if you’d -” Miss Militia said, her eyes flicking to Dad.

I stood up. “No, it’s fine. I need a shower anyway.” Besides, sitting here feeling sorry for myself wasn’t helping anyone and I could use the distraction.

“You don’t have to leave,” she insisted, following Amy into the room and pulling down her mask. “Really Taylor, I wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

Oh for the love of-! Huffing, I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her. It was awkward, Miss Militia tensed at the sudden movement and hesitated to put her arms on me. She stank of sweat and blood, but I wanted to make a point.
“You are not making me uncomfortable and I’m not angry with either of you!” Really, the three of us needed to sit down and talk, but there just never seemed to be enough time. “Honestly, I’m happy for you both. Just… try to lock the door from now on?”

Hannah laughed quietly, her body relaxing slightly as she patted me on the back.

With a weak smile, I let her go and stepped back. “But seriously, I do need a shower and I’ve got a ton of work to do. Keep an eye on Dad for me?”

Leaving her to take my empty seat, I walked outside. Amy grabbed my hand the moment the door shut and pulled me forward. Stopping at my room, she quickly pulled me into a hug.

“I suppose that was one way to make a point,” she said with a soft smile. “Seriously though, you okay?”

“I’m pissed off,” I admitted, resting my head on hers. “I hate myself for forgetting to send Warpath to the docks with Dad and for thinking my reputation was enough to keep him safe -”

“Don’t do that,” she said quietly, cutting me off. “Trust me, hating yourself just makes it worse.”

She gave me a watery smile and a quick kiss before I could say anything more. Letting me go, she nudged me towards my room. “Now go have a shower. I’ll see you downstairs.”

After a long, hot shower, I had to admit I was feeling a bit better.

Checking with Teletraan, I found Amy and most of my Autobots gathered together in Lisa’s ‘infosphere’. The various monitors were lit up with streams of video, text or images.

“What’s going on?”

Arcee looked up from a glowing screen. “Streetwise has been doing some digging into the riots, he thinks he’s got something.”

Streetwise hummed in agreement but stayed focused on the floating screens in front of him. “I just need to double check some numbers, give me a minute?”

Leaving him to it, I took a look around. Amy was sitting in Lisa’s chair, watching everything with interest and gently patting Steeljaw’s head. Cyclonus was standing guard near the door, leaning against the wall, his eyes dark. The now human-sized Wheeljack was huddled into a far corner with Nautica, a glowing hologram between them as they worked on something.

Out of curiosity, I pulled up a terminal and pinged my other Autobots.

Rewind was in the ‘rec room’ with Chromedome, Ratchet and First Aid were in the medical wing, Rhinox was outside tending to his flowers and keeping an eye on the protestors outside with the help of the Protectobots and Warpath. Windblade was downstairs talking to Dragon, Rattrap was still keeping an eye on Lisa and Soundwave was in the ‘communications room’ with Blaster.

Huh… “Soundwave? What are Ravage, Waspinator and Laserbeak doing downtown?”
I looked at Arcee, who shrugged. “You want to go after the Nazis right? The boys are just looking for some soft targets to hit.”

Smirking, I brought up a map of the city with the ‘Terracons’ patrol route highlighted in red. “Find anything?”

“No,” Arcee said with a huff. “Nothing more than a couple of drug dealers.”

Amy giggled. “Show her the footage of that one Ravage snuck up on!”

A general sense of amusement filled the room; even Cyclonus smirked slightly.

“Ravage walked up behind a drug dealer and sat there for nearly five minutes.” Arcee smiled. “Poor son-of-a-glitch never noticed or even realise why his buyer suddenly ran off until he turned around.”

“And?”

“Ravage has an impressive roar,” Arcee said by way of explanation and I decided to pull up the footage first chance I got. “Beyond that, the whole territory is dead. Almost no one is wearing gang colours and none of the capes have been seen. Even PHO or Blaster’s hot-line have been quiet…”

“The Empire is trying to avoid retribution.” Cyclonus’s eyes lit up and he glared at one of the floating screens. “They know we will be coming for them and they hope to go unnoticed.”

“It’ll likely be a week before any of them are spotted,” Streetwise said suddenly, the screens around him blinking out.

“They’re running scared?”

“Or bucket-head is planning something.” Streetwise shrugged. “Okay, first things first, your speech has gone down well. It’s been reposted a dozen times on PHO and while Blaster hasn’t replayed it, he has had a number of people phone in to say they agree with you or voice similar opinions. There has been some blowback, though, more than a few have commented on capes only getting involved once ‘one of them’ got hurt.”

He gave me an apologetic shrug while Amy pinched the bridge of her nose. She muttered something too quietly for me to hear, but based on her tone, it likely wasn’t ‘polite’.

“Well, it’s not like I expect everyone to like me;” I said with a snort.

Streetwise chuckled. “Yeah. Regardless, I’ve done everything I can. Best I can tell, all the riots were genuine. They all happened in areas worst affected areas of the city. The only one we can prove the Empire caused is the attack on the docks.”

“So we’ve just gotta wait and hope one of them sticks their head out.” Arcee frowned. “Who knows what they could get up to before then?”

“Nothing good.” I brought up a console and connected to the comm system. “Blades, Cyclonus, any chance you can patrol Empire territory? I want you to be as visible as possible, but do not put
*Oh sure, take all the fun outta it!* Blades grumbled over the radio.

“Don’t worry, I will keep an eye on him.” Cyclonus pushed himself away from the wall and left the room.

Ravage and Laserbeak were excellent scouts, but they worked best when unnoticed and no one could really consider Waspinator a threat - with the exception of maybe Rune. Cyclonus and Blades, however, were much more noticeable.

I wasn’t sure the Empire was really scared of me. It was more likely they just wanted to avoid a direct fight. Still, if I put a little pressure on them, something would have to give.

“Let’s up the number of patrols in Empire territory, keep this fresh in their memories and -”

*Warning, hostile parahuman detected!* Teletraan’s warning suddenly cut me off and a screen appeared showing me a view of the sky above my base.

Sure enough, Rune was floating twenty feet above the forcefield. She was standing on what looked like a snowboard but the usual floating debris she used as weapons were noticeably absent. She also had her hands up.

Floating above Autobot City, Rune hoped to hell Matrix was willing to listen and didn’t decide to just shoot her out of the air.

This whole situation was so fucked up it wasn’t even funny. When the riots had started, she’d thought it would be a great time to go out and smash some shit up. She’d barely made it out of the door before Othala had called and ordered her to Kaiser’s current ‘base.’

Kaiser wanted them all ready in case another gang tried to be clever.

Then that riot had happened at the docks with the dyke blaming them for it. Rune had never seen Kaiser lose his temper like that before.

And now here I am, playing fucking messenger girl, she grumbled to herself.

Below her, a gap opened in the side of the shield and one of the Autobots flew out. The mostly red paint of Windblade stood out in the night sky as she flew up.

“Is there something you want?” the robot said coldly as she drew level. Rune couldn't help but notice the rather large gun in the ‘woman’s’ hand.

Rune bit back her first response. Instead, she called out, “Can we land?” It was cold at this height and it took concentration to stay in the air.

Windblade stared at her, her eyes narrowing, then she waved towards a nearby building. The windows were dark, likely abandoned but the roof was flat and Rune couldn't see anything that looked like a weapon. Not that it meant much, when it came to tinkers.
As she was under orders not to argue or cause trouble, Rune turned and floated down to the roof. Windblade followed close behind her, the only sound being the fans in her wings.

Landing, Rune relaxed slightly. Sure, she was still standing outside the base of a tinker who was likely pissed as all hell, but it looked like they were at least willing to hear her out.

“Now, why are you here?” Windblade asked, her free hand resting on her hip.

“Kaiser sent me. He wants you to know the attack on the docks wasn’t ordered by him.” Rune held her hands up as Windblade gave her a disbelieving glare.

“Is that everything?”

“No, he’s asking for time to find the people responsible and deal with them. He wants to meet with Matrix in three days at a neutral location.”

“Why did he send you with this message? Why not an unpowered member?”

Rune pointed at the people still gathered outside Autobot city. “You think some random fuckwit in Empire colours is getting past that after the speech your boss made? They’d tear him apart!”

Glancing around, Rune cursed. “Look, Kaiser’s pissed. Ever since you guys turned up things have been fucked up and now this? Fuck, everyone knows who you work for, you really think he wants to fight Dragon?”

That's not really why I’m here. She didn’t voice the thought, even though it wouldn’t leave her alone. She was here because she was expendable. Hookwolf, Stormtiger, the fucking bimbos, even Purity. Any of them could have delivered this message and gotten away safely. Instead, here she was.

Windblade tapped the side of her helmet, her eyes never leaving Rune. “He has forty-eight hours. Matrix will meet him at the docks.”

Growling in irritation, Rune quickly used her phone to send a message to Othala. As a rule, none of the Empire capes’ phones had Kaiser’s number stored, though she suspected that rule only applied to the capes he didn’t trust.

Looking up from her phone, she noticed an odd expression on Windblade’s face. Rune expected the Autobot was just as pissed as her creator, but instead Windblade was giving her a long, considering look.

“What?” she snapped.

“How old are you?”

“None of your fucking business!”

“I suppose not.” Sighing, Windblade closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Oh, fuck you!” Rune snapped, her temper finally slipping free. “I don't need your pity. 'Oh, the poor girl’” - she raised her voice in a high pitched mockery of Windblade’s - “That awful Kaiser must be abusing her!”
“I didn’t-”

Rune snorted in disgust. “Oh please, don’t give me that bullshit. Let me tell you something, I do this because I enjoy it! Flying through the city, taking what I want, doing what whatever the hell I like? I fucking love it!”

“And what happens when Kaiser orders you to die for him?” Windblade’s voice never wavered, it never rose above that gentle politeness.

Rune worked her mouth silently and for a moment, she considered just attacking the pretentious bitch and being done with it. Instead, she swallowed back her anger. Kaiser would be pissed if she fucked this up now.

Thankfully, before the tin-chink could say anything more, Rune’s phone beeped. She took a moment to calm down while she read the message.

“Kaiser isn’t happy, but he agrees to the terms.” Stepping back onto her board, Rune started to lift herself into the air. “We’re done here.”

“Rune?” Windblade called before she could clear the roof. “Maybe It's time for you to ask yourself; who are you? And what do you want?”

I watched the screen as Rune threw Windblade one final dirty look before flying away.

The moment she’d appeared, I’d wanted to fly up there myself or just blast her out of the sky. In the end, it had seemed like a better idea to send Windblade to talk to her.

“You think she was telling the truth?” Amy asked from her seat. She’d been glaring at the video of Rune the entire time.

“If it is the truth,” Streetwise called up more screens, “then it means his control over the Empire is less stable than we thought.”

“So, you're really going to meet him?” Amy moved to stand next to me, putting an arm around my waist. I wasn’t going to complain, but she was definitely a hugger.

I shrugged as I considered what to do. If Kaiser did turn up at the docks, it would be the perfect place to arrest him, though that ran the risk of hurting my reputation. Who trusted a cape that couldn't keep to a truce after all?

“Maybe I should just cover the area in containment foam mines and detonate them the moment he arrives?”

Amy snorted and Arcee chuckled.

“If nothing else, I’d love to see the look on his face.”

Straightening up, I stretched until my spine made a satisfying crack that made Amy grimace.
Laughing, I poked her in the ribs.

“So, if the Empire is planning to stay quiet, what should we do?” I asked, mostly talking to myself.

“We could always borrow one of Dragons ships and go to Vegas?” She said with a laugh. “God knows we could do with a vacation.”

“Ugh, tell me about it. What do you guys think?”

“Long straight roads, open desert and endless sky?” Arcee smirked, “Sounds great. It’s a shame the teleporter is one way, or we could just vanish for a few hours.

“Yeah, nice for you maybe. I have no interest in reenacting ‘the fly’.”

“Could that really happen?” Amy asked, looking pale.

I shook my head, “Not really. A human going through that teleporter would likely end up looking like ground beef. The teleporter really wasn’t designed for humans.”

“Actually…” Wheeljack and the other ‘science bots’ looked up from what they were doing. “We’ve been thinking about that. Why can’t we make it human safe?”

Walking over Wheeljack pulled up a dozen screens, each filled with information. I looked over them quickly, one document after another filled with formulas and rough ideas. There was even sensor data that Dragon had gathered with the help of movers like Strider.

“Nautica found all this while looking through some of Dragon’s old research.”

I looked to Nautica, who gave me a nervous smile, “Dragon spent time studying movers. She wanted to find an efficient way to move large groups of heroes around but kept running into the usual problems of tinker-tech.”

‘Safe, efficient, reliable. Pick two,’ was how Kid Win phrased it.

“Dragon eventually settled on using airships, but she kept all her notes. Including this!”

A new screen appeared, this one detail a device that the Police had confiscated in 1984 and credited to ‘Professor Haywire’.

I knew that name. He was a tinker that specialised in dimensional technology, creating weapons and devices that focused on moving through various realities. He was the one who opened the connection to Earth-Alph, very nearly sparking a war in the process.

The notes Dragon made said the machine was an earlier device that was damaged when it was captured and she’d been unable to restore it. Nautica had apparently been studying it for a while as there were pages of extra notes and mathematical formulas attached.

“I like quantum physics,” Nautica said quickly when I asked.

Looking at the data, I felt ideas starting to surface. It all floated in my mind like a puzzle, I had all the pieces, I just needed to work out how it all went together. Pulling up a hologram of Haywire’s device, I started making changes.
As the four of us started to bounce ideas around, I vaguely heard Amy talk about making some tea.

Two days after the debacle at the docks, Kaiser walked into what had once been the parking lot for the dockworkers union office. Hookwolf, Storm Tiger, and Fenja following close behind. Menja, Purity and Rune hung back with the car, staying out of sight in case Matrix tried to trap him.

Kaiser took up his position at the front of the group while his men spread out in a curved line behind him.

Normally, he wouldn’t be at such a meeting, nevermind letting the other party set the terms. But this wasn’t a normal situation. With the ABB and the Merchants gone, and his own forces weakened, Matrix was now the largest single force in the city. Whether she knew it or not, her actions against Leviathan and her connections to the hero’s made her a major player in the city.

When she accused him of attacking her family, when she called him a coward, the entire city was listening. He had no choice but to answer, no matter how much it infuriated him.

That meant she needed careful handling despite being an arrogant child.

“Think she’ll turn up?” Hookwolf rumbled with a voice like scraping knives. “No one's seen her in days.”

Looking up at the burned out remains of the union office, Kaiser spotted a small shape in the darkness, perched on the roof. It was hard to make out, but he was fairly sure it was one of her creations.

“I believe she wishes to make an entrance.”

No sooner had he spoken before a swirling vortex of green energy appeared before them with a whump of displaced air. Seconds later, Matrix emerged from the portal, followed by every single Autobot.

Matrix’s armour was bristling with weapons, including a large shoulder mounted cannon. It looked like the armour he’d seen her field against Leviathan. The ten Autobots, likewise, were all visibly armed and fanned out behind Matrix, mirroring the positioning of his own men.

Despite being armed to the teeth, the Autobots held their weapons loosely at their sides, apparently unconcerned with the empire capes.

The message was clear, Matrix was showing off. Gritting his teeth, Kaiser forced his hands to unclench.

“I see you have decided to come in person this time,” he said smoothly.

While I wasn’t sure what Kaiser knew about me or my bots, he clearly wasn’t an idiot. Hookwolf and Stormtiger had the best chance of actually hurting me or my Autobots while Rune and Cricket,
the ones I could counter easiest, were nowhere to be seen.

“I thought it was clear I called you here to discuss a truce or did my messenger failed to mention that?” His helmet and armour hid everything, making it nearly impossible to tell what he was feeling.

“You say truce, what you really mean is; ‘chance to reload your guns’.” To my surprise, Kaiser laughed. It was a warm, rich sound and I suspected he was either fairly handsome under that mask, or just had a nice voice.

“Normally, yes. But you and I both know this city wouldn't survive a war between us. Isn’t that why you agreed to this meeting?”

“I just wanted to hear your excuses for myself,” I said bluntly. If I fight broke out here, there would be nothing in the way but the burned out remains of Dad’s office.

“I am not here to give excuses. The attack on your father had nothing to do with me. Yes, my men were involved, but I gave no such orders and certainly did not approve of them, or you attempting to link the events to me.”

“Unless it had worked,” I crossed my arms as much as my ‘war’ armour would allow. “I know what happened to Fleur.” Amy had told me the full story, how Fleur was gunned down in the streets by a man trying to join the Empire. According to Streetwise, he had been welcomed into the gang upon his release from prison and I felt no shame in giving his address to New Wave.

“I assure you, the men responsible will be dealt with.”

“By who, you?” I snapped, trying to keep my temper under control. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? You’ll make up for the attempted murder of my father by killing some random people and telling me they were responsible?”

“No, I also have this.” Kaiser nodded his head and Stormtiger took a step forward. In his hand was a ziplocked plastic folder. Walking forward, he stopped halfway forward and held the folder out.

“Arcee?” I asked over a private connection.

She stepped forward and took the folder. As they both returned to their positions, she opened it and scanned through the documents, sending them to us all. My blood turned to ice at the picture of Eligos and Valefor. There was also an address and other information written on the documents.

“How long have you had this?” I demanded, stepping forwards.

Kaiser didn’t move, but Hookwolf stepped forwards, growling like a chainsaw. I aimed my shoulder mounted gun at him, even at low power, it would tear through him like paper.

Kaiser held out a hand to stop Hookwolf. “A few days at most. I was in the process of verifying it when this happened.”

*I know this address,* Arcee said over the radio so Kaiser couldn’t hear it. *Ben told me the people who had been harassing him came from there*

“I trust this, and my assurances that the people responsible will be punished settles things between us?” Kaisers voice was like silk, I could almost see the smile on his face and for a moment, I
seriously considered blasting him, truce or no.

Instead, I decided to be subtler and turned to leave, exposing my back and silently daring him to attack me as the ground bridge opened up.

“Dragon! You need to see this!” I hissed over the radio. Cameras on the back of my armour showed Kaiser clenching his fists, but he made no move to attack us as we entered the portal.

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Had a bit of trouble getting this one beta checked, but i’m honestly tired of sitting on it. Don’t be surprised if I have to come back and re-upload this.
“Oh sure, send in the rat, not like he’s small and vulnerable,” Rattrap muttered to himself as he walked through the building’s crawl space, his tail leaving trails in the thick dust and his whiskers twitching in irritation.

It wasn’t like he didn’t understand how important this was, and he really wanted to hurt the Fallen after what they did to Blondie, but at the end of the day, he was a rat. If Valefor or his bodyguard caught him, he was good as dead.

*Maybe we should reformat you into a chicken,* Arcee said dryly. *Now focus on your mission. We only get one shot at this.*

“Yes ma’am, whatever you say, ma’am,” Rattrap said sharply, stopping to stand up and salute. Hearing her tired sigh, he dropped down and continued walking.

“What’s the point in risking your neck if you don’t get to complain about it?”

There was no answer, but he knew she was still listening, all the Autobots were. They had to be, just in case something went wrong or Buckethead’s information turned out to be true and the Fallen really were here.

The building he was currently crawling through had once been a youth centre, built back when the city had money to spare. Like a lot of buildings of the era, it was a concrete box, with some windows cut into it, wedged between a couple of high rises in the cheaper part of the city.

While it was nothing special to look at, the walls were thick enough to keep the heat in and there was enough space to house a large number of people. That made it a perfect shelter for those displaced by Levithan.

Which was why the boss didn’t want to just send in the big guns. If the building was nothing more than a shelter, it would only make things worse to turn up, guns in hand, and start threatening people.

*Of course, there ain't nowhere that can keep me out,* Rattrap thought as he navigated through the maze of pipe holes, air conditioning and rat tunnels. In the distance, he could hear people talking and the clinking of plates.

Following the noise, he reached a small hole in the wall. Carefully, he stuck his tail through. When there were no immediate sounds of alarm, he turned around and slowly poked his head out, sniffing the air as he did so.

He was in what had once been a kitchen. The hole emerged underneath a set of metal cupboards, their legs holding them a few inches off the floor and giving him room to move. To his right, someone had shoveled a mouse trap as close as they could to the hole. There was even a hunk of half-rotten cheese on it.

*Don’t they know that's a myth?* Shaking his head, Rattrap turned left and followed the wall. He could hear people in the room talking. Most of it was just typical small talk: ‘How are the kids? Does anyone know if there are blankets spare?’ and so forth.
The most interesting bit of gossip was that a young girl called Louise had managed to get herself pregnant. All in all, none of it would be out of place in any of the city’s shelters. Not exactly what one would expect from a group of cultists.

*Then again, not everyone here was a cultist.* Things were bad in the city, who knew how many people had been lured here just by the promise of a roof, a warm meal and a dry bed?

Reaching the end of the wall, Rattrap hesitated, waiting until he was confident it was safe before darting across the floor and ducking under another a tall cupboard that reached the ceiling. He heard a strangled scream and a plate shattering against the floor as someone spotted him.

Freezing, he listened intently as whoever it was ran off. They quickly returned, ranting to another person about filthy rats all over the place.

Rattrap’s fur bristled. He was *not* filthy. Ignoring them, he used the small gap between the cupboard and the wall to reach the ceiling. Judging by the hole he found in the wall, he wasn’t the first rat to come this way.

Squeezing through, he found himself in another crawl space, this one between the ceiling of the room below and the floor of the room above. Dirt was thick on the floor, making his nose twitch as he walked but he did his best to ignore it. Light spilled through the occasional gap that let him listen in on the people below.

*Any luck?* Arcee asked suddenly, her voice making him jump in surprise.

“Don’t do that!” he squeaked, his fuel pump racing.

*Sorry,* she said, not sorry in the least, *everything is ready here, we’re just waiting on you.*

“You do realise Buckethead could have lied, right? They might not even be *in* the ci -” there was a commotion below him, a nervous atmosphere rising up as people started moving with a purpose.

“- Call you back!” he hissed, doing his best to follow the crowd from his narrow passage.

It soon became clear that not everyone was heading in the same direction. Some, generally the biggest and healthiest looking people, were moving towards the front doors, drawing hidden weapons from cubby holes as they moved.

The rest made their way further into the building, gathering in what had likely been one of the sports halls; one of the walls still had a rusted metal hoop bolted to it. Rattrap watched as the people below lined up, facing towards a blank wall and kneeling.

A swirling green vortex appeared and a man emerged. He wore heavy plated armour, with claws built into his gauntlets. Matching obsidian horns swept back over his head, along with a mask that covered his entire face, bar one eye.

*“Eligos is here,”* Rattrap hissed as the portal closed.

Eligos watched as the people bowed before him. He had to admit, the sight was intoxicating.
These people weren't believers, not real ones. Maybe one in three had the fortitude to truly join the Fallen. Some of the more desirable people had already been taken back to Mama Mathers and put to work increasing their numbers. The others would serve as fodder for Valefor’s plans.

“My brothers and sisters!” Public speaking wasn’t his thing; he couldn't hold people like Valefor did, he lacked the divine presence needed to make them listen, so he had to keep his speeches short and simple.

“Valefor sends word that things are moving quickly and that you should be ready to -”

The wall behind him exploded in a shower of concrete as a small, but heavily armoured vehicle crashed into the building, bricks bouncing off its thick armour. Even though the dust, the red sigil of the Autobots could be seen.

“Eligos of the Fallen!” Rhinox shouted, transforming as the wall crumbled around him. “You are under arrest!”

“Fuck me!” Stumbling backwards, Eligos sent a blast of air at Rhinox, pushing the Autobot back slightly but not hurting him.

“Shoot, shoot!” he ordered. Around him, the smarter of Eligos’s minions opened fire, even as the purple form of Cyclonus stepped through the hole. Both Autobots kept their arms up to shield their faces, but neither seemed threatened by the gunfire, content to let his followers expend their ammunition.

Drawing on air around him, Eligos readied another, more powerful blast when the far wall behind him exploded and a squad of men storm in, their armour branded with a red dragon symbol. Their glowing shields protecting them from the bullets, the soldiers opened fire with bolts of blue light. Anyone they hit was knocked off their feet and didn't rise.

Divine blessing spared him, their shots going wide as he ran for the door in an effort to escape.

“Don’t let him get away, we need him alive!” a soldier shouted behind him.

The sound of gunfire filled the building, his guards shooting through windows at the gathered police forces outside. Ignoring them, Eligos ran forward. He couldn’t afford to be captured here. Leaving his men to buy him time, he unleashed a blast of air at a nearby wall, punching a hole into the building next door. Crossing the gap, he blasted the next wall.

The sound of weapons fire was fading when he burst through the final wall, emerging into a side street that ran between the buildings.

Breathing deep, he tried to catch his breath when the sound of a motorbike made him turn. Skidding round the corner came a blue motorbike, Mouse Protector clinging to the handlebars and whooping with joy.

Cursing, he used a blast of air to propel himself further down the road, but it wasn’t enough. As the bike drew level, Mouse Protector jumped, first onto the saddle, then into the air.

She threw her shield at him like a discus, forcing him to turn and intercept it with a gust of wind. Mouse Protector appeared suddenly, snatching the shield and bringing her sword down in an
overhead strike.

Eligos caught the blade on his gauntlet

“Eh garde!” Mouse Protector shouted with a smile, pushing back against him.

The motorbike had carried on forwards, transforming into Arcee as she skidded to a stop, her arm turning into a gun.

Twisting, Eligos tried to watch them both, even as he had to duck under another sword swipe.

“Toupee!” Mouse Protector called as she continued to attack.

They continued to dance back and forth, her sword glancing harmlessly off his armour, while she continued to bounce and flip around his punches. Meanwhile Arcee continued to circle around them, weapon at the ready.

Growling in frustration, Eligos dived forward, grabbing Mouse Protector’s shield to hold her in place. Arcee’s gun let out a bark and his shoulder exploded in pain.

Letting the hero go, he staggered forward, his good arm coming up to feel the damage. The broken armour fell to the floor, exposing the black bodysuit he wore underneath, but there was no blood.

He’d barely had a chance to think about that when Mouse Protector was on him again, literally. Jumping on his back, using the spikes of his armour as a handhold.

“Ladies and gentlemen, give the man a hand!” she crowed, one hand closing on his shoulder.

Bellowing in pain, Eligos released a blast of air, knocking the hero loose and sending her flying. Spinning around, he unleashed another blast before she could recover. The shot glanced off hit her shield, sending her into a wall with a crunch.

The hero slumped bonelessly to the ground.

“Mouse!” Arcee charged forward, but a power assisted jump from Eligos sent him up and over her head.

Grunting as he hit the ground, Eligos ran, glancing only briefly only his shoulder to see Arcee fussing over Mouse Protector. He’d nearly reached the end of the street when he heard a bike engine roar.

Cursing, he turned the corner just in time for the goddess to smile on him.

Against all odds, a young woman was leaning against the wall in a dark leather jacket, her long blonde hair pulled into a ponytail. She was staring intently at her cellphone, headphones strapped to her ears, oblivious to the world.

Lunging forward, he grabbed the girl. She shrieked in terror as he wrapped an arm around her throat, spinning them both to put her between himself and the approaching Autobot while while his free hand the other fumbled with his phone.

Tires screeched as Arcee came to a stop, transforming and drawing her weapon but not making a
“Let her go!” Arcee barked, but he ignored her and put his phone to his ear.

“Get me out of here!” he growled over the sobs of his hostage.

A portal sprang to life behind him and the girl’s cries became more frantic. Arcee visibly tensed, likely readying herself to follow him.

He smirked. Dropping his phone, he drove his now free hand into the girl’s back, the spikes on his forearm punching through her jacket. The jagged metal broke off in the wounds, making the girl scream again.

Shoving her forward, he dove backwards through the portal as Arcee rushed to help the girl. His last sight as the street vanished was of her angry glare.

Eligos hit the ground with a thud, driving the air from his lungs. Coughing, he staggered to his feet. That had been far too close. He had barely had a moment to breathe before Valefor arrived in the room, his expression thunderous.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“The fucking Autobot -”

“Leave!” Valefor snapped before he could say any more. “Get out of here, now! Raum, take him away from here!”

“What?” Eligos looked between Valefor and the portal in confusion, but any further questions died as the world around him slowed to a crawl, his thoughts cloudy as he felt himself detach from his body.

“Go now and check yourself for tracking devices!” Valefor ordered.

He straightened up; some small part of him was aware of what was happening, but he was unable to do anything about it. Turning around, he marched through the open portal, Valefor and Raum following behind him.

They emerged in the middle of a desert, a flat expanse of sand rolling away in all directions. The sky above them was pitch black.

As the portal snapped shut behind them, Eligos stopped walking, still moving under Valefor’s control as as he started to pull his armour off.

The first insect-like robot turned out to be in the back of his helmet. It was small enough that it had been able to hide under the overlapping plates of his armour but it was also fragile enough that he could crush it in his hands. The next was near his waist and another was in his boot.

As he continued his search, he saw Valefor lean down and mutter something to Raum. There was the telltale flash of a portal opening, then silence.
Doing as he was told, Eligos unstrapped each piece of armour, pausing only long enough to check for more devices. When his armour was laid on the ground around him, his hands started on his bodysuit, peeling it off despite the freezing temperature.

After what felt like an age, Eligos sagged in relief, his mind clearing as he regained control of his body. He’d seen Valefor control people before, but that was the first time he’d ever experienced it himself. Being a prisoner inside his own body had been…

He pushed the thought away, finally able to look around. As he suspected, he found himself alone with Raum. The dark skinned man just stared blankly ahead, trapped forever under whatever orders Valefor had given him. “Sorry bastard,” Eligos muttered in a brief moment of pity.

Shivering from more than just the cold air, he snatched his bodysuit off the ground, shaking it in an attempt to remove some of the sand before he pulled it back on. It was a little itchy, but it would have to do for now.

As he started to pull his armour back on, his fingers traced the damage the Autobots had inflicted. He’d been wearing his more ornate set with the exaggerated spikes, to impress the people at the shelter. All the overlapping plates of extra armour had given the little robotic bastards plenty of hiding spaces. He’d have to stick to his more practical set for a while.

“Take me to Valefor!” he snapped, not wishing to linger here longer than necessary. He knew he’d fucked up by running back to Valefor while literally bugged, but that didn’t give the bastard the right to use his power on him like that.

Still angry, he stormed through the portal without checking to see if Raum was following.

It was dusk as Eligos was escorted outside. The sky was clear and the ground beneath his feet dry as he walked. Others marched around him, their gazes fixed ahead, refusing to meet his. He knew why of course. He’d made a mistake and now he was to be punished.

He’d been stripped of his armour, left with only his still sand dusted bodysuit while he waited for his judgement.

Following the path from the small outhouse he’d been kept in, he rounded the copse of trees that screened the large plantation house from view.

The house was only two stories tall, but it stretched out lengthways, packed with dozens of windows. The white paint was as immaculately kept as the front lawn, all but glowing in the dwindling light.

Despite the warm temperatures, a brazier had been placed just to the side of the steps that led to the veranda, the fire within blazing.

Past the fire a woman sat in the shade, her hair almost as white the walls. As they approached, she stood and walked forward, stopping at the top of the steps. She was taller than him, gaunt, with wispy hair. She wasn’t old, but she had the presence of an old woman, thin enough that it seemed like she would break or crumple into a heap if struck.
Eligos knelt at the foot of the steps and bowed his head. He looked up only when she spoke.

“My son tells me you nearly exposed him today,” she said, almost conversationally, “that you almost led the faithless to his door.”

He lowered his head again.

“Nothing to say?” Her voice was harder now, anger seeping through.

“No… I made a mistake. I was too focused on escaping to think about my actions.” He spoke as clearly as he could. He’d had plenty of time to reflect on his actions by now and had already accepted his fate. “They wanted me alive, I couldn’t risk them capturing me.”

“You could have killed yourself,” she said simply.

Unable - and unwilling - to argue, he just nodded.

“Everyone has responsibilities,” Mama Mathers said, her voice softening slightly. Putting a hand under his chin, she lifted his head so he was looking at her. “And while you have shown you possess the zeal to be one of my soldiers, if you do not have the fortitude to do what is necessary, to obey,” her voice hardened, “then I will find other uses for you. If you can not to be trusted to fight then you can be a slut and produce all the children we need. Or, maybe I should just geld you like I would any animal that is of no use?”

Free of her grip, he bowed his head again. “I accept whatever punishment you deem fit, Mama,” he said quietly.

To his side, one of his guards reached into the fire and picked up a metal rod. At its end was a flat disc, glowing cherry red from the heat.

“You have been a loyal soldier,” Mama Mathers said softly and he looked up to see her eyes. “For that, I will give you another chance, but you must still be punished.”

The second guard moved behind Eligos, pulling a knife and slicing open the back of his bodysuit. He could feel the heat of the brand as the other guard brought it close. To his surprise, the last man kneeled and offered him a small bit, the leather wrapped tightly into a tube.

Looking at it, Eligos glanced at Mama Mathers. She shifted her head almost imperceptibly, nodding in agreement and offering one small moment of mercy. Eligos quickly bit down on the leather as the guards took his arms.

He screwed his eyes shut in anticipation when there was a muffled pop behind him and someone gasped. Looking over his shoulder in surprise, Eligos was horrified to see Mouse Protector standing there. a thick strip of cloth wrapped around her helmet like a blindfold and a peaked cap balanced precariously on her head.

“Candygram for mongo!” she said with a grin, dropping a small metal tube to the floor and vanishing. The tube burst open, small robotic insects flying out in different directions even as Mama Mathers started screaming orders.

“Sound the alarm! Get everyone out and kill this imbecile!”
A swirling green portal sprang to life on the lawn before anyone could do anything more than stare and a tall robotic woman stepped out, the light glinting off her black and orange armour. She was followed by others: two cat-like robots, Arcee, Warpath and Cyclonus.

“Halphas! You are under arrest,” the lead Autobot called, walking forwards. “If you surrender now I promise fair treatment for you and your followers, resist and we -”

“Kill them -!” The Autobot dove forward, transforming into a dragon mid-leap. Her head shot forward like a snake, jaws closing with a snap around Mama Mathers’ head and silencing her with a crunch of bone.

“Autobots, if they surrender, take them alive. If not, put them down!” Dragon roared.

Eligos jumped to his feet and sent a blast of air at Arcee. She ducked under his attack, her arm transforming into a gun. He tried to use another blast of air to dodge, but he was too slow. A blue bolt punched through his chest, leaving a hole bigger than his fist.

Collapsing to the floor, he lay in a rapidly spreading pool of his own blood as the Autobots advanced on the house, his vision slowly going black.

“I realise he’s a idiot, but he’s still useful,” Valefor muttered, a cigarette held loosely in his hand. He was back in Brockton Bay, deep in what would be Empire Eighty-Eight territory and one of the first areas to regain power. It didn’t offer the great view of Autobot City like his last hideout, but he couldn't risk returning there.

“I am aware of that,” his mother said, walking across the room to look out of the window. “But failure must be punished. I promise, you can have him back when I'm done with him.”

“And he’ll still have all his limbs?” He glanced out the window, the setting sun casting long shadows over the city.

“Yes, yes.” she said with a roll of her eyes. Walking back towards him, she placed a hand on his shoulder. “You really shouldn't get so attached. You have a grand destiny ahead of you and he’s just a McVeay.”

Sighing, he smiled at the contact. He’d grown up with his mother's apparitions, so used to them coming and going that he saw no difference between them and her real body.

Not that he needed to. She, like God, was always with him. That's all that mattered.

“So what do you plan to do with him?”

“A gentle reminder of his place and a branding. He’ll be sore, but he’ll live.”

“Sounds fair.”

“I'm so glad you agree.” She gave him a withering glare and he straightened up slightly in his chair. Yes, he was her son, but she would only tolerate so much attitude from him.
“Sorry,” he muttered quietly.

“At least he accepts.” Her eyes widened and the apparition vanished mid-sentence.

“You fool!” she shouted, reappearing. “The heroes are here! Eligos led them right to me!”

Valefor jumped up, running through the building to reach the small room he’d ordered Raum to wait in.

“Just hold on, I’ll have you out of there in -”

“No!” Rather than run after him, she simply appeared before him, a hand held up to halt him. “You stay where you are! You have a destiny, I’ve heard her voice through you. You must stay safe.”

“But!-”

“But nothing!” stepping forward, she gently placed a hand on his cheek. “You must live. Make them suffer and never forget, you are my son and -”

The apparition vanished suddenly, taking with it a presence he’d never noticed before. Like a sound or a feeling at the back of his mind, it had been there so long that it was as much a part of him as his arm and all the more painful in its sudden absence.

“...mama?…” He dropped to his knees, his stomach rolling as the bile rose up his throat. His scream went unnoticed in the bustle of the city.

In the silence that followed, the feather in his hair began to sing.

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AN: damn, sorry this took so long but life was kinda bitch for awhile there.

In before anyone complains, there will be some explanations coming next chapter. I will say this though.

I tried multiple times to create an Autobot/Fallen fight, but it just didn’t work. Autobots Vs humans with guns is a stupidly unfair fight and while I can level things a bit by throwing in some capes, I don’t actually like creating a dozen or so capes, just to have them killed off in the very same chapter with no time to flesh them out.

It’s unsatisfying and has all the weight of a red-shirt getting killed. So, in the end I decided the actual fight added nothing and cut it.
London was, for lack of a better word, *gloomy*. Valefor found it fitting, the grey skies and cold wind matching the dull ache in his chest.

Unlike the high rises and orderly straight roads of America, the city of London sprawled. Its streets were narrow and winding, with numerous side streets and cut-throughs. The buildings that lined the roads were squat things, all dull stone, brick, or concrete that rarely went beyond a few stories tall, funnelling the wind into a constant draft.

His red-rimmed eyes flicked about. Even today, with the sky’s threatening rain, the streets around him were packed with people coming and going, shopping, working, tourists, and even families milling about. His fists clenched in his pockets at the sight of them.

\[She died and it’s your fault.\]

Moving past the subway station, he followed a cobbled path down into the Piazza. Covent Garden was, as ever, filled to the brim with people. It was in the west end of London where the theatres and shops met. The large square was ringed with high-end shops of all kinds, while in the center stood the old market, a covered area under an arched glass roof and filled with more shops that sold everything from fashion to exclusive sweets and antiques.

In between the market and the outer ring, scattered about on the wide cobble square were street performers; magicians, musicians, human statues and more. The crowds of tourists either parted to walk around them or stopped to watch. Many of the performers had small, portable speakers to boost the sound of their voice, hoping to draw more attention to themselves.

Spotting one such magician, Valefor took his phone and made a call.

“I will need collection in thirty seconds,” he hissed the moment the other person answered, then hung up without waiting for a reply. He wouldn’t get one anyway.

With his loose hoodie and scruffy jeans, no one even glanced at Valefor as he strode through the crowds, though there was the occasional comment as he pushed people out of the way.

The magician turned to look at him as Valefor emerged from the crowd and into the empty space he had claimed. “You alright mate? I don’t need a volunteer just yet-”

“Shut up.” The man’s mouth closed with an audible click of teeth. Ignoring him, Valefor pulled the microphone from the magician's ear, quickly leaning down to turn the speaker up.

Straightening up, he pushed his hood back.

“Anyone who can hear or see me. Kill the nearest person to you, then yourself!” he barked the order just as a portal opened behind him. Without looking, he stepped through it as chaos descended on the crowded square.

It wasn’t enough.
Valefor stormed out of the portal with Raum in tow, the early morning mist wrapping around his ankles as he approached the small stone house on Anticosti island.

“open up” he shouted, banging on the door. was in no mood to stay so close to the Guild for any length of time. But he needed someone to kill their Thinkers. He needed one of his sisters. They weren’t really his sisters, of course, just girls with useful powers that Mama had ‘adopted’ and hadn’t been made into breeders.

“Sis, you need to come with me!” He banged on the door again.

After a long pause, a woman wearing leathers and a carved wooden mask opened the door to the house. “You are not welcome here. Be gone from this place.”

Valefor snarled and poured his power into his voice. “Sisiutl, you will protect me.” Immediately he was slammed with a migraine, as his sibling’s power kicked in.

“You bitch! You’re never supposed to do that!” He screamed through the pain. He looked at her exposed arms. Two lines, one thin and one thick were still trickling blood down her wrist.

“You are not my brother. I do not recognize you any longer.” She stated headily, almost like she was in a trance. “You will leave this sacred ground. You taint it with your failure. Return to whatever wanderings you sought to erase your sin.”

“They killed Mama!” he snapped, “Doesn’t that mean anything to you!”

She stared back at him, the wood of her mask expressionless.

Leave the weak behind

Valefor growled but said nothing further to her.

“Raum, new portal.”

Valefor emerged from a portal onto the streets of Geneva, it hadn’t even been an hour since his attack on London or his ‘disagreement’ with his sister. Raum followed close behind as he marched forward. It was colder here, but the clear sky was a bright blue.

He resisted the urge to command people as he passed, ignoring the dirty looks he was getting from passersby until he reached a busy intersection.

“Open a door to Ellisburg,” he ordered before turning his power on the busy streets. The flash of the portal opening drew the attention of those around him, many outright stopping to watch.

“Anyone who can hear or see me, go through the portal and wait for further instructions!”
The majority of the crowds turned, his power only affecting those that understood English. As one they walked through the doorway, Valefor stepping aside to let them pass without comment.

Those who didn’t understand, but were still close enough to see him remained stationary, staring lifelessly ahead. Among the rest, mostly those furthest away, panic was starting to spread as people realised what was happening.

Smiling, Valfor pushed his hood back, letting them see his face.

“Our queen blessed you once! Now she asks that you serve her once more and avenge her most faithful!” he shouted before repeating his order to walk through the portal.

A shadow passed over Valefor, drawing his attention to a dark figure in the sky. He knew immediately it was a cape, though he couldn't tell if it was a hero or villain. Bearing his teeth, he debated fighting them, trying to bait them close enough that he could take them as well.

\>You must live. Make them suffer\n
“Let's go!” he snapped, turning and stepping through the portal, Raum following silently behind him.

##

Stepping out of the portal, Valefor was surprised to find himself standing in a field under the cover of night. Around him, his thralls stood motionlessly, waiting for his next command.

Ahead of them, less than half a mile, rose the giant wall that isolated Ellisburg. Even at this distance, Valefor could see the lights that ringed the wall so the heroes could keep things under control.

“Why are we here? Take us inside!”

Raum just stared blankly at him.

“Open a portal!” Valefor shouted, taking a step forward and raising a hand to strike Raum as his barely contained anger pushed to the surface.

Raum didn't flinch at the threat. Instead, he spun his bullroarer and a portal sprung to life. A second portal appeared barely twenty yards away.

Pushing down his anger, Valefor reminded himself that Raum didn’t have enough free will left to disobey. To make matters worse, Valefor couldn't just order him to explain what was wrong; the dark-skinned man had been mute long before he’d been recruited.

Valefor glanced around; they couldn't remain here, the PRT had to be aware of them by now.

“Yes or no; can you get inside the walls?” he barked and Raum shook his head slightly.

“Fine, everyone over the age of… 15. Break down that wall. Don’t let anyone stop you and kill anyone who tries!”
The majority of his thralls charged forwards and Valefor half imagined he could hear sirens in the distance. “Take us back to Brockton Bay!” he snapped at Raum and ordered his remaining slaves through the portal.

It wasn’t enough.

##

The news footage on the small tv above the bar showed carnage. White sheets covered the bodies of nearly a dozen people that had been carefully laid out on the White House lawn. Men in white bodysuits were moving around the scene, carefully examining everything they could find in pursuit of answers.

They wouldn’t get any. Valefor knew they wouldn’t. He’d had every single one of them drop their phones and wallets before sending them through the portal just to make identifying the bodies harder. He’d also hadn’t been back to his original base since Eligos had… He pushed the thought away with a fresh stab of anger at the man who had doomed Mama.

Over the bar, the TV continued to talk. “Investigators are still identifying the victims, but they estimate the eldest to be barely fifteen.”

Chuckling to himself, he sipped at his drink. The anger, the pain, the all-consuming ache Mama’s absence caused was still there. Occasionally, he’d see things, flashes out the corner of his eye, or a sound and for just a moment, he’d forget. Only to turn around and realise she wasn’t there. She’d never be there again.

His hand tightened, shattering the glass and sending his drink everywhere.

“Get me another!” he snapped at the barman. Around him, the other patrons continued to mechanically sip at their drinks.

He felt like shit. After disposing of those useless children he’d tried to rest, listening as her song lulled him to sleep. Only to wake up barely a few hours later, a fleeting vision of Mama being torn apart by a winged monster lingering in his mind.

“You’ve got some nerve showing up here,” a deep voice said from behind him. “No, don’t turn around. I’d rather not get brain fucked by you.”

Valefor glared, glancing up briefly at a mirror behind the bar to see the dark-skinned man standing behind him. “I need your help. I need infor-”

“No,” the man snapped. “What you need, is to get the fuck outta my bar.”

“Don’t forget your place,” Valefor snarled. “Your minor family serves-

“Nobody. Thanks to you, and your mother, the three families are gone and the faithless hunt us down. They are killing us in the streets and my place is between my people and anyone who would hurt them.”
“My family are the Fallen!” Valefor shouted, standing up and turning to face the man. Part of him longed to reach for his power, to bend the man to his will, but he knew it was pointless. The man’s eyes were glazed over and there was a smell of rot coming from him. He was just a puppeted corpse.

“No, the Fallen are, and always have been, greater than any one family. We are god’s chosen, we are the ones who will be spared when the faithless are gone!” the corpse snapped.

“In your hubris, you, and the three families have clearly forgotten that and it falls to me to clean up the mess. You and whatever remains of your family can consider yourself excommunicated.”

Turning back to the bar, Valefor snatched up his drink. “If that’s so, why did you come here?”

“I am only here as a courtesy. To tell you in person because of your family’s long history. That is also the only reason you are leaving here alive. The safehouses, the pastors, the supply drops, all of them are gone, relocated so you can’t lead more faithless to our door. Don't bother looking for them, if any of them see you, they’ll kill you.”

“Cowards,” Valefor muttered, his voice trembling in anger. “The faithless come for us and you would rather run and hide?”

The corpse rolled his eyes with a snort. “Oh, please. Spare me the sermon. What does dropping a bunch of kids on the White House prove? You're a coward, knocking on doors and running away and this,” he waved towards the TV. “This isn’t about faith, it’s about you and that twisted bitch you came out of. She’s dead -thank the gods- and you're the only one who will ever care. Now, finish your drink and get out!”

Snarling, Valefor pulled a knife from his pocket, the metal flashing in the light. He drove it deep into the chest of the corpse, right through its heart.

The man staggered back slightly, looking down at the knife in mild interest. “Well, that certainly looks fatal.” He slumped, his body slowly dropping to the floor. “You have two minutes to leave. Make sure you release my bartender on your way out.”

With a shout, Valefor kicked the body, again and again before snatching up his drink and throwing it across the room.

It wasn’t enough.

Grabbing an unoccupied chair, he smashed it into a table, then the nearest person, sending the man to the floor. No one reacted -- they couldn’t as Valefor had ordered them not to.

It wasn’t enough.

His hands closed around the head of another man and he drove it into the thick wooden table with a crack of breaking bone. Pulling the man’s head back, he did it again and again until the man was barely breathing, his face a bloody mess.

“What the fuck!? Put’em down asshole!”

Glancing up, Valefor saw a young cape standing in the door. He was dressed in black with an orange “X” across his chest and large grenade-like gauntlets on his arms.
The moment their eyes met, Valefor saw the boy’s face relax as his power took effect. Straightening up, he walked towards the door, careful not to break eye contact.

“Once I leave, burn this place and everyone in it, then go kill your family and any friends you might have.” He snapped. He was barely clear of the door when he heard the first explosion. Deciding against sticking around to watch, he called Raum for a portal back to Brockton Bay.

It still wasn’t enough.

##

Slumping down on the sofa of his newly borrowed house, Valefor sent Raum to find himself some food. He wouldn't eat unless ordered and it wouldn't do for Valefor’s only method of transportation to starve.

Snatching up a remote from one of the cushions, he admired the large wall mounted TV before turning it on.

“In local news, Brockton Bay PD and the PRT have confirmed that the mob who attacked Director Renick four days ago were, in fact, mastered.” the host, a pretty young woman in suit said calmly.

“The Director, newly appointed in the wake of the attempted assassination of Emily Piggot, was said to have returned to work today. He is, as one inside source put it, ‘a little battered’, but otherwise fine.”

Valefor felt a brief flash of amusement that was quickly discarded. He’d nearly forgotten about that one. The riots had been fun, and startlingly easy to trigger. He’d only needed to directly order a few people and the rest had taken care of itself.

The assassination of that PRT bitch though, that wasn’t his doing. Someone must have really hated her. Shame she survived.

“Shouldn’t be too long now,” he muttered to himself.

Glancing out a nearby window, Valefor saw it was getting dark. “Raum!” he snapped, “make sure you close all the blinds and curtains!” The last thing he needed was the PRT crashing in while he considered his next move.

Sighing, he rubbed his head and considered using his power on himself again. He needed sleep, real sleep and not a few fitful hours interrupted by visions of Mama’s death.

Growling in frustration, he flipped through the channels.

“A spokesperson for the White House-”

“The death toll-”

“The ward was later subdued when he attacked-"

With each press of the button, his frustration only grew. None of them mentioned her, no matter what station he chose, all they spoke about were the wasteful sacks of shit he’d killed by the dozen today.
He continued flipping through the channels until he saw a headline that caught his eye

‘Death toll rises, is the PRT to blame?’

The channel was a local one, that didn’t have much viewing outside Brockton Bay. Or in it for that matter. They used public access broadcasting, apparently not even capable of paying for web hosting. Hesitating, Valefor put the remote down and settled down to see what they had to say.

"This is Jackson Bailey, broadcasting live from Brockton Bay Frontline News."

After an obnoxious and cheap CGI transition of machine-guns and poor quality explosion sound effects, the screen showed a somewhat young man with a mismatched army helmet and office suit.

"In less than twenty-four hours, the latest out of town nutjob to crash our home of havoc, known as the Valefor of the Fallen, fucked if I know what that even means, has killed more than fifty people for no damn reason. But here’s the real kicker: The PRT sent out another one of their memos. You know the ones, the ‘don’t cover this massive war zone in the middle of America please and thank you, or we’ll send in the men with foam’ letter. They want you to not know what he’s up to, because they have no clue what he’s doing next! See, it’s even in the letter.” The host pulled up a paper from his desk, the camera somewhat awkwardly zooming in on it to try and show the relevant passage.

“They want us to treat this like it’s another Slaughterhouse jaunt. I call bullcrap. I think they’ve been repressing our constitutional freedom of speech before, but this is just pathetic. The press holds the government accountable, so that’s what I’m going to do. I ain’t saying Valefor’s justified, I’m telling you this is a half-assed ass-covering.

Jackson paused, a finger touching his ear,” No! Don't cut, let me say my piece! Fire me if it comes to it, goddamnit, but the world needs to know this.”

"Valefor is doing this because of the Guild. The big internationals up in Canada decided it was time to drop the hammer on the Fallen’s leadership. And it worked! They axed a bunch of the inbred pedos, including the number one threat to the PRT’s Thinker tanks, Valefor’s mother! But wait, you ask. If they got rid of her, why haven’t the PRT Thinkers spotted Valefor? Because they’re too scared the little pisser has one of her other crotch-spawn with him! They’re not even trying to find him, and that’s what makes this so inexcusable. Everyone, the people of the world, the families and friends of the victims, deserve to know the truth, no matter how hard it is to hear."

“That's right, Washington is keeping you in the dark because they don’t want to tell the world they let a non-US group cause this mess and won’t take responsibility. Why? Because they worried about retaliation!” He shook his head, hands held high.

“Well done them,” he muttered quietly before refocusing on the camera.

“Let's talk about the PRT and retaliation, shall we? The big foundation the PRT lays down when they ask us to give up everything the Founding Fathers stood for. Entire towns walled off by Dragon Tinkertech because the Think-tank backs up the local office when they say the toilet’s about to throw shit everywhere. People given no chance to face their accuser because they can’t be brought in without being killed. And the worst part is, we’ve all justified it for years, said all the times the system failed or oppressed the innocent was worth the lives saved. But guess what folks? These people died for nothing. This could have been avoided. The PRT’s put The Fallen on their precious ‘do not kick’ list for a reason, and once the Leviathan group got dealt with, they could’ve just let them fade away. But no. The Guild had to break the rules they made with the PRT, and this is what
us average Joes and Janes pay.

And what’s worse, this guy isn’t just hanging around DC or the backwater south! Oh yes, we got video!”

The projector screen near the man went from blank to a split-screen of two grainy, low-quality footage. One was clearly from a rooftop, and another looked to be peeking their camera around a corner.

“First posted by the truly underappreciated folks at Parahumans Online, Valefor pulled something the S-9 never did: Hopped the pond. First London, UK, then Geneva, Switzerland. Yes folks, the recently Kill-ordered, Simurgh-worshiping, American-born terrorist just pulled two massacres in European sites of Simurgh attacks. Apparently, Dragon lived up to her namesake and kept a few of those vaunted anti-teleport upgrades for her own. Oh, I’m sorry, did you not know that? Dragon has apparently cracked anti-teleport tech and not told anybody! I’m sure the Guild would be happy to explain to the countries of Europe why the next Endbringer attack there isn’t going to get the same attention she gave today.”

With a wave and a shrug, he leaned back in his chair. "That’s what it’s all about in the end. DC fucked up again, and they’re hoping you never find out. That didn’t fly in ‘Nam, and it sure as hell won’t fly today!"

“But you know who we should be really applauding? The spoiled brat who caused it all. Hey, Valefor, if you’re watching this,” He began sarcastically clapping. “Good job. You made over fifty families feel the same pain you do right now. Bet that makes you feel like a man, don’t it? But let’s be real, little man. You can say it’s revenge; that you’ve done it in the name of love, that you want to make up for your mother’s death, yadda yadda yadda. Anyone can make something sound epic and dramatic. What do you think I do for a living? So let me cut the bullshit and lay down the facts.”

Leaning forwards, he glared at the camera, his face wooden. "Jackie Wilson. Francis Geraldine. Ethel Harris.” He tapped his desk with a finger. “I can keep going. A hundred sons still mourning their parents, two hundred daughters hoping that it’s all been a bad dream and their parents will wake up. All these families gone, and it’s never going to bring your whore of a mother back.”

The remote smashed into the TV, cracking the screen and distorting the image.

“Raum!” Valefor snapped while Jackson continued to speak.

"Look, kid. You can keep one-upping Jack the Knife until you’re the last human on earth, but it won’t do a thing. You’re throwing a violent temper-tantrum because the only person who ever gave you a hint of focus just croaked and the rest of your so-called family is either dead or working to kill you for money. Religious adoration? Family loyalty? It’s all nothing now, and it never was. The Fallen were a bunch of inbred, ignorant hillbillies who got high off of their own petty and shallow cult. You can’t figure out how to beat the Guild, or Dragon, or her Autobot buddies. So you just throw people you don’t know at whatever you think is important and hope it’ll make you feel like momma’s holding you again. But it won’t. You’re just a sad. Stupid. Pathetic. Monster.” He punctuated each word with a finger stab at the camera.

“And she knew you weren’t worth shit.”

##
Jackson took a deep breath. This was it, the biggest stunt of his career. None of the other stations would touch this story, too scared of the PRT to even consider breaking the story. Well he wasn’t. If if this went viral, if enough people paid attention, he’d be too big, too public to prosecute and the station would be catapulted to the big time.

If it didn’t work, well at least he’d tried. At least he would go down telling the people of Brockton Bay, of the entire country, the truth.

Before he could speak again, there was a flash and a swirling green portal appeared next to his desk and a young man in close-fitting jeans and a dark hoodie emerged.

His face was slightly effeminate, with fang tattoos around his mouth. He pushed his hood back, revealing long blonde hair with feathers woven through it.

##

Stepping through the portal, Valefor felt the feather in his hair sing, his power surging. As he smiled at the camera, he could feel his power connecting to the hundreds of people watching.

“Do not stop broadcasting, if the police attempt to enter this building, I want everyone watching this to kill themselves!” he said, a smile splitting his face for the first time since her death.

This was it, this was enough.

He glanced over his shoulder at Jackson, “I’m sorry, what were you saying about my mother?”

If you enjoyed this, please consider donating: ko-fi.com/metallix

AN: no, your not going mad, this is a revised version of the chapter based on feedback (read bitching). This should (hopefully) address some of the biggest issues.
Changes: 1, make it clearer that this chapter was supposed to be about the Fallen splintering and Valefor not handling his grief very well.
2, an in plot reason for Valefors powers acting differently.

Also, just to be clear, there will be no further changes to the chapter.
Inside 'Autobot city', Soundwave sat in Lisa's unused info sphere. Wires ran from his chest, connecting him directly to the system and letting him monitor transmissions from across the country.

Hidden by his visor, his eyes flicked back and forth. News reports, social media, forum posts — if it was publicly accessible, he could see it. It blurred past him in a swirl of light and colour, ebbing and flowing like the tide. Even for him, the amount of information was staggering, and Teletraan was dedicating large amounts of run-time to sort and filter the data, prioritising what was relevant and discarding everything else.

*Yo Soundwave, check out the crazy cat on channel 6!* Blaster chirped from his own terminal elsewhere in the building. The smaller Autobot was using a break between radio broadcasts to skim local sources

Soundwave discarded the Facespace posts he'd been skimming through as Teletraan confirmed Blaster's find. Mentions of the PRT, communication and Valefor were being flagged and he quickly spared a moment to review the content.

"In less than twenty-four hours, the latest out of town nutjob to crash our home of havoc, known as Valefor of the Fallen, fucked if I know what that even means, has killed more than fifty people for no damn reason.

But here's the real kicker: The PRT sent out another one of their memos. You know the ones, the 'don't cover this massive war zone in the middle of America please and thank you, or we'll send in the men with foam' letter. They want you to not know what he's up to, because they have no clue what he's doing next! See, it's even in the letter." The host pulled up a paper from his desk, the camera somewhat awkwardly zooming in on it to try and show the relevant passage.

Soundwave's processor worked overtime to predict possible outcomes even as the host continued to rant, calling out Valefor and making insinuations. This wasn't the first such transmission; nearly a dozen were being broadcasted nationally. The words were different, but the overall tone, the message, remained the same: Angry, accusing and more often than not, trying to turn the situation to their own ends.

Before the host could speak again, there was a flash and a swirling green portal appeared next to his desk and a young man in close-fitting jeans and a dark hoodie emerged.

His face was slightly effeminate, with fang tattoos around his mouth. He pushed his hood back, revealing long blonde hair with feathers woven through it.

Soundwave triggered the alarm, a loud shrieking sound that echoed throughout the building. Through his connection to Teletraan, he snatched control of the ground bridge.

"Ravage, Ratbat, Laserbeak, Steeljaw; eject. Operation: interference!"

The smaller bots were already gathered by the bridge; the whole base had been on alert since Valefor's rampage started, just waiting for a chance to bring him down.

As the animals emerged from the ground bridge, high in the sky above the station, Soundwave connected to their systems. Using them as signal boosters, he blocked all transmissions in or out of

##

I stepped out of the portal, my armoured boots crunching on the loose gravel of the roof.

"Status update?!

[Ravage, Ratbat, Laserbeak, Steeljaw on site. Protectorate forces: deploying.

Warning, Valefor has issued the following commands:

1. "Do not stop broadcasting."
2. "If the police attempt to enter this building, I want everyone watching this to kill themselves!"

Additional commands:

3. "If anyone attempts to enter this building without my permission, cut the signal or the power, I want everyone watching to kill themselves."
4. "If anyone tries to kill me, kill them and then yourself."
5. "Until then, you are to do everything you can to make others watch!"

I frowned at the hologram. The four of them were arranged in a loose square around the studio, acting as signal boosters to intercept transmissions from the studio. I didn't like the idea of Ratbat being out in the field — he'd only been online for a day — but I could understand Soundwave's decision.

I'll talk to him about it later.

Putting the thought aside, I focused on what was going on. It had only been minutes, at best, since Soundwave had triggered the alarm. Valefor, after constantly appearing and disappearing around the world, had interrupted the live broadcast of a local TV station.

Thankfully Soundwave had reacted quickly, blocking the TV signal before Valefor could make more than two commands. The rest had been given to empty air, and now Soundwave and Blaster were working hard to provide everyone with up-to-date information.

"Ready?" I muttered to Rattrap, who was currently in my hands.

"No!" he squeaked, gripping my fingers tightly.

Ignoring him, I tossed Rattrap into the sky. He arced through the air, clearing the distance between my roof and the studio, screaming as went. Just as he started to fall, a little parachute popped open and he drifted gently down, landing on the roof.

"Get a hardline established," I ordered, ignoring his grumbling and trying not to feel guilty for throwing him. "We need to see what is going on inside!"

*Matrix, I'm uploading a plugin to your suit.* Dragon said suddenly, not wasting time on idle talk. She was in front of the building with Armsmaster, covering the deployment of the heroes. *It will automatically block Valefor and anything he says. Go to these coordinates and set up the equipment
"Right!" As I took off, I noticed a helicopter closing in, a camera mounted underneath. "Windblade, Cyclonus, I want you up in the air, keep those reporters outside the perimeter. Arcee, Rhinox, Warpath, help Dragon. Protectobots, the PRT will be establishing a holding zone for the hostages, go there and help with any injuries!"

PRT troopers were circling the building. They were dressed in riot gear, the extra armour and shields to protect against mastered civilians, with some carrying foam sprayers and others using stun weapons.

All of them were wearing earplugs and mirrored visors after Belial - one of the Fallen capes that the Guild had captured - had told the PRT that Valefor's power required eye contact. The Wards, what few that had been available, were further out, helping to direct traffic away from the studio.

Skimming across the rooftops and trying not to be visible to anyone inside the studio, I kept one ear on the radio.

*How many people are in the building?* Armsmaster snapped from where the Protectorate were gathering.

*Maybe a hundred, we're unsure, sir,* the agent running the console said.

*Alright, I'm in!* Rattrap said with a huff. *Security camera feeds are being sent to Soundwave. Looks like he's moving through the building. I think he's grabbing more people.*

*Damn it, is there a way to get those people out? Couldn't we just gas the building?* someone, a PRT trooper I assumed, said.

*Too risky, do you know how long that would take?* Ratchet grumbled. "Not to mention health risks, sedation rates, effectiveness and so on.*

Ignoring the chatter, I landed on the roof Dragon had highlighted. A pair of PRT troopers and a large metal travel case were already there waiting for me.

The troopers were fairly indistinct, their body armour hiding their features to the point it was almost impossible to tell them apart beyond their height. They were both kneeling near the edge of the roof, binoculars held in their hands and a long rifle laid next to them.

"Ma'am," the taller of the troopers said, standing up and saluting me as I moved closer while the other remained where they were. He was broad shouldered and taller than me, putting him well over six feet. "I'm agent Hightower, this is Valenza. We're the sniper team. Dragon said you would know what this is?"

He waved at the metal box that was perched to his side. It came up to my hip, but was nearly twice the length of my arm.

"Yeah, just give me a minute to get everything set up," I said with a nod. I grabbed it and pulled it closer to the roof edge, an overlay on my HUD showing the best position for it.

Once everything was in place, I sent the activation command and the case opened up. The side panels folded down to expose a mess of cables and electronics. Four mechanical legs extended, their sharp tips pressing against the building. With a pop, small claws dug into the rooftop. Inside, the mess of cables and parts continued to shift as magnetic coils and heat sinks aligned. One section, facing the TV studio, extended forwards and opened up to reveal a barrel.
On my HUD, green lights appeared as everything activated. Magnetic coils, targeting system, solid ammo block… Right.

The taller agent let out a small 'huh' of surprise.

"This was a prototype," I said over my shoulder. I pulled a rectangular section free of the case and it unfolded into a long rifle. Another section of the case became a large scope that I quickly clamped to the rifle.

"It's functional, but it wasn't intended for rapid deployment." *Something to work on later.* "This, is a railgun and this," I said, handing the rifle to the trooper, "is a targeting rifle."

The idea was simple. The targeting rifle used data being fed to it from the Autobots, satellites, Insecticons or any other source to let the sniper see through walls. "Line up the sights, pull the trigger and the target goes away."

The smaller of the troopers chuckled and climbed to their feet. It wasn't a friendly sound. It promised pain. It was also a woman's voice.

"Very nice," she said, taking the targeting rifle and testing its weight. "Mind if I borrow this? I have an ex-husband."

She sighted down the scope, her partner sighing.

"This thing likely cost more than your house," I said with a snort. "Anyway, the magnetic coils take time to charge, so if you miss, you probably won't get a second shot."

"Umm, Ma'am?" The tall trooper said quietly as I handed him a modified range finder so he could act as the spotter. "You said railgun, right? What about over-penetration?"

"Don't worry." I glanced at my own map to be sure. "Wheeljack is setting up a forcefield on the other side of the building to catch the bullet."

Numbers flashed across my visor. It was going to be a balancing act. The shot needed to be powerful enough to punch through walls without going off course, but be weak enough that the shield could stop it.

I patched into the targeting system, passive only to avoid interfering with the shot, and the walls of the studio fell away, a simple wireframe taking their place. Icons appeared one after the other to show the locations of civilians.

"Status on Valefor?" I asked.

*Target: Valefor. Location: Dressing room.* Soundwave intoned. One of the icons turned red and took on a human shape.

I shared a look with the spotter, who shrugged in confusion.

What on earth was he doing in there?

##

Valefor stalked back into the studio, his new costume hugging his body. He'd raided the costume store, finding an elegant black corset and dress. Black and white feathers had been hastily glued to both by a technician while another member of staff had helpfully applied a professional layer of
"You can sit down," Valefor said to the host, Jackson Bailey, with a chuckle as he walked in front of the camera. "You are to remain sitting until I say otherwise." The host had been doing a passable Irish jig for the last five minutes now. As he collapsed to the floor gasping for air, his skin was a nasty shade of purple that didn't look healthy at all.

"There now." Valefor smiled at the camera. "While I took some time to slip into something more... fitting, I wish to begin with a tribute to Mama." He looked at two of the people who had followed him into the room. "Cool him off. The rest of you, take your positions."

The staff members stepped forward, large plastic bottles in their hands. Without saying anything, they both pulled the lids off and poured the contents over Jackson. The man shouted as the bleach and other cleaning products covered him.

"Wait!" the man cried between hacking coughs.

Pulling a lighter from the cups of his corset, Valefor lit it with a flick of his wrist.

"Please, don't!" He tried to move, his torso jerking even as his legs remained locked in place.

Staring down at the man, the manic gleam in Valefor's eyes and the slight tremor of his arm belied his calm expression. "A moment of silence for Christine Mathers."

##

Watching through the various sensors on my HUD, one of the people in the studio suddenly lit up, their outline vanishing in a bloom of heat.

*Status update,* Soundwave said dispassionately, *Valefor has executed one of the hostages.*

*Execu-! He fucking burned him alive!* Rattrap screamed.

"That's enough Rattrap!"

*But.*

"Enough!" I took a shaky breath and tried not to think about Bitch. About her burning alive because I hadn't been able to stop Lung. I shared a look with Hightower. "He's not getting out of here alive."

"Yes, ma'am!" Hightower grunted. Valenza stayed silent, but I could hear the creak of her gloves as her grip tightened on gun.

*Matrix, status of the sniper team?* Dragon's voice was quiet. She was likely watching the live feed from the studio.

"The gun's almost charged, but it would help if we could keep him still."

*I'm on it.*

##

Smiling, Valefor stood before the camera. Behind him, Jackson had already stopped moving and now staff members were working to put the fire out.

"I know what you are feeling, what you are thinking," he said to the camera. "You call us killers,
monsters, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. We were a family, the family. We were the followers of the Simurgh, greatest of the three. It was your people that attacked us. You hunted us through the streets, invaded our homes and attacked helpless women and children! But above all..."

His voice wavered. "You killed my mother..."

He jerked as a swirling portal opened to his right with a crash and a green suit of power armour walked into the room.

There was no mistaking the theme. From the stylised helmet to the impression of claws and scales that covered the body, the whole thing screamed 'Dragon'. It was empty, of course, but he could feel his power reaching for the mind that was hidden behind it. There was something there, faint and nebulous, as if he was trying to grab smoke.

Giving up, he smiled. "If you kill me, they all die."

He raised a hand and everyone in the room raised an improvised weapon.

"Let them go, Valefor," Dragon growled, stopping just past the closing portal. "Release them all, and I'll guarantee your safety. You can serve out time in prison."

"How generous," he spat back, giving a theatrical bow, his lips pressed tight. "Did you offer to spare Mama?"

There was an electronic sigh as Dragon's head lowered. "I tried, but your mother gave me no choice. I took no joy in her death."

Valefor snorted. "Pity, she'd have enjoyed yours. She'd probably have taken her time, maybe visiting you again and again until you killed yourself. Or she'd have reduced you to breeding stock. A powerful tinker like you... that assumes you're still enough of a woman to fuck."

Dragon shrugged, her head turning as looked around the room. "It doesn't have to be like this Valefor. Let these people go..."

"Why should I? These people celebrated her death while she lies in an unmarked grave somewhere!" Valefor was shaking as he took a step towards the still smouldering corpse of Jackson, kicking out at it in anger. People like this man, this man who survived Leviathan's baptism.

He spun to face Dragon, his eyes wild. It was hidden under layers of makeup, but the sensors in Dragon's suit let her see the dark rings under his eyes, smell the hint of body odour he'd likely built up from lack of cleaning and the slight sway as he moved. "Well I don't have time to wait for the Simurgh's judgement. He dies, you die, this whole fucking city dies!"

"Is that your plan? To just keep killing? What of the Fallen?"

"The Fallen? I am the Fallen. I am the last true believer. The others are just... pretenders, content to hide away and suck their own dicks!" His eyes focused on her suddenly. "What's your plan Dragon? You can't touch me, hundreds will die if you do!"

"You realise that threat won't last long. Sooner or later, the PRT will move in. What will you do then?"

He gave her a flat look. "Raum, open a portal... Raum?" When nothing happened, he pulled his phone from his pocket. The screen showed full signal, but when he dialed the number from memory, the call failed to connect.
"Ah ah ah!" Blaster said with a laugh as Soundwave routed the phone call to him. "None of that Jack! Taylor, I traced the call, but they're not picking up!"

Smirking, I tapped my radio. "Hey Vicky, you there?"

*You know it, you got something for me?"

"An address downtown, take backup!" Sending her the address for whoever Valefor was trying to call, I focused on the railgun's readouts.

The suit Dragon was controlling was feeding telemetry to the sniper team, giving us a perfect 3D image of him inside the wireframe building.

The air around us was charged, the tension almost a physical thing as he took a step towards 'Dragon', entering empty space with nothing past him.

The world froze. Valenza pulled the trigger and the railgun roared with the sound of thunder, shattering the windows below us.

Valefor jerked, the left side of his chest exploding in a shower of blood and bone. Looking down, he could see the shattered remains of his ribs and the gaping hole where his heart had been. His mouth worked silently as he fell to his knees, blood pooling beneath him.

"Console, this is Dragon, target down…"

He heard Dragon's words, but they were muffled, he felt like he was sinking underwater.

\In the end, this is all you could do…\%

No…

\How… boring\%

Please… his hand twitched as he screamed at his body. Mama….

\..Pathetic\%

The feather fell from his hair, landing in his hand, glowing under the studio lights even as his blood soaked into it.

Contessa put down the tablet she was looking at and closed her eyes. The broken remains of Valefor floated before her.

'Please…'

This was an unexpected development. She'd never expected the remote agent she'd installed on that weapon fragment to cause this. Adding pressure to an already unstable host was always a risk. There was always a chance of it not working or alerting the Other, but the chaos this one had caused had yielded a wealth of data.
"Why should I? What's in it for me?"

'I serve... Revenge!'

Simulations ran, weighing the possibilities. There could be no risk to her, regardless of what she chose. She couldn't modify the host remotely; the connection between the original agent and the Other would expose her and she wasn't strong enough to fight him. But if she established a direct connection, she could overwrite the Other's privileges, spoofing the host's death...

She spared a quick glance at the world. The avatar used by the Other was on the far side of the planet, his slim attention elsewhere.

"Your bargaining posture is highly dubious, but very well. I will provide you with a new body and a new purpose."

Valefor reached for her, 'And?'

"And nothing... you belong to me now."

This would be an interesting experiment, an avenue she'd never considered before. Selecting the most fitting protocols, she uploaded them to the remote agent, giving it new functions.

"Kill them, let none survive."

Picking the tablet up, Contessa returned to work.

##

Valefor gasped, a wet rattling sound coming from ravaged lungs as heat flooded his veins. His hand closed tight around the feather, its sharp edges cutting into his palm and his body jerking as he impaled the feather into the wound on his chest.

"What on earth!?"

He barely heard Dragon as the feather started to pulse, again and again, each one coming faster than the next. It started to grow, burrowing deeper into his body, sharp barbs anchoring it into his flesh.

The pain was incredible as his flesh bubbled and tore, writhing tendrils bursting free of his skin.

Reality shattered around him and her voice filled his mind.

\kill them all\n
Fleshy tendrils burst from his eyes, wrapping around his neck. Mouths opened to scream as his flesh overflowed.

"Pull back, all units, pull back!"

##

Dragon stepped back as the twisted mass that had been Valefor continued to grow. Vine like appendages were bursting from his body, each one looking like a skinless snake, with exposed muscle veins running their length.

They moved quickly, spreading out from his body, each one splitting and splitting again in a wave of flesh. They burrowed into the floor and walls, growing thicker with each moment. A few burst out of
the floor, wrapping around her legs, sprouting feathers like thorns that cut into her armour. The central mound continued to thrash and writhe, mouths opening and closing randomly across his body, each one screaming.

The last thing Dragon saw before she lost connection to the suit was the tendrils reaching out to crush the studio workers who remained still, unmoving, trapped under Valefor's power.

##

*Everyone, fall back, fall back now!* Dragon's warning came only seconds before the studio exploded, flesh pouring down the walls. Tentacles writhed in the air and lashed out at people like whips.

Grabbing Hightower and Valenza, I took off just as one of them, wider around than me, crashed into the roof we'd been standing on, crushing the abandoned rifle. Instead of pulling back and striking again, the tendril split with the sound of tearing flesh, and more limbs emerged and dug into the crumbling brickwork, growing longer and thicker with each moment.

"Ma'am, look!" Hightower shouted, pointing back at the studio.

The walls were quickly being covered in the growths. They wrapped around the building and spread outwards like a nightmarish bramble patch. I could see the exposed muscles and veins throb, pulsing like a heartbeat.

They flowed down the streets, twisting around cars and buildings, crushing anyone they could capture.

The troopers I was carrying drew their pistols, firing at the limbs while the men on the ground tried to slow the thing down, hosing everything they could see in containment foam or bullets while they tried to get away. Those who didn't move quickly enough were dragged down as more tentacles burst from the ground under them.

*All units, fall back and establish a perimeter!* Armsmaster shouted, grunting as he fought his way free.

*How!?* came Assault's incredulous reply.

Wheeljack came flying out of the 'forest', Miss Militia clutching his roof. *All Wards are ordered to retreat, do not engage!* she ordered, not risking letting go to fire at the encroaching monster.

Spinning around, I flew as fast as I dared, tentacles whipping at the air behind me.

"All Autobots, grab whoever you can and fall back!"

This had gone so badly wrong.

##

"We need to push forward!" Armsmaster shouted as he spun his halberd, hacking through the twisted limbs almost as quickly as they appeared, Tess at his side, a spear held tightly in her hands.

They were the only ones still close to the TV studio, two hundred yards southeast of the building by his guess, but these things were cutting through his men like a hot knife through butter.

A tentacle lashed out, wrapping around a trooper, crushing him with the wet cracking of bones.
Another ruptured a containment foam tank that was being carried by a trooper, spraying quickly expanding foam over the trooper and anyone nearby.

Dragon, the real one, was nearby, using her claws and teeth to tear through anything that tried to trap them, but it was a losing battle. The tentacles were dense, hard to cut through and regenerating almost as quickly as they were cut down. The feather-thorns they were sprouting were sharp enough to pierce even her armour.

As more of them appeared, she realised her connection to the base and other systems were degrading. Pinning a tentacle down, she tore one of the feathers free, noticing a high-intensity electromagnetic field around it.

"We need to fall back! The feathers are interfering with our radios!"

Then they had lost sight of the others, the thick limbs closing off the roads around them as they spread further into the city, forming a dense jungle of flesh.

"We need to regroup!" Tess shouted, and knelt down to grab a fallen trooper who was pinned under a tentacle as thick as a telephone pole. Before she could pull him free, a smaller tendril burst from his body, impaling her chest.

She choked out a scream as she was pulled against the main limb, new ones growing and wrapping around her body and quickly crushing her.

Dragon roared as the pain was transferred back to her. Spinning her head around, she opened her mouth and spat a blast of fire that incinerated most of the tentacles. There was a flash as Tess vanished in an emergency teleport.

Panting, Dragon shook her head. She'd have to rebuild the body later.

###

"Go, go, go!" Picking up a man with brown hair, Mouse Protector pointed him up the street and gave him a push. Around her, people were running in fear.

They were a block east of the studio and the creature showed no signs of stopping.

One man was too slow, a tentacle wrapping around his waist. Razor sharp feathers cutting into flesh, even as he was pulled into the mass of limbs behind him. Wrapping around his body, they squeezed, crushed him and using his body to feed their growth.

Duette was nearby, having swapped her tonfas for a pair of trench knives, ducking and weaving between the tentacles. She wasn't doing much damage, but she was apparently annoying the creature enough that it was wasting time trying to catch her and her projection.

Mouse deflected one of the limbs with her shield before hacking at it with her sword. She didn't see the ground beneath her start to crack, and screamed as a growth burst out of the ground, wrapping around her leg and crushing it in a spray of blood and bone.

Arcee dropped from a nearby roof, her forearm blade slicing through the limb wrapping around her. Unlike the others it fell lifelessly to the floor, the flesh blackening where she'd cut it.

"Is this city always this nuts?!" Mouse screamed, teeth clenched against the pain and clutching at the Autobot as she picked her up.
"No, this is a new one, even for us!" Arcee shouted back, using the blaster on her free hand to destroy another tentacle.

##

Dropping the PRT troopers off a safe distance away, I shot back into the sky.

The creature, Valefor, had completely covered the block surrounding the TV studio, with its tentacles spread out over nearly three blocks into total like a twisted parody of a bramble patch. On my HUD, I could see the various markers for my Autobots and the Protectorate that had been scattered by the growth.

I tapped my radio. "Perceptor, launch the Sentinel drones! Set groups B and C to search and rescue, get everyone out of there! Send group A to help the Wards!"

I didn't have many drones left. Most had been destroyed fighting Leviathan and it was taking time to replace them but at least I could get the others to safety. "And start sending Insecticons into the area, and set up a communications network with them!"

I'd already lost contact with Dragon and anyone else who was too close to Valefor's main body. If I could get enough Insecticons in the area I might be able to set up a tight infrared beam transmission from one drone to the next.

*Yes, right away! Taylor, you should be aware that seismic readings indicate aggressive and continued subterranean growth, most likely being aided by the existing municipal network and-*

"Perceptor!" I snapped, cutting him off while I quickly tried to parse his words. "It's spreading through the sewers?"

*I believe so!*

Shit.

##

"Fall back!" Weld shouted. "Gather everyone you can and keep moving! Don't let it surround you!"

*Console to all units, be advised, the creature is apparently spreading through the sewers, try to stay away from major junctions or outlets!*

He ignored the message as one of the growths lashed out at him, trying to stab him, only for the soft, half formed flesh to scrape across his chest. Weld ignored the deep grooves the small feathers carved, and instead grabbed the limb, holding it tight so Flechette could shoot it with her crossbow.

"Vista, clear a path, we need to get the civilians out of here!"

Vista and Aegis were up ahead, trying to direct people away from the fighting while Kid Win was flying overhead, his pistols flashing as he opened fire.

"And where can we send them?" Vista shouted.

"Anywhere but here!" Kid Win shouted back.

Weld tried to think, to picture the layout of the city but he was still learning his way around. Before he could make a decision, a buzzing filled the air and a dozen drones came into view, weapons blazing as they cut down the growths.
The sight of them jogged something in his mind. "Head west, make for the Autobot city!"

It wasn't close and the rough state of the roads would only hinder them more, but it gave people a direction. The crowds of panicked people, responding to the shouts of him and the Wards, turned in a rush towards what they hoped was safety.

##

Triumph let out another roar, pulping the tentacles that were quickly replaced with more.

Breathing heavily, he backed up, bumping into Battery. The older woman was clutching at a wound in her side. A glancing blow had sliced across her abdomen, razor-sharp feathers cutting deep into her flesh.

They had been separated from the others and were being pushed toward the southern parts of the city. Empire territory more specifically.

"I don't suppose we could ask Kaiser for help?" Velocity joked, his face pale.

"You," Battery grunted, "just want a chance to gawk at Menja and Fenja."

"Can you blame him? Now hold still." Kneeling next to her, Triumph carefully pulled her hand away and sprayed the wound with a small tube of 'medical spray'. It would seal and disinfect the wound, but she really needed a doctor.

She grunted in pain, fists held tight as the spray hit the exposed skin.

"No, not really." She flashed a brief smile at Triumph's look of surprise then glanced around. A faint buzzing filled the air and three of Matrix's Sentinel drones dropped from the sky. The drones were rectangular with small thrusters on the back, And each drone extended a hardlight rope that ended in a foot stirrup.

"Battery's hurt!" Velocity shouted at the drones as they came to a stop. One of the drones beeped, then swapped its rope for something that looked like a harness.

Triumph roared again, pushing the monster back as Velocity helped Battery into position.

"Go, go!" the older man shouted the moment she was strapped in and both men quickly grabbed tightly to drones of their own.

A tentacle burst from the roof of a building as they passed, swiping at them. Triumph tried to hold on as his drone took a hit, sending it into a stomach-lurching spin as the ground, covered in writhing flesh, rushed up to meet him.

##

Dauntless held his lance ready as the limbs went still. Something was wrong. The tentacles had surrounded him, forming a wall nearly twenty feet high in all directions, but they weren't moving any closer.

"Have they stopped growing?" Assault asked quietly.

"That kinda luck we ain't got," Rhinox muttered as the flesh nearest to them began to bulge, exposed muscles splitting and bloodstained feathers growing inside the openings like razor sharp teeth.

As soon as a 'mouth' finished forming, it started to laugh. All around them, more mouths appeared,
each one with a different voice; old, young, male, female, there was no pattern to it.

Behind them, scared civilians cowered back. They were trapped between the 'vines' and the side of a building with only himself and Rhinox as protection.

"AHAAHAHAHAHHAHAHA! Everything I do is divinely sanctioned!" the cacophony of voices screamed. "This is God's judgement, this is what awaits those who serve!"

Dauntless tightened his grip on his lance as the eyes focused on him, on the people behind him.

"And you will all serve! Bring the heroes to me! Remove their masks, let them see my glory!"

Around him, the air changed, and the people that had been hiding behind him suddenly tensed, before moving as one. Throwing themselves at him, they tried to drag him down, grabbing his arms and legs in an effort to keep him from moving as hands reached for his helmet.

##

The shotgun in Miss Militia's hands dissolved into a green blur, reforming with bean bag rounds while Wheeljack pulled a small pistol from storage. They had been trying to meet up with Dauntless when the spread of 'vines' had cut them off, and now they were surrounded, vines to one side, ruined buildings to the other and more than a dozen mastered civilian slaves ahead of them.

People poured from the ruined buildings, rushing to attack them. For every person they stunned or knocked down, two more took their place. All the while Valefor continued to laugh at them.

Movement to the side caught her attention and Miss Militia turned to see a child emerge from a door, a gun in her tanned skinned hand, and Hannah's finger froze on the trigger.

The moment of hesitation cost her. The child fired, the bullet slamming into her head. The forcefield she was wearing dulled the blow, stopping it from being lethal, but the force still made her head swim.

A blow to her knee knocked her to the floor and hands grabbed at the mirrored PRT visor she wore. She tried to shake her attacker off, her power switching to a curved knife, but her vision was too blurry.

Her attacker was pulled away, her visor tightly held in the man's grip. She screwed her eyes shut, just as something stabbed her in the neck. Opening her eyes, she looked up at the masked face of Wheeljack, his ears flashing as he spoke. He wasn't using his radio, and her earplugs stopping her from hearing what he said as her vision went dark.

##

The Sentinel drones were running flat out, grabbing whoever they could and carrying them to safety. The list wasn't very long.

*Ev..eva… I repeat!* Velocity shouted as he cleared the interference. *We need to evacuate the city! Can't we sound the Endbringer sirens or something?*

"No!" I shouted quickly, "Valefor has spread out underground. The shelters might be compromised!"

*I agree,* a new voice suddenly said. "This is Director Renick, I want all hands to fall back to a safe distance! Do we have any idea what the range is on this... thing?
I glanced at my map. 'Valefor', if it could even be called that, had stopped growing and now seemed to be fencing off a section of the city.

*Sir!* another voice said, "We estimate three blocks is its maximum size.*

*Fine, pull back another block and establish a perimeter. We-*

Laughter filled the air as mouths and eyes started appearing over the pulsing flesh.

"AHAAHAHAHHHAHAHA! Everything I do is divinely sanctioned!" the cacophony of voices screamed. "This is god's judgement, this is what awaits those who serve! And you will all serve! Bring the heroes to me! Remove their masks, let them see my glory!"

People near the growing walls started to move, turning and running out into the city. One or two pointed up to me before sprinting into the building while others started grabbing rocks from the ground to throw at me.

Stepping back from the edge, I turned and fired a containment foam grenade at a nearby door, stopping anyone inside the building from reaching me for now.

*I…* Renick paused, "God help me… I'm authorising Simurgh containment protocols. All national guard and police forces in the area are to help establish a perimeter. Our priority right now is containment! Anyone suspected of being mastered is to be subdued, the use of force is authorised while I contact head office.*

Green and blue dots appeared on my HUD and map, rapidly converging from across the city.

"Perceptor! What are the 'Simurgh containment protocols'?" I'd heard the term before — some of the PRT troopers had mentioned them when the Simurgh had attacked China — but I hadn't been able to bring myself to look them up. As the information appeared on my display, I almost wished I hadn't.

"Matrix to console! There's a refugee shelter nearby, they will be trapped inside the cordon!"

*I am aware of that!* Renick snapped at me. *It can't be helped. We can't spare the men to evacuate the shelter and contain this mess at the same time!*

"And what about the people still fighting inside the perimeter?"

*Matrix.* Renick's voice was a barely above a whisper. *As you are not a member of the Protectorate or the Wards, I cannot order you to assist us, so either help establish containment or pull back and let us work. Either way, clear this channel.*

"But!-

*Clear the channel!*" That arrogant, ignorant, son of a-

Stopping myself, I took a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down and think.

Valefor's transformation, however that happened, was new. Capes didn't suddenly develop new powers like this. Really, the closest anything had ever come close to this were places like Ellisburg. Small towns that had suddenly been taken over by Masters or similar capes too quickly for the PRT to respond.

I couldn't blame them for reacting the only way they knew how.
Doesn't mean I have to agree with it though. The Matrix pulsed in my chest, a calm sense of certainty flowing through my body. For just a moment, I felt different, older, more experienced. Then, the feeling was gone.

"Calling all Autobots, we're changing the game… let the PRT handle the perimeter. We'll deal with Valefor. Defensor, Windblade, get to that shelter and start evacuating the civilians. If you can, send them towards the base."

I still couldn't reach anyone inside the 'forest', but I could still feel their sparks. I'd have to trust they would be okay.

*Weld, to Matrix, we're west of the studio and heading for your base. We've got civilians with us!*  

"Roger, when you get there head to the main gate, Perceptor will let you inside the shield. Perceptor, send my armour upgrade. It's time to test it out."

*R-Right!*  

Seconds later, there was a flash and a squat rectangular shape appeared on the rooftop. I'd designed it to look like a small trailer when unused, something I could tow behind my armour's bike mode. Coloured in red and blue, the Autobot sigil was proudly displayed on both sides.

As I stepped towards it, the trailer opened up, parts reaching out and wrapping around me as they transformed, my HUD expanding as the systems came online.

Armor integration - complete
Flight system - online
Shields - online
Fusion cannon - online

**Endbringer armour - online!**

I clenched my fist to test the armour's feedback just as Cyclonus landed on the roof. "You were ordered to fall back," he pointed out calmly.

"Yes, and I'm going to interpret that as a thinly veiled order to attack," I said just as calmly. "Care to join me?"

Jumping, I opened the wings on my upgraded armour, thrusters screaming as they pushed me into the air and towards Valefor.

I gasped as the world blurred beneath me, the suit flying faster than I was used to while the whole thing felt heavier than ever. Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to stay on target, Cyclonus following closely behind.

Rolling, I dropped down low, a long sword extending from my arm while smaller guns fired at the vines around me as they rose up in an effort to catch me. One, bigger around than a truck, rose up and tried to slap me down only for me to spin around it, my sword carving a deep furrow into its flesh.

[fusion cannon- charging]

The number of tentacles were increasing, whipping through the air like hundreds of angry snakes. I
did my best to weave through them, my sword cutting them down when I couldn't but they just kept coming.

Dropping to the ground, my feet dug into the pavement as I skidded to a stop, the cannon mounted on my shoulder pointing up at the studio.

"The receiving end," I muttered to myself and the cannon roared. A bright purple beam punched through the thick layers of flesh on the studio walls and out the other side, lighting up the night sky.

My thrusters fired, throwing me into the air as Valefor tried to crush me. Creating a hardlight sword I hacked through the limbs that got close.

As I rose into the air, all I could hear was the screaming of hundreds of mouths, each one with a different voice.

##

"If we turn here, we can reach the studio's loading area!" Armsmaster shouted, cleaving another limb in two.

"We can't keep this up!" Dragon screamed back, ripping her arm free of more vines. The city around them had been completely covered in the growth by this point; they even blotted out the sky above them, forming a dense canopy that was filled with lidless eyes watching their every move. The last of the PRT troopers were gone, leaving just the two of them to walk through this maze of flesh, their armour battered from the constant onslaught.

More mouths appeared, opening suddenly around her. "I can see you scurrying about down there, like rats in the sewers!"

Tentacles began to extend from the walls, feathers growing and twisting to form pincer like shapes.

Dragon dived forward, tackling Armsmaster to the ground and knocking his halberd from his hand. Without thinking, she overloaded the shield generator in her body, surrounding them both in a glowing blue dome. The pincers crashed against it, again and again, relentless in their assault.

"Now can we leave?!" Dragon shouted over the noise.

"No!" Armsmaster shouted back. "I can still stop this!"

"But!-" her words cut off with a scream as the shield failed and her shoulder exploded in pain, the head of a halberd bursting through her armour. She glanced at the faint grey haze around it, then over her shoulder.

A skinless body loomed over them, covered in feathers and eyes. From the waist down, the body was just a mass of tentacles that spread out into the walls around them and its hands were tightly gripping the shaft of Armsmaster's dropped weapon.

"Your lives are in the palm of my hand," the creature said in Valefor's voice. "Before I squeeze, I offer up one last shining truth."

Twisting the halberd, he pushed it sideways, unknowingly towards her spark.

"God hates you!"

Thunder echoed out over the city and Valefor screamed, his hands slipping from the weapon.
Dragon rolled sideways, Armsmaster going the other way. His arm blurred and his knife slammed into 'Valefor's' head with a meaty thwack.

He barely seemed to notice it as the walls around them writhed and screamed in agony.

Grabbing the halberd, Dragon pulled it from her body, pain and warning messages flashing as she tried to climb to her feet. Above them, the canopy opened, twisted limbs pulling back to reveal the sky.

With a pained grunt, she transformed, her wounded shoulder sparking as she opened her wings and grabbed Armsmaster with her foreclaws.

"We are leaving!" she shouted, jumping over the canopy and fighting for altitude.

##

A tentacle shot up into the air after me, smaller growths splitting off from it and reaching out for me as I rocketed into the sky, but they couldn't keep up.

In the distance, I could see the TV studio, a hole punched clean through the building. I doubted I'd hit anything vital; even as I watched, new limbs were covering the hole, wrapping tightly together with more appearing over the top.

*Taylor, analysis reports show a contraction in the target's outer areas!* Perceptor's voice said suddenly in my ear as I cleared the interference.

Below me, the tentacle that had been trying to reach me had stopped. Instead, it started to bulge and writhe before a human torso burst free. It was skinless, the eyes replaced with waving tendrils, but its body was covered in mismatched eyes that glared up at me.

The chest split open, revealing row upon row of teeth.

"You!" a cacophony of voices screamed. "You can't stop me! She demands this city's destruc-!"

A shot from my Ion blaster took the bastard's head off. The body jerked a couple of times, then a new head started to form.

With a scream, he pushed himself higher, more and more tentacles reaching up for me. On my map, his outer ring continued to shrink.

Smirking, I dived down, flying as close as I dared, weaving between thrashing limbs and ignoring the occasional scrape of feather against metal. Shots from my Ion blaster peppered his body. The damage was quickly healed, but each hit served to enrage him more.

"Really, is this the best you can do!?" I shouted back, rising higher into the air.

Just below me, Cyclonus streaked through the air, missiles striking Valefor as he strafed him again and again.

Valefor swiped at me again, more and more bodies appearing among the limbs. "It'll take more than your pathetic little darts to stop me!"

Twisting, I aimed my fusion cannon down at Valefor. I had to be careful now, if I missed, god knows how many people I'd kill.

"I have more!"
Spinning around in another wild swing, I locked onto the studio and fired again.

I could hear Valefor scream as the purple bolt punched through the roof and into the deepest parts of the building, destroying anything in its way. As the after images faded, I saw a brief glimpse of the building below before Valefor covered the hole.

The tentacles below me retracted as he wrapped more of himself around the building.

*Taylor!* Perceptor suddenly shouted. *There is a massive spike in seismic activity in the surrounding area! It appears Valefor is trying to submerge himself*

*Taylor!* came Windblade's panicked cry. *Valefor is attacking the shelter!*

"What!?”

On my map, the red ring that showed Valefor's body was changing shape. The ring was shrinking, with one red line branching off towards the shelter.

I hesitated. Why was he reaching for the shelter? For the people? What would be the point, who knows how many people he'd already enslaved.

Recharging my fusion cannon, I aimed at the studio. There has to be a core… I told myself. If I could just hit it, this would all… oh, fuck! "Cyclonus! Follow me!"

Cold dread settled in my stomach as I spun around and the thrusters on my back screamed.

##

"Everyone! Remain calm and keep walking!” Windblade shouted over the noise of the shelter. They had barely managed to get half the people out before the national guard had arrived. The shelter sat inside the 'containment zone', even though Valefor hadn't reached this far yet, and their orders were to contain everyone, including the Autobots.

Ducking out of sight, Windblade had called for a ground bridge. Now she was trying to funnel the remaining refugees through the narrow portal.

"Don't worry about your belongings, we need to clear-"

There was a distant rumble as the ground beneath her started to shake and a large tentacle burst out of the ground just past the shelter. Rising up into the air, it was wider than a truck. It slammed back to the ground with a crash before it started to split apart, new limbs spreading out like weeds, each one digging into the ground even as feathers started to sprout along their length.

Around Windblade, people panicked, surging forward in an effort to get through the portal. The soldiers, who had until now been carefully ignoring her, opened fire, bullets slamming into the growths but doing nothing to slow it down.

Drawing her sword, Windblade shot forward, cleaving a limb in half before it could finish forming, even as more started to appear, all of them moving towards the shelter.

"Taylor! Valefor is attacking the shelter! Defensor! Get a shield up!” she shouted over the hail of gunfire.

Leaving the refugees to manage themselves, the larger bot stomped forward, A glowing blue dome appearing over him, large enough to cover most of the shelter, and tentacles crashed against it.
harmlessly.

Windblade spun, hacking another limb apart and using her turbines to propel herself backwards to buy time.

"We could really use some hel-" Her message was cut off as another tentacle appeared, bursting out of the ground under Defensor and wrapping tightly around the combiner.

"Status:... not optimal." Defensor groaned as the limb constricted, newly formed feathers cutting into his armour.

More burst from the ground around the shelter, circling the area and lashing out like whips. The national guard screamed as they were cut down.

The larger limbs began to bulge and twist, the flesh tearing apart as torsos started to form.

"Drop the shield!" Windblade screamed at Defensor, pounding her fists against it futilely.

"N-negative!" Defensor ground out, even as his armour started to give way under the crushing force of the limb. "Priority: protection."

"Aw, how sweet," a voice said. Several of the smaller tentacles twisted together, their flesh flowing into each other as a human torso started to form.

"You actually think you can stop me!" As the grinning mouth formed, more tentacles burst from the ground, driving themselves into Defensor.

The Autobot roared, his eyes glowing like fire, then smoke billowed from his armour and he went still. The shield vanished as Valefor released his lifeless body.

With a wordless scream, Windblade shot forward, her sword hacking at Valefor. One limb after another was sent flying. A vicious swipe decapitated the newly formed torso. All-the-while, Valefor laughed.

For each limb she severed, two more would grown, the damage they were doing to her gradually slowing her down until one slammed into her wing, the feathers cutting through the thinner metal and severing it in a shower of sparks and metal.

In pain and off balance, Windblade screamed as she was pulled to the ground, tentacles wrapping tightly around her limbs until only her torso and head were left exposed.

Another torso loomed above her, but this was one different. Bits of human skin and ruined clothes clung to its body and a tangled mass of feathers sat over its heart.

"Tell me," Valefor drawled, and a tentacle extended from his arm, slowly, its tip pressed against her chest, just above her spark. "Can you feel pain? I really hope-""

Taylor hit him with all the force of a freight train, dragging him off to the side and driving him into the ground.

##

Pinning Valefor beneath me, I lashed out, slamming my fist into his head again and again. My blood was pounding in my ears, the Matrix an inferno in my chest, its heat fueling my rage.

Extra limbs appeared, grabbing me and throwing me backwards. Hitting the ground, I rolled over,
letting my momentum bring back to my feet.

"That was hardly a fair fight," Valefor spat, blood running from his mouth, even as he healed. "I thought heroes cared about honour?"

"This isn't about honour or rules Valefor!" Pulling my Ion blaster from my back, I opened fire. "You're a monster and this is about ending you!"

My gun fired, only for one of Valefor's other bodies to jump in the way, tentacles bursting from its ruined form, reaching out and wrapping around my arm.

Cyclonus hit the ground between us, his sword slicing through the limbs in one clean stroke.

Valefor screamed, either in rage or pain, I couldn't tell, and more tentacles burst out of the ground.

Hardlight sword in one hand, Ion blaster in the other, Cyclonus and I tried to fight our way through them, always keeping an eye on Valefor. That was his real body, it had to be. It was the only one that still had remains of skin and clothes on it.

Around us, Valefor was relentless, his flesh rapidly covering the ground and warning messages filled my vision as Valefor slowly overwhelmed us. I grunted as he lifted me off the ground, my limbs entangled in Valefor's tentacles.

I continued to struggle as Cyclonus was dragged forward and held in front of Valefor. Dozens of eyes appeared across Valefor's body as he held Cyclonus in place and uttered a single word.

"Stop."

My heart froze as Cyclonus suddenly went still.

"Well now, isn't that interesting…"

Stepping back, Valefor unbound Cyclonus' sword arm.

"Cut off a limb"

His face black, Cyclonus brought his sword up and in one clean swipe, severed his left arm at the shoulder.

Releasing him fully, Valefor's laughter echoed through the shelter, countless mouths speaking as one, eyes filled with manic glee. Turning to me, he slithered forward while feelers started working at the seams of my armour.

"I'm going to prise you from that armour. Then you will build me an army." His eyes, all of them, were unfocused, lost in whatever fantasies had filled his mind.

"We shall march across this world, a crusade against all non-believers and hereti-HICKS!"

Valefor's gloating was cut short as a sword burst from his chest, lightning dancing along its edge. Behind him, cyclonus growled his eyes burning red as he pushed forward.

Screaming in pain, Valefor lashed out, a tentacle bigger than he was slamming into Cyclonus and sending him to the ground. Before he could recover, another grabbed him by the arm, lifting him off the floor.

Another limb one wrapped around the hilt of the sword that was still buried in Valefor's back and
pulled it free. He grunted as it fell to the ground, his body trembling as he hacked and coughed. From behind, I could see the blackened edge of the wound as they slowly spread across his body.

Straightening, Valefor tightened his grip on Cyclonus.

"I fight because God has ordained it," Valefor's mouths hissed from all around us, his tendrils biting deeper into my armour. His leaned towards Cyclonus, his neck lengthening with a sickening crack. "What do you fight for?"

"It's personal!" Cyclonus bellowed suddenly, his eyes blazing with fury. Jerking in Valefor's grip, he threw his head forward, driving his horns deep into Valefor's face, one of them breaking off in an empty eye socket.

Valefor pulled back screaming, his grip on us both loosening as he tossed Cyclonus aside.

"Kill them! Kill them all!" soldiers emerged from the devastation, many covered in open wounds. They raised their rifles and opened fire, the bullets raining down on my armour, heedless of the ricochets that we hitting their own people.

Clutching at his face, with one hand and his chest with the other, Valefor moved away from the chaos, cracking apart the ground and lashing out wildly at anyone who got in his way and I realised with a sickening lurch that he was trying to run.

No, you are NOT getting away!

Not stopping to think, I triggered my armour's emergency release. Hidden charges detonated, blasting apart my Endbringer armour. Hitting the ground, I ignored the hail of bullets as I snatched up Cyclonus' sword and jumped, small thrusters throwing me into the air.

The Matrix blazed in my chest, its energy arching across my body as my sword burst into flame.

Hearing my scream of rage, Valefor turned. His eyes widened in fear as I dropped from the sky, knocking us both to the ground. My sword coming down on his shoulder in a spray of blood, bone and feathers, burying itself deep in the mess of feathers on his chest.

Pinned under me, Valefor looked up at me, what eyes were still visible were wide in fear. His mouth worked soundlessly as black lines traced across his body, the visible veins and muscle crumbling.

"I want you to know this," I said hissed, leaning forward slightly. "Everything you did. Was for nothing."

"P-please," he gasped, his voice barely a whisper. "I surrender, I surrender…"

He couldn't be saved; all around us his flesh was crumbling, what few people he hadn't killed were looking around in horror, freed from his control. Even if I could save him… he would always be a threat to everyone.

Letting go of the sword, I stood up, my Null-Ray extending.

"I surrender!"

"...I know."

Aiming for his head, I opened fire.

##
Sitting in her office, Contessa frowned. The host hadn't lasted as long as she had hoped, but the data it had resulted in had been enlightening. Maybe she should repeat the experiment? Maybe the corrupted host would provide a useful result?

If nothing else, it could be fun.

AN: so, those who follow me on Spacebattles might know this chapter was finished a couple of weeks ago and got a very negative reception. That was why I held off cross posting until now.

So, for those who dislike this chapter or just want to complain about i'll say this. Don't bother.

I doubt anyone can say anything I haven't already heard and I honestly don't care at this point. I will not be editing/changing the chapter either.
Despite what people thought, reverse engineering tinker-tech wasn’t always impossible. In fact, a number of companies had sprung up over the years offering to do just that. Companies like Onyx R&D. They were new to the industry, but well funded, and rapidly catching up to its competitors.

For CEO Garrison Blackrock, merely ‘catching up’ wasn’t enough. He wanted to surpass the competition, to go further, rise higher than anyone had before.

While most considered exotic technology like teleporters beyond understanding, he was determined to prove them wrong and confident that he had discovered the key to unlocking all tinker-tech.

The small elevator came to a stop and Garrison Blackrock stepped out into the top floor of Onyx R&D.

“Good morning!” he said with a warm smile as he walked through his office, making a pretty young intern blush. She was maybe twenty years younger than him, far too young for him to consider even touching, but a little harmless flirting was fine. No one ever got in trouble for making someone blush after all.

“Sir?!” A tall man with slicked back hair quickly crossed the room, a tablet held in his hand. Despite his well-pressed suit, the man had the haggard air of a man trying to tap-dance on quicksand about him. “We just heard back from the PRT, they are interested in our offer, but they want the designs finalised by the end of the day.”

Chuckling, Blackrock took the tablet and glanced at the blueprint. A central controller and four receivers to establish a perimeter. His new ‘advanced research and development’ department had already replicated the controller, but the receiver would be an issue. Only a Tinker could have made so much tech fit into such a small package.

Thanks to the efforts of various government groups, the PRT was the biggest legal supplier of ‘tinker-tech’. It was fairly normal for them to shop designs like this around, under heavy NDA of course, and allow various corporations to ‘bid’ on creating a successful copy.

Blackrock had confidence in his lab-techs. He’d hand picked them all from the very best up and coming minds he could find. However, he doubted they would be able to get results that quickly.

The PRT was likely testing his company, and if they could impress here, it would probably result in more contracts in the future.

“Very well, leave it with me and I’ll see what can be done.”

Nodding to the man, he tapped at the various options on the tablet as he walked into his darkened office, which took up nearly half the floor space.

He wasn’t surprised to find someone already waiting for him. The metal lines on her black bodysuit reflected the daylight let in by the large floor-to-ceiling windows - they were mirrored, of course. No sense having a private, top floor office in the middle of San Francisco, only to let all and sundry see
who he was meeting with.

Next to the woman sat a large metal box. It was longer than she was tall, but only slightly wider, giving it the look of a casket. The PRT logo was printed on the lid, along with a series of dates and numbers.

As the CEO of one of the U.S.’ newest tech-research companies, his security was second to none. No one was able to enter or leave the building without being seen, either by a camera or his well-paid security staff. Of course, it meant nothing when he handed people keys to the ‘backdoor’.

“Ah, good morning Josie.” Walking past her, he sat on the edge of his desk. “You didn’t have to get me a present, my birthday isn’t for months.”

“Stuff it,” she snapped, folding her arms across her chest. “You’ve got a leak. My men reported spotting the Elite and Toybox sniffing around.”

Blackrock sighed. That was troublesome. “It’s probably a coincidence,” he said, helping himself to a water bottle from the minifridge in his office. Idly, he offered one to Josie.

“You really willing to risk that?” She glared at the bottle until he placed it back in the fridge.

“No, I’m not. I’ll start a sweep immediately. Are you sure it wasn’t one of-”

“My people are clean,” she snapped, her eyes flashing dangerously.

They probably were, he thought. The Dragonslayers were a small group. After their near destruction at the hands of Dragon, any new members were likely checked thoroughly.

So, the leak was either on his end, or Coil had let something slip. “And how are things with Coil?”

“He’s pissed. He seems to think you leaked the info on Valefor’s mother.”

“Does he? I can’t imagine why.” Blackrock smiled, carefully looking out of his office window and watching her reaction in the reflection. He wasn’t disappointed.

“Bullshit! You really expect me to think you planned that shit?.”

Walking forward, she glared up at him. She really was quite short. “I had people in Brockton. You want to tell me you got them killed?”

He looked down at her. Now that they were closer, he realised she stank of blood, smoke and sweat. Her cheeks were pale and gaunt, making the dark rings around her bloodshot eyes stand out.

He’d be very surprised if she’d had more than a few hours of sleep in the past week.

“You never let me have any fun,” he grumbled playfully. “While I did leak the information, I never expected, never even considered he’d turn into some sort of monster.”

He ran a hand down his face, his dusky skin paling in genuine shame. “Valefor was many things, sane wasn’t one of them. I guessed that if the right people said the right things, he’d make a mistake and the PRT would put him down. Everything else...”
It had been a gamble. He’d met Jackson Bailey once and made a point to drop the man the odd tip here and there. Nothing much, but enough to help boost his career. Just one more useful contact in his ever-growing network of friends and acquaintances. The perfect person to leak some choice information that the PRT didn’t want getting out.

He’d known that releasing the information would likely get someone killed. He’d never imagined it would have gotten so far out of hand.

Josie continued to glare at him for a time, then with a huff she looked away.

“I want to see it,” she growled.

“If you insist,” he said with a shrug, a smile returning to his face. “Do you mind bringing the package along?”

Turning, he walked to the far wall. There were two ways into his office: the public entrance guarded by his fearsome secretary, and his private elevator that went to every floor in the building and his private car park beneath it.

He didn’t use it often; he liked walking through the office, meeting his employees, stopping occasionally to talk to them. It helped morale, and happy workers were productive workers after all.

Of course, the elevator also had access to the extra floors, the ones beneath his carpark that only his personally selected workers knew about.

Stepping inside, he waited for Josie to follow him. She propped the box up against the wall and glared at him as he pressed the button for the lowest floor.

As the elevator descended, he considered the boon that was the Dragonslayers. Years ago, he’d stumbled across a small-time mercenary group with access to tinker-tech led by a man called Saint. It had taken time, but with some effort and carefully worded requests, Blackrock had managed to convince Saint to share his technology.

It had taken Blackrock even longer, not to mention a few strong bottles of whiskey, before Saint had finally taken him into his confidence and admitted not only the source of his technology, also the fire that had driven him forward.

Dragon. An AI, alive and free in the world.

Blackrock had been surprised, then ecstatic. Tinkers had built AI in the past. Most tended to be extremely limited or outright insane, the most well known of which was still contained in Eagleton. Dragon, however, wasn’t just functional, she was flourishing.

He’d urged Saint over the years to capture Dragon, to bring her in alive and whole so she could be studied, but the man hadn’t been swayed.

Blackrock spared a glance at Josie. It seemed she was determined to martyr herself on the same cause as her former leader.

Not that Blackrock expected anything different. Both of them were, frankly, a little unhinged, driven by anger and regret. But if Saint was a knife, then Josie was a hammer. She didn’t care to be delicate or even consider the context of a situation, she had her goal and nothing was going to stop her, and
that goal was the destruction of Dragon.

Blackrock could respect that level of determination, that zeal, even if he didn’t understand or agree with it. Why destroy something when it could be made to work for you?

Letting the thought go, he emerged from the elevator and led Josie down a corridor to a code-locked door.

“Your security is too light,” she muttered, shifting the box on her shoulders.

“Just because you don’t see it, doesn’t mean it’s not there,” he said with a chuckle, opening the door and walking forward.

He heard the crash of the box hitting the floor, but ignored it.

“What have you done,” she hissed.

“It’s beautiful, is it not?”

“It’s grotesque,” she growled back.

In the middle of the room sat the Programming Enhancement Chair, or at least, that’s what it had once been. The Dragonslayers had sold it to him, along with a corrupted copy of Dragon.

It had taken months of work to understand everything, to fix it and bring it all to a functioning state. But the machine before them now was a piece of art. A central column rose up into the air, supporting a large dome. A dozen beds circled around the base, each one with a helmet-like device attached to it.

Currently, all twelve beds were occupied by the smartest people he could find. Experts in data analysis, programming, psychology, artificial intelligence and other disciplines.

From the ceiling hung dozens of robot arms on rails that allowed them to move freely throughout the room, each with different interchangeable tools attached. All around the room, people in white coats observed the arms as they went about various complicated tasks.

“Your friend Nestor helped set up the first one. Then we hooked him and a dozen others into it and they were able to design the mark two and three. After that… well, we’re somewhere near the seventh iteration.” He made no effort to conceal the pride in his voice.

It was incredible—a human gestalt, a hivemind greater than the sum total of its parts and, incredibly, it was not only working, but it was evolving, constantly making small modifications and improvements to its own systems.

As he watched, an arm removed one of the white plastic panels from the top of the PEC, allowing another to carefully insert a circuit board.

This was the key, this was how he would crack the secrets of tinker-tech. While it would take a team of people months, or even years, to reverse engineer even simple tinker-tech, a dozen working together in concert with an AI only needed hours, or days.

Onyx industries would soon be the front runner in reverse engineering and mass-producing tinker-
“And people just volunteer for this?” Josie sneered, disgust clear on her face and fists clenched.

Blackrock laughed.

“Oh, I'll admit, they were reluctant at first. That's why I was one of the first volunteers.” He ignored the way Josie took a careful step away from him. “It was… an experience. Would you like to try it? You might find it enlightening.”

“And you look that stupid?” she growled. “Do you have any idea what you are playing with? You're giving that thing free access to human minds!”

“Regardless,” he said with a shrug, “we're not fools. The system is completely isolated. No outside connections of any kind to this room. No hardlines, radio signals or phone lines of any kind can reach this room.”

“It won't be enough,” muttered Josie and he spared her another charming smile.

“My dear, you really need to relax.”

Catching the eye of one of the researchers, Blackrock waved the man over and passed him the tablet he had been carrying.

“I want this on the next analysis run. We need designs for a working prototype by this evening.”

The researcher nodded, then hurried off between the tables. Turning around, Blackrock found Josie looking at a complicated mess of spikes and straps that had been placed on a table.

“Ahh, yes that”—Blackrock stood beside her—“one of my researchers designed it. He wanted to produce a portable version of the PEC that would allow people to be connected while still allowing them to move and work.”

Josie fixed him with a harsh glare. “And that seems safe to you?”

“No, of course not,” he said with a sigh. “I cancelled the project immediately. The idea has merit, of course, and I can't fault a man for being enthusiastic, but it’s currently too much of a risk.”

Before he could say more, there were two short blasts of an alarm and two of the bodies connected to the machine started to stir, people in white coats rushing to help disconnect them.

“As you can see, I take the safety and security of my people very seriously. Members of the ‘brain-bank’, as they call themselves, can only operate for limited durations with mandatory breaks in between. No exceptions, not even for me, and security monitors the system twenty-four seven to ensure there is no unauthorised access.”

He led Josie across the room so he could talk to the researchers.

“Have you made any progress?”

“Yes, sir,” a woman with short brown hair said with a nod. “She’s stable, and the last of the kill commands have finally been removed. We think we have the emotional blocks bypassed, so she’s
able to feel again. She’s certainly talking more. She’ll never be the same, of course, but I think with
time she may make a full recovery.”

“She?” Josie hissed. “It is a machine.”

“She,” the woman said with a firm glare, “identifies as female and we at least respect that. Also,
she’s picked a name for herself.”

“Oh really?” Blackrock ran a hand over his beard, smoothing it down. “And what should we call our
patient?”

“She wants to be called Wyvern.”

“Alright, have Williams print her name on the side of the PEC when he gets a moment.”

Blackrock looked back at Josie. The woman was glaring at the PEC, at Wyvern. Her fists were
clenned tightly and her cheeks ruddy with temper.

“I understand your feelings,” Blackrock said quietly. “Saint was a good man, he didn’t deserve to die
the way he did. Impaled on debris and left to bleed out… Dragon will be made to pay.”

As two more people climbed into the PEC, a pair of arms lowered from the ceiling, picking up the
crate Josie had left by the door.

Blackrock chose not to comment as the woman stepped away from the arms as they carried the box
to a nearby table, glaring at them even as she approached them.

“So why do you want that…thing anyway?”

“I’m keeping my side of the deal.” The mechanical arms unbolted the lid and lifted it free, the smell
of salt filling the air. “This way, I can help you identify weak spots, design flaws or limitations you
can exploit.” Not to mention the boon reverse engineering it would be for robotics technology.

“Still,” he said almost to himself, “I’m impressed Coil was able to secure it. I assume he still plans to
go ahead?”

“He had men in the water within minutes of the fight ending,” she said, glaring at the contents of the
crate. “And yes, he’s just waiting on the others to contact him.”

Inside the box lay a silver body, the metal of its arms and legs reflecting the bright lights above, its
smooth, faceless head staring back at them.

“I don’t like what you are doing here.” Josie continued to glare at the lifeless Autobot. “Just find me
a way to kill these things.”

“Don’t worry my dear,” Blackrock said gently, watching as more arms descended, a large spike
emerging from one of them as it approached Josie from behind.

“Dragon won't be a problem for much longer.”
If you enjoyed this, please consider donating: ko-fi.com/metallix

so, yeah, I hadn't forgotten about the Dragonslayers
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Insight
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 chronologically.

Topic: Matrix
In: Boards ► Cape News ► America ► Brockton Bay
Bagrat(Original Poster) (The Guy in the Know) (Veteran Member)
okay, give me a bit to gather what i can together.

(Showing page 50 of 54)

► BadSamurai
Look, did you see the leaked footage? you can see a feather in his hands. Since when did endbringer flesh do that to people?
► Mock Moniker
Your telling me people regularly stuff endbringer crap into their bodies?
► Good Ship Morpheus
Yes actually. Had a chinese neighbor that used to sniff 'powdered leviathan scales'. He claimed it cured impotancy.
► Mock Moniker
Bullshit!

I refuse to believe that shit was real leviathan scales. I mean, yeah, the chinese will snort, drink or eat all kinds of shit and think it will cure everything from limp dicks to baldness.

But whatever he was snorting it wasn't endbringer skin. Does Levithan even have scales?

*User has received an infraction for racist comments.*

► HighLife
I think we're forgetting something important. She outright executed Valefor!

Seriously, what the hell is going on in that city?
► Bagrat (Original Poster) (The Guy in the Know) (Veteran Member)
senorEel Valefor had a kill order on his head before he turned into a monster.

Right, here is a 'rough' timeline of events. Special thanks to all those who contributed.

Just after christmas, Lung destroyed a couple of buildings. Apparently he was looking for the undersiders. He Found them and Matrix.

Matrix ended up in the hospital and we got our first look at Predaqueen.
It was also confirmed that she helped bring the Merchants down (the first time).

Now, things get a little hazy, but apparently Matrix was kidnapped by the Dragonslayers who also took a shot at Dragon. I can’t find many details, the PRT is being really quiet about it.

Things go quiet, with Matrix making some minor public appearances. Then that whole mess with Concert happened and, who can forget, the battle with Uber and Leet in the mall. (seriously, wtf was Leet smoking when he got this idea?)

For those who don't know, Uber and Leet decided to use paintballs and rubber bullets in a mall. Matrix and Panacea -of all people- drive them off and Uber got his hand crushed.

She also tried to stop the Undersiders from hijacking a prisoner transport. It didn't work, but she tried.

Not long later, the Wards and Autobots were caught in an attack by the empire, aimed at Concert. Stormtiger and Cricket were captured, but were later rescued by Kaiser.

She fought against Lung when what was reportedly a meeting between him and Kaiser went wrong. (for those keeping track, that's the second time she's dropped him into the bay)

Short time later, Uber and Leet pulled another stunt. This time forcing the Wards (and Matrix into a left4dead styled game. This actually ended with her interrupting a bank robbery by the Undersiders. (there are rumours that she doesn't sleep and I believe them.)

Not long after that, Leet started attacking people with his knock-off Autobots (Leet-bots). Eventually they attacked Matrix at school and Matrix ended up calling them out. Three days later she… well no other word for it, she played Leet like a fool and crushed him.

Then the small riot that resulted in Oni-Lee's death. We don't really know what happened that night, the PRT won't say anything, but we do know that Matrix was there.

After that, I don't think any of us will forget Bakuda. She blew up a hospital, tried to take over the ABB and went on a rampage. I don't think I could really convey the level of destruction she caused.

From what we know, Matrix and Glory Girl went after Bakuda hard. A friend in the PRT told me Bakuda was brought in with a broken arm, shattered ribs, a cracked jaw and rope burn. She died in the Birdcage.

After that… Leviathan. Reports are sparse. They always are. But from what we know, Matrix and her Autobots fought like hell. What few eye witnesses I can find say Matrix was all over the place, pulling people out of danger, putting up shields, apparently she turned a hospital into a shelter.

There's a couple of people claiming she fought Leviathan himself, but no eye witnesses.
*edit - claims confirmed by 'hunress' and 'GloryGirl'.*

Matrix vanished for two weeks after that, but the Autobots -with Panacea in tow!- took out the resurgent Merchants.

That, more or less, brings us to now, with the riots and Matrix's public plea for peace and her fight with that thing that was Valefor.

► BBhunress (At Ground Zero: Brockton Bay) (Verified Cape)
Bitch is fucking nuts. I was there, I watched her fight Leviathan.

► QwertyD
bbhuntress
You and XxVoid_CowboyxX both. Tell me, did you see some magic glowing crystal too?
I can’t talk about the fight. I will, however, say I know who Huntress is and can confirm she was there.

I'm giving you tags for that reason and that reason alone.

oh, come on! I hit my head on some rubble and saw some shit!

The only major difference is willow. They swapped actresses, they went for another blonde with huge tits. Seriously, they are bigger than my head! She ended up banging buffy near the end of season 12.

The only major difference is willow. They swapped actresses, they went for another blonde with huge tits. Seriously, they are bigger than my head! She ended up banging buffy near the end of season 12.

*User has received an infraction for this post* - This is a SFW forum.

Wanna know Matrix's first words when she woke up?

What happened to my name and where did those tags come from?!

Her first words were (I swear im not making this up) 'Did I win?'

Also, Rattrap, I don't know how you got admin privileges, again, but change Panacea's name back and remove those tags!

Chuckling to herself, Lisa leaned back in bed, letting the tablet fall.
"You okay?" Rattrap said quietly, climbing over her shoulder in rat-mode and settling himself down on her chest.

"Buy me a drink first," she muttered, smiling nonetheless. Putting a hand on the rat, she gently brushed his faux fur with her fingers. "m'fine… just a bit…"

She was well aware she wasn't thinking entirely straight, but that didn't really bother her too much. Three weeks. She'd been in a coma for nearly a month. A medically induced coma to try and protect her from the effects of one of the worst anti-thinkers in the world.

She didn't really remember much. She'd been looking at a monitor when she'd seen Mama Mathers. Then… She shook her head. The memories were faded, indistinct, leaving only faint images when she closed her eyes. Lisa wasn't sure what she'd seen while dreaming, but she expected she'd have trouble sleeping for awhile.

There was a knock on her door and Lisa looked up to see Victoria Dallon standing there.

"Hey, how you feeling?"

"Ever had a hangover?" Lisa said with a small groan. It wasn't too bad, but she just felt so tired, drained for lack of a better word.

"Nope!" Victoria said far too cheerfully.

"I bet you can eat whatever you want too?" Victoria simply continued to smile.

"Oh I hate you," Lisa said with a laugh. "By the way, Rattrap showed me some pictures of Taylor and Amy. Tell me the truth, are they really that sickeningly sweet?"

"You have no idea." Victoria laughed, walking over to the bed. "They're all 'careful touches and doe eyed looks. I swear, I'm gonna get diabetes just watching them."

Her smile softened, taking a slightly pained edge. "Taylor… after Leviathan… I dunno. We walked in on her one night, and she was just staring at her armour. She wasn't moving, it was like she'd just checked out mentally. Before any of us could say anything, Amy was there and the next thing I know, they're kissing."

They lapsed into a thoughtful silence that was only broken when Rattrap wiggled out of Lisa's hands with an air of mischief.

"Hey, wanna know something cool?"

"Hmm?"

A hologram appeared in the air and Lisa felt her jaw drop as she realised what she was looking at.

"Is that?" Victoria said, her voice equal parts shock and awe.

"Oh yes!" Rattrap said with a smile.

"We're gonna tease her about this, right?"

"Oh yes."

Standing up, Victoria was smiling broadly. "So, ready to go?"
Lisa held her arms out, letting Victoria lift her from the bed. "My hero!"

"Don't push your luck," Victoria grumbled, but she was still smiling so Lisa wasn't too worried. Sure, she could have walked, she wasn't that out of it after all. But she didn't need her power to know Victoria wanted to feel helpful.

Rattrap clung to her top, whooping as Victoria lifted into the air and carried them down the stairs, and Lisa let herself relax. She was so looking forward to this.

##

[Taylor]

It had been a few days since Valefor's defeat and I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When he'd died, most of his 'body' had crumbled to dust, leaving only his ruined torso, which had made the cleanup easier. It had also left a lot of damage to the city's already damaged infrastructure. Search and rescue was still ongoing, though at this point it was mostly just gathering up the bodies.

I'd wanted to help, but Dragon, not to mention Dad, had insisted I returned to base to 'recover from my ordeal'. Personally, I think they just wanted me out of sight after footage of me 'executing' Valefor had inevitably gone viral.

So, here I was in the 'Autobot-medbay', working on the mess that was Defensor.

He was currently lying on a specially made rig that was supporting each individual Autobot to help spread his weight and avoid causing more damage.

A hologram of Defensor floated in front of me, the wireframe glowing with different colours. Blue was fine, while red denoted areas that needed fixing. Anything greyed out was beyond repair.

There wasn't much blue. Most of the hologram was red with some grey mixed in. On the upside, all five sparks were strong. I have replacement t-cogs… the solenoids and actuators will need some custom machining because he doesn't use the standard ones. Most of his outer armour will need replacing… Sighing, I continued to mentally tally all the things I'd need to replace.

"Hey," Amy called out, walking into the room, but I was too focused on what I was doing to do more than call back quietly.

Walking up behind me, Amy wrapped her arms around my waist and kissed the back of my neck, the action surprising me enough that I looked over my shoulder at her.

"Is he okay?" Amy asked, looking up at me.

"Yes, no?" I said with a huff. "They are alive, but there's so much damage…"

"Can't your power repair them?"

"No." I shook my head, sighing in frustration. "Defensor is built from five individuals, each of their systems integrating with the others right down to their sparks. The problem is, while they're combined my power only sees them as a single individual. Small repairs would be fine, but I'm not sure what effect it would have on them, individually, if I tried to use my power to fix everything at once."

"That's… bad?" Amy hazarded.
"Very. I mean, it's not been a problem until now, nothing has managed to do any major harm to them after all."

Picking up a crowbar, I glanced again at the hologram. "So, that means I have to do this the slow way. I'll have to untangle them all, then repair them individually... Honestly, I think it would be better to just recover their sparks and build them new bodies.

"I agree," Ratchet said with a nod, "though if we're going that far, I'd suggest a full systems upgrade while we're at it."

"Hmm." He had a point. The Protectobots were built with my early tech, much of it barely more than prototypes. None of them had received many upgrades or improvements beyond some basic maintenance since they were sparked.

Walking around Defensor's prone form, Ratchet took the crowbar from me."That said, it doesn't need both of us to be here. I'll handle this, you've got guests waiting downstairs."

"Wha, now hold on!"

"Ah-ah-ah." Putting a hand on my shoulder, Ratchet spun me around and gently, but firmly pushed me and Amy out of the room.

"Ratchet! You can't just-" The door closed with a snap and the sound of a lock clicking into place. Grabbing the handle, I rattled the door, trying to force the lock.

"Teletraan, unlock this door! Code; Shut up and do what I tell you!"

"Unable to comply," the VI chirped. "Override code temporarily rescinded on medical officer Ratchet's orders."

"He can't do that!"

I was honestly considering finding some tools and cutting my way into the room when there was a choking sound behind me. I looked over to find Amy trying, and failing, to stifle her laughter.

"This isn't funny…"

"It kinda is." Taking my hand, she pulled me in the direction of the stairs. "Come on, let's go see who's waiting for us."

##

Who was waiting turned out to be Dragon, Dad, Windblade, Rhinox, and Vicky, the last of whom was carrying Lisa in a bridal carry.

"What are you doing!" Amy snapped, letting go of me and rushing to reach Lisa. "You're supposed to be resting!"

"I am resting, see how relaxed I am?" Lisa said as she lounged like a house cat in Vicky's arms.

"Come on Ames, she's fine."

Ignoring them, I turned to Dad. "What's going on?"

"We're going on a trip," Dad said with a smile I'd seen before. Last time it resulted in me covered in paint and a dent in his truck door.
"Uh-huh…" I backed up slightly, ready to run if needed. "I can't, I've got too much work to do, not to mention a medic that needs his head examined."

"Ta~ylor," Vicky called out, closing in on me, "it's not that we're giving you a choice here."

"You can't be serious..."

"Actually, we are," Dragon said, finally speaking up. "In the last few months you have seen more violence and conflict than most Protectorate heroes, nevermind a Ward, and you have barely stopped to rest."

"I don't need sleep."

"Sleep and rest are different things," Dragon countered. "So, consider this mandatory leave. I don't want to see you back here for at least two days."

I glared up at her. "I'm not going anywhere…"

##

"Not. A. Word." I growled at a laughing Amy as Dragon carried me through the ground bridge over her shoulder.

"I didn't say anything." She didn't even try to hide her amusement as she trailed along behind us.

I felt the usual moment of disorientation that came with walking through the ground bridge, followed by sweltering heat. If I hadn't known better, I could have sworn Dragon had walked us into an oven.

With no effort at all Dragon lifted me off her shoulder and placed me on the sand beneath us. Sparing her a moment for another glare, I tried to work out where we were.

We were on a soft sandy beach that stretched off a mile or so into the distance. The air was warm with a faint breeze that kept the heat tolerable, though I could feel my legs starting to sweat in my 'too thick for this climate' jeans.

The sun was halfway above the horizon, its light shining on a sea that almost looked like glass. There was what appeared to be an oil rig further out to sea and behind us stood palm trees, swaying slightly in the breeze.

A few yards from where I stood, where the beach met the grass, Rhinox was carefully putting together bits of metal that I realised was actually a barbecue. Nearby, a large pit had been dug in the sand, and piled high with wood.

"This is…"

"Not bad huh?" Dad said, moving to stand next to me. "Dragon suggested the location."

Dragon hummed. "The structure in the distance is one of my older sites. I used it for offsite storage and the occasional weapons testing. The island itself is uninhabited, and far too small to support any large predators so it's safe to explore. Just don't go beyond the markers I've placed in the water as the currents can be dangerous."

I was still trying to wrap my head around everything when there was the tell-tale crash of the ground bridge opening. Predaqueen came running out in a full sprint, her clawed feet kicking up sand as she ran past us and straight into the ocean with a splash and a whoop of joy.
Nautica followed along behind at a more sedate pace, waving cheerfully at us as she passed.

"Is that safe?" Vicky asked, watching the small bot bounce around in the surf.

"Well… it's not like she needs to breathe and Nautica turns into a submarine." I wanted to be annoyed at being forced into this, but I could feel myself smiling despite that.

"Can we please get changed," Lisa said with a groan. Sweat was visible on her forehead, sticking her hair down and her thick pajamas were likely even hotter than my jeans.

I looked again at our group and realised none of us had brought a change of clothes. Worse, I wasn't even sure I had anything I could wear. I hadn't been swimming in years and while Brockton Bay had a beach, I'd never really cared to go there without Emma.

"Umm?" From the look on her face, Amy had realised the same thing.

"Oh! Don't worry," Vicky said, turning quickly to look at us both, her wide smile mirrored by Lisa who was still in her arms. "I've got you covered."

My eyes flicked to the ground bridge as it closed and I was hit with the realisation that it was too late to run.

##

[Taylor]

I still wasn't sure if I should be worried or not as Vicky, still carrying Lisa, led us a little further up the beach and into a large clearing that was hidden from the beach by a copse of trees.

A large white tent sat in the middle of the clearing. Pushing the entrance flap aside, Vicky led us inside.

Really, it was more of a marquee made of four equally sized sections, one in the center with the other three branching off that. The sections of the tent were separated with flaps that could be zipped to each other and the floor to form a wall. Each room was only slightly smaller than my room at home. The middle of the tent was clearly a communal space, with chairs scattered around it.

"Right," Vicky said, "Taylor, your room is to the right, Amy's left and I'm in the middle. There's a bag in each with something for you to wear. I have Lisa's stuff in my room."

Lisa quickly stifled a laugh and Vicky glared at her.

"Why is this tent even here? I mean, what do we need rooms for?" I asked, looking up at the roof. I always assumed tents were supposed to be small things that you had to crawl into.

"Because we're staying here," Vicky said simply. "Dragon's orders. We're not allowed back to Brockton Bay until tomorrow evening at the very earliest."

"That's nice and all," Lisa said, looking around, "but I hope you're not including me in that? A day out is nice, but I'm not sure my power would let me sleep out here..."

"You sure? We have plenty of room."

"Very sure," Lisa said with a grin that didn't look even the slightest bit guilty.

"Alright," Vicky shrugged, "Everyone might as well get changed. I expect both of you out here in ten minutes, otherwise I'll carry you to the beach in whatever you're wearing."
I was sure she was joking. *I hope.*

Sharing a worried look with Amy, I went to my 'room'.

The white fabric of the tent helped give the room a light and airy feel, helped by the plastic windows that allowed the light to stream in. There was a small dresser along one wall and the bed, as it turned out, was an inflatable mattress on a sturdy metal frame and large enough to fit two people.

True to her word, a bag sat on my bed. *Please tell me she didn't…* The bright pink colour of the bag made it immediately clear that it had come from one of the most expensive, not to mention risque, lingerie stores in the city.

"Really Vicky?" Lisa's voice carried through the tent. "That's not a swimsuit, it's dental floss with delusions!"

"It's fine," came Vicky's laugh. "You should see Amy's."

"Vicky!" Amy shouted.

Trying to banish the images and the blush, I reached into the bag, dreading what I would find. To my surprise, my hand closed on plastic?

Frowning, I pulled another bag from inside the first, this one branded with one of the city's sporting goods stores. Puzzled, and a little bit relieved, I opened the bag to find a top and some shorts.

It was... smaller than I would have liked. It was no bikini but I would still be showing a lot of skin. I glanced at the dresser. Had they thought far enough ahead to bring me extra clothes, maybe I could wear something over it?

"T~aylor! Are you ready?" Vicky called, making me jump.

"G-give me a minute!" I called back, my heart in my mouth.

Running a hand over the material, I forced myself to calm down. It was just us girls here after all and I was sure Vicky would be wearing something much more revealing.

Repeating it like a mantra, I dropped the fabric blind over the window and pulled the clothes on. Quickly slipping a pair of sandals on my feet, I was still considering how best to get back at Vicky as I took a deep breath and opened the flap.

Vicky and Lisa were already waiting for me. Lisa was sitting in one of the chairs in a simple green two piece, her hair pulled up in a ponytail. Vicky, to my surprise was wearing a long bodied top and short-shorts that, while tight, actually showed *less* skin than mine.

"What?" she asked with a grin.

"Nothing, I just expected something a little more…" I waved at Lisa who just smirked back.

Vicky rolled her eyes. "Look, I plan to have *fun* today, and that's much easier when I'm not bouncing out of my top, okay?"

I held my hands up, but Vicky had already turned in the direction of Amy's room before I could say anything more.

"Amy, how long do you plan to hide in there? Don't you want to see what your girlfriend is wearing?"
My face grew hot while my mouth moved soundlessly and Lisa cackled in her chair. I was just considering strangling Vicky when the zip started to move and a blushing Amy emerged. I was surprised, and a bit disappointed, to see her wearing a large white t-shirt that reached down to just above her knees.

"Really?" Vicky sighed. Storming over, she grabbed the collar of Amy's shirt and gave it a quick tug, letting her see what was underneath.

"Well," she grumbled, "at least you're wearing it." Spinning on her heel, she clapped her hands together. "Right, let's get down to the beach. You okay to walk Lisa?"

"Oh, I'm sure I can manage," she said with a dramatic sigh, heaving herself out of the chair.

##

By unspoken agreement, we took a slow walk back to the beach, taking things easy for Lisa who was still weak after her long coma.

We hadn't been long, twenty minutes at the most, but the sun was clear above the horizon by the time we emerged on the beach and the heat was already starting to climb.

More of the Autobots had arrived while we were getting changed. Windblade was chatting to Dragon and Dad about something, while Waspinator was perched on one of her wings.

A table had been put on the beach with a small set of stairs attached to it. Rattrap, Chromedome and Rewind were spread out on the table, small fabric squares laid out like towels for them.

Steeljaw had apparently arrived and was sniffing around the rockpools, sticking his snout into the water and snapping at the small fish within while Predaqueen tried to copy him. Nearby, Ravage was lazing in the sun, his black paint shining as he watched them with an air of indifference.

"So, do we actually have a plan for today, or are we just going to-"

The ground bridge opened with a crash and Miss Militia—Hannah, she wasn't wearing a mask—stepped through, followed by the Wards, all of them unmasked and looking around curiously and carrying various bags.

I could feel my cheeks starting to colour, my arms wrapping around my waist in an effort to cover my bare midriff as a sullen Dennis spotted us, his expression brightening. Whatever comment he was going to make was stopped by Dean putting a hand over his mouth and hissing in his ear.

"Why didn't you tell me others were coming!" I hissed at Vicky.

"Duh, 'cause then you'd be dressed up like Amy."

"Vicky! I can't believe you!" Amy snapped quietly. "Come on Taylor, if you want, we can head back to the tent and pick up a shirt for you."

"Oh come on, she looks great!"

"No." Ignoring Vicky, I pushed my embarrassment down. "No it's okay. Doesn't matter now anyway. Just remind me to drown Dennis later."

Forcing myself to move, I went to meet with the Wards as the bridge closed. This close, I was struck by how tired they all looked. All of them had dark rings around their eyes, while Vista—Missy's—
face was puffy, like she'd been crying.

"-thank you for inviting us," I heard Hannah say to Dragon as we got close.

"It's not a problem," Dragon said with a smile. "Now, I'm sure you all want to get changed, so if you just head through those trees you will find a couple of tents for you to use. Boys on the left, girls to the right."

As the Wards moved off, Dragon leaned towards me. "After everything that happened in the city, I felt they could all do with some rest."

I found myself privately agreeing.

##

By the time everyone else had gotten changed and been given Dragon's warnings about not going too far out at sea, Rhinox had finished putting the barbeque together and cooked enough bacon sandwiches to feed an army, and Blaster had bridged over from the base and was up on the table we had put aside for the smaller bots.

Most of us spread out across the beach to eat. Dragon had provided large towels or blankets to sit on, all of them with my symbol printed on them. Sitting down next to Amy, I held out my plate so she could help herself to a sandwich and settled back to relax in the growing heat.

Amy groaned as she bit into her food. "Seriously," she said between bites, "how can he cook so well, when he can't eat?"

"No idea. Did you know about this?"

"Nope, though it's clear Vicky did." She waved at her sister who was currently talking to one of the new Wards—Flechette in costume and Lily out. She was a japanese-american girl, nearly as tall as me and wearing a dark one piece.

"Oh, now that's just not fair," Amy grumbled as Miss Militia walked across the beach in her dark green two-piece, a sarong wrapped around her waist and her long hair swaying in the breeze. I tried to ignore the way her hips also swayed, or the goofy smile my Dad had when she stepped next to him and put an arm around his waist.

"Look at Chris," Amy said quickly. The poor boy was sitting away from everyone, a dark blush on his cheeks. "I don't think he knows where to look…"

"Can you blame him?" I muttered. Not counting Missy, there were six girls on the beach in various swimsuits and he was kinda shy.

Giggling, Amy laid back on the blanket and stared up at the blue sky above us.

"Did you ever go to the beach much back home?" she asked once she'd calmed down.

"Not really. Emma didn't like the sea, it creeped her out and she was allergic to the chlorine in pools."

Looking out at the ocean, I wondered just how long it had been since I'd last thought about her. The pain of what she did to me had faded, though it had tainted all my memories of her. Even the happiest of memories just reminded me of what had happened between us, even if it no longer hurt.
Looking around, I couldn't help but notice something. With the exception of Vicky and Weld, all of us had a mark or two somewhere, faint scars from our lives as 'heros'. Even the Auotbots had them in the form of weld lines under layers of paint. I had to wonder, how many of us had scars that we couldn't see?

"We're all broken… but we're /not dead/." I said the words so quietly that I was barely even aware I'd spoken.

Sitting up, Amy took my hand in hers and leaned her shoulder against mine.

"Hey, you okay?" she asked quietly.

Squeezing her hand, I turned and let myself smile. "Yeah, I'm getting there. You?"

"I'm getting there." She tilted her head to look up at me, her cheeks turning pink and I leaned forward, our lips touching.

"Oh god, they're at it again!" Dennis called out and we jumped apart, our faces glowing as everyone turned to look at us.

"Alright you two," Vicky said, walking over to us, "I think you need a little time out. Rhinox is setting up a net for us to play beach volleyball. Come on Taylor, you're on my team. Ames, you wanna play?"

Without pausing, Vicky pulled me to my feet and gave me a gentle shove over to where Rhinox was currently stretching a net between two poles.

"You're kidding right?" Amy scoffed. "I was bad at sports before I lost my legs."

"Fair enough, then you and Lisa get to watch," Vicky said with a shrug. "Better yet, grab a phone and take some pictures."

"Look out and shout, oww!" Blaster called, from the table, switching to his radio form and putting a heavy reverb on his voice.

"Ladies and gentleman, welcome to the first annual game of the season, and it's a battle of the sexes, boys V girls, X vs Y here on the sun kissed beaches of the forgotten lands!"

Up beat music started to play as we took up our positions on the beach.

Vicky, Lily, me and Missy were on one side. Carlos, Dean, Weld and Dennis were on the other. Chris was sitting the game out. Instead he was following Predaqueen as she and Nautica explored the 'jungle'.

"Now," Blaster continued, "we want a nice clean game. Keep it friendly and remember, no powers!"

Rolling my eyes I dug my feet into the sand as Vicky and Weld stepped forwards. Rhinox was standing by the net, a ball in his hands as Blaster started counting down.

"3...2...1...Go!" An air horn sounded and Rhinox tossed the ball upwards. Vicky and Weld both jumped, arms reaching for the ball.

##

[Amy]
Amy smiled as Vicky slapped the ball, sending it straight between Dennis and Carlos before either of them could move. It felt like it had been an age since she'd seen Vicky be able to take part in a sport.

Her sister had always been something of a tomboy growing up and while she loved having powers, Amy knew it had upset Vicky to be kicked off the basketball team. She wasn't even allowed to take part in training or casual matches with the team because of her brute rating.

"I give it two rounds before one of them cheats," a voice said and Lisa dropped down onto the blanket. She had a wide floppy hat shielding her head and Rattrap draped across her shoulders.

"Sucker's bet," Amy said with a snort, looking back at the game.

The teams had repositioned, with Taylor now behind the others. As the ball sailed over head, she grabbed Missy around the waist and lifted the smaller girl into the air. Amy stared as the muscles on Taylor's back and arms flexed, sweat glistening in the sunlight.

Amy knew Taylor worked out regularly and her swimming costume left her shoulders, abdomen and most of her back exposed showing the of all that work. Amy's eyes followed the length of Taylor's spine, down her back to her legs that just seemed to stretch on forev-

"You're drooling," Lisa said dryly and there was the digital click of a camera-phone shutter.

Jumping, Amy's hand went to her mouth on reflex. She'd completely forgotten Lisa was there.

Finding her fingers dry, Amy glared at a now grinning Lisa.

"Don't you have a bank to rob? Or maybe some children to mentally traumatise?" she snapped.

"Ouch, you kiss your mother with that mouth? Oh, sorry."

Seeing that damn smirk, Amy considered sealing Lisa's mouth shut, or just literally wiping it off her face.

Lisa suddenly looked concerned. "You can do that?" She paled further. "Oh fuck me…"

"Like I'd get anything out of it," Amy snarked, leaning back slightly.

"Okay, look, I'm sorry. I didn't realise that was a sore spot. For what it's worth, I do know what it's like to have a bad relationship with your parents."

"Oh really?" Amy continued to look out at the ocean, refusing to engage more than she had to.

"Yeah. When I got my powers… well, lets just say, my parents were quick to find ways to use my power. Mostly, it was the stock market, but they weren't above the occasional bit of black mail."

"So your whole family are criminals."

"Do you really want to go down that road?" Lisa hissed, all warmth and amusement gone from her voice. "Yes, my parents were assholes, but at least I never tried to fuck my-"

"Amy, Lisa! Would you like to give me a hand?" Dragon said, having crossed the beach at some point during their 'argument'. The tone of her voice made it clear; it wasn't a request.

Flushed from temper and embarrassment, Amy took Dragon's hand and let the woman help her up. She wobbled a bit as she walked across the sand. She was mostly used to her prosthetic legs now, but walking on sand was surprisingly difficult.
"I don't know how you put up with her," Amy huffed, "she's such a bitch!"

"In my experience, Lisa doesn't always think before she speaks. It's a common problem, I find." Dragon gave Amy a pointed look as she led her towards the treeline where an exhausted Chris was waiting.

It took Lisa a few more moments to catch up. Amy knew she was lagging behind intentionally just to annoy her.

"Good," Dragon said when they were finally together. "As you might have guessed, this is Predaqueen's first real trip outside of the compound and she's a little… excited."

"You're telling me," Chris muttered.

"So, would you two mind keeping an eye on her for a little while?"

"We'd love to," Lisa said with a smile that didn't reach her eyes, her voice perfectly saccharine.

"Great, I'll send someone to take over in a bit," Dragon said with a smile and a wave of her tail. Then she turned and walked away, Chris following.

"I blame you for this," Amy grumbled as the others left.

"Oh… shut up. It's just a little babysitting. How hard can it be? Now, where is the little… darling."

In the trees, something giggled and a shadow moved overhead.

"Can… can she fly?" Lisa asked, not sounding as confident.

"No, but I'm pretty sure she can climb."

"...Right." Lisa pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'll look around here, you go and get Steeljaw?"

"Maybe Laserbeak as well?" Amy said with a groan.

##

[Taylor]

Missing a shot, my foot slipped on the sand and I fell to the ground, knocking the wind out of myself.

"Well, that was spectacular," Lily said, leaning over me and holding a hand out. "You okay?"

"Just prime," I muttered, letting her help me up.

The game was going well, we were leading by at least three.. Goals, points? Whatever the term was, we were ahead. Some of it, I suspected, was Vicky, Lily and me being fairly tall. It probably didn't hurt, a small part of me whispered, that we were jumping about in very little clothing and our opponents were all teenage boys.

I honestly wasn't sure how to feel about that, but a win was still a win.

I readied myself as Vicky picked up the ball and took another shot. It was deflected by Dean, bouncing into the air where Weld spiked it at us, only for the ball to clip the net, landing on the boys' side.
"That's bullshit!" Dennis cried, laughing nonetheless. "The net moved!"

I very pointedly did not look at Missy when I shouted back, "It was a trick of the light!"

"Are we really just going to let them cheat?" he protested.

Dean looked at Vicky, who cocked her hip and gave him a smile.

"I didn't see it move," he said, his ears going red.

"Man, you are so whipped."

Picking up the ball, Carlos just laughed, then he jumped nearly twenty feet into the air and fired the ball down at us.

Missy bent the net into a U, not even bothering to hide it now as Vicky took off to match him.

Things sorta fell apart after that, with the two brutes smacking the ball back and forth, Missy twisting the net into knots and the rest of us running for cover, laughing all the way.

With a shout, Vicky punched the ball hard. It smashed into Weld's face with 'spang', then shot off across the beach like a missile, trailing bits of leather.

I dove for the ground and most of the adults ducked as the ball screamed overhead, slamming into a tree with enough force to finish the ball off and shake the tree.

On the ground, sitting in the shade of the tree, Waspinator was building a small sandcastle. The noise of the impact made him look up in time to see a pair of coconuts fall, one just after the other.

The first flattened his sandcastle, missing him by scant inches. He wailed as the other closed in on him.

A large rock arced through the air, hitting the coconut with a crack and sending them both spinning off in different directions. The coconut hit the ground just behind Waspinator and the rock landed in the sand.

Jumping up, Waspinator shot into the air, throwing himself at Vista, who quickly pulled him into a hug.

Rolling over, I turned to face Lily. "Thank you?"

"You're welcome," she said with a laugh. "I think the game is over though."

She was right. The ball was now a deflated lump of leather at the base of the tree.

"It's probably for the best." Getting up, I looked around for Amy, only to find her and Lisa missing.

"Has anyone seen Amy?" I called out.

"She's looking after Predaqueen!" Nautica called back. She was standing by the barbeque with Dragon and they shared a knowing look.

Before I could ask, Rhinox turned and bellowed "Foods ready!" so loudly that he could probably be heard from Dragon's oil rig.

I winced at the volume and started walking towards the food when I heard something crashing
through the trees. I turned in time to see Predaqueen and Steeljaw come bounding out of the forest, bits of dirt and twigs on their armour.

A moment later, Amy and Lisa appeared. Both girls were red faced and sweaty. Amy's shirt was streaked with dirt and a few twigs were stuck in Lisa's hair. They glared at each other, then stormed across the beach, the distance between them widening as Amy moved towards me.

"Taylor…" she said sweetly, the hairs on my neck standing up in warning. "Can we drop Lisa in the ocean? It doesn't have to be from high up, a few hundred feet will do."

Silently, I glanced over at Lisa, who seemed to be asking Vicky something.

Vicky gave me a bemused look and I was willing to bet I knew what Lisa said.

"Let's… let's just get some food, okay?" I suggested instead, gently pulling a leaf from her hair.

Grumbling, Amy followed me to the barbeque, but never said anything more about it.

##

I wasn't quite sure, but I was willing to bet Rhinox had cooked so much meat for lunch that Amy could probably have made an entire cow out of it.

Whatever bad feelings there were between Amy and Lisa seemed to have been forgotten as everyone spread out to eat, Blaster filling the air with a more laid back selection of music.

A few large beach umbrellas had been set up, giving us all some much needed shade as the midday temperatures hit their peaks. Amy, Missy and I were sitting under one of them, while Lisa was sleeping under another, Rattrap at her side.

Chris was sitting in the shade alone, a sketch pad on his lap as he scribbled down a new idea, only to stop and quickly grab his cell when it rang.

"Is it me…" I said quietly to Amy, "or has Chris been getting a lot of messages today?"

Missy snorted. "It's not just today," she said around her burger. "He's always texting someone. Dennis thinks he got a girlfriend he's not telling anyone about."

"Really?" Amy leaned forward. "Y'know, I've seen him hanging around the music room at school. Maybe it's someone there?"

"Huh…" Watching Chris, seeing how his face lit up when he grabbed his cell phone, I found myself agreeing with Dennis, not that I'd ever tell him that.

"I'm going to get another drink, do you want anything?" I offered Amy and Missy, climbing to my feet and stretching.

"Just water's fine." "Soda please!" they called as I walked away.

Dad was standing by a large cooler that had been filled with ice water and drinks. He lifted the lid before I could say anything and pulled out two bottles of something orange that he quickly popped the caps off, then a bottle of soda.

A glance at the label told me that the orange drinks were alcoholic, though pretty weak by my understanding.
"Don't tell anyone," he said with a chuckle.

"Aren't you supposed to be the 'responsible adult?'" I said in mock outrage. "Should you really be encouraging minors to drink?"

"Everyone has to start sometime," Dad said, feigning seriousness. "At least here I can keep an eye on you and I don't have to worry about you trying to go flying or something afterwards."

"Aw Dad, Divebomb would never let me hit something!" I laughed, taking the bottles.

"I don't care. I catch you drinking and flying and you'll be grounded until you're thirty."

"So… don't get caught?" I said sweetly, ducking when he tried to ruffle my hair.

"Har, har. Now go on, get out of here." He chuckled and I went back to the others.

Amy took her drink with a raised eyebrow, but otherwise didn't comment. Missy however looked on with open curiosity.

"You ever had a drink before?" I asked Amy.

'A couple of times." She took a careful sip of her drink and hummed in appreciation. "Mom occasionally let us have wine with lemonade at public events and Vicky dragged me to a few parties last year. You?"

"Few sips of beer at family barbeques," I said trying my own drink. It consisted of oranges and mango that was almost strong enough to hide the taste of alcohol.

Around us, I noticed Dad handing out bottles to the others. It looked like the boys got beer, while the girls were given the same fruity drink I'd been given. To my surprise, Vicky took one sip of hers, made a face then swapped bottles with Dean. He didn't seem to mind.

Next to me, Missy pouted at her bottle of soda.

Sharing a smile with Amy, I held my drink out for Missy. "One sip and don't tell anyone."

Quickly grabbing the bottle, Missy tried to discreetly take a drink. The moment it hit her tongue however, she gagged. Coughing and spluttering, she shoved the drink into my hand and gulped down her soda.

"Maybe when you're older," I said with a laugh.

"Everyone, can I have your attention please?" The music volume dropped as Dennis walked to the middle of the gathering.

"I'm probably not the best person to be saying this, and this might not be the best time but… who knows when the next disaster will happen… Can we have a minute's silence? For everyone in the city, for Rory. I know the city is going to have an official memorial, but I'd like us to have one now, as his friends…" His voice trailed off and Dennis visibly choked back tears.

"To Rory," Rhinox said, nodding at Dennis and lifting a cup of energon. Across the beach, everyone echoed him before falling into silence.

I never knew Rory too well. He'd moved up to the Protectorate by the time I'd started working with the Wards and we never really had much of a chance to work together. The only time we really spoke was when he thanked me for saving Dinah.
Next to me, Missy looked like she was holding back tears, so I quietly pulled her into a hug, intentionally ignoring the way she trembled against me in an effort not to cry.

After a few minutes, the music started up again, but the atmosphere wasn't the same. There was a heaviness in the air, a tension that hadn't been there before.

Finally, after what felt like an age, Vicky stood up and called Amy over.

Giving me a puzzled look, Amy nonetheless did as asked and walked over to her sister. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lisa move and I turned to see her biting her lip in an effort not to laugh.

A sense of foreboding crawled up my spine and I looked back at Amy in time to see Vicky giving her a smile that was far too wide. Before I could shout a warning, Vicky grabbed Amy's shirt and pulled.

Amy shrieked as her shirt was torn apart, exposing the swimsuit she'd worn underneath. Like her sister, Amy's top covered most of her torso, but unlike Vicky, Amy wore bikini bottoms that exposed the large, red tattoo on Amy's thigh.

My brain stopped, frozen on the image of my insignia painted proudly on Amy's leg.

"What the fuck is wrong with you!?!" Amy screamed, hands covering her body on reflex. When Vicky's only response was to smile, Amy snatched a bottle of water from Dean's hand and pulled the cap off. Vicky's eyes widened, but she wasn't able to get away quick enough as Amy squeezed the plastic bottle, spraying water all over her.

Things sort of went downhill after that, with an impromptu water fight breaking out between everyone.

##

"So," I said as I wrung the water out of my soaked hair after things had calmed down, "where did you get the tattoo?"

I was proud of myself for sounding relaxed, even if I knew I was blushing.

"First Aid," Amy mumbled, rubbing her hair with a towel. "He created an ink that can be removed without scarring and wanted to test it."

"So he asked you? Wouldn't I or Vicky have been a better idea? You would be able to undo it if something went wrong after all."

"I volunteered! Besides," Amy smirked, "Vicky's last attempt at a tattoo didn't go so well."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, it started out fine, but she couldn't quite suppress her forcefield so it kept turning back on, ruining the tattoo and breaking some of the needles. I removed it before Mom found out."

Reaching out, I put my hand on the tattoo. Amy's thigh was hot under my fingers and her face flushed.

"Well... I think it looks good on you." Amy went a rather interesting shade of red and quickly turned to look at the beach.

Smiling, I sat back to let myself dry off in the sun. The water fight hadn't gone on long, but it had
been intense. It only stopped when Dragon had gotten involved. As it turned out, when she was
submerged in water, her beast-mode could draw water in and spit it out of her mouth like a firehose.

Needless to say, she won.

Still, as bad as Vicky's solution of 'strip Amy' had been, the resulting water fight had broken the
tension and lifted the mood.

Currently, the Wards were taking it in turns to be pulled through the water by Nautica. Her sub-mode
could, with effort, go fast enough that she could plane across the ocean. A rope was clipped to her,
letting someone waterboard behind her.

Right now, Chris was showing off, doing flips and jumps on the board when everyone else had
trouble just staying upright.

Laying back, I closed my eyes and let myself drift off to sleep for a bit. Amy laid down next to me,
but we didn't touch as it was far too hot.

##

[Predaqueen]

Prowling through the jungle, Predaqueen kept her nose to the ground, following the scent trail ahead
of her. She was a mighty hunter and nothing could escape her mighty… might. She wouldn't eat
them. Big-sis said she wasn't allowed. But no one said she wasn't allowed to hunt.

Broken dirt and imprinted twigs lined the rocky path, her target was close.

Predaqueen had followed them off the beach and up this path as it wound its way through the mighty
jungle and deep into the wild lands beyond. It had been ages since Predaqueen had seen anyone, but
she wasn't scared.

Eventually, the trail led to a huge cliff and with a determined growl, Predaqueen jumped into the air,
her claws digging deeply into the rock face as she scaled the vertical wall. Emerging high above the
trees, she took a moment to preen in the sunlight.

Ahead of her, feet dangling over the cliff, sat Vista.

Getting low to the ground, wings tucked in close and tail twitching, Predaqueen began to sneak
forward. Closer, closer… now!

Stretching her neck out, she squeezed under Vista's arm and turned her head to lick Vista's face.

"Found you!" she crowed, smiling up at the girl.

Vista laughed. "Yeah, I guess you did. Do the others know you're here?"

"Uh-huh." Predaqueen nodded. "I told Big-sis I was going hunting! I've been following you for
days!"

Vista giggled, the sound broken by a small sob and Predaqueen's smile dimmed.

"Did I hurt you?"

"What? Oh, no, no!" Vista wrapped her arms around Predaqueen's neck. "I'm sorry, I'm just a bit
sad."
"Why?"

"Some of my friends… They… they had to go away."

"Oh… will they come back?"

"No…"

"I'm still your friend!" She pushed her forehead against Vista's chest.

"Yeah." Vista gave her a smile, but it looked wrong, her eyes were still watery. "I'm sorry, I kinda wanna be alone…"

Gently, Predaqueen stood up and moved away from Vista. Staring at the girl's back, Predaqueen wondered what to do. She wanted to make Vista feel better.

Maybe a hug would help?

Frowning, she looked down at her claws. They were great for climbing and catching stuff, not so good for hugging. Her sisters could hug people. Maybe she could go get one of them… but the beach was so far away. It would take ages and ages to reach them.

Her sisters… they walked on two legs didn't they? Rearing up, Predaqueen tried to balance herself on her back legs. It wasn't easy. She had to use her wings and tail to keep her balance.

Wobbling slightly, she looked again at her claws. They were still no good. What did big-sister do with hers? She made them go away like, like…

*TSCHE-CHU-CHU-CHU-TSCHE*

Something inside her body whirred into life and her body started to change, the sound making Vista turn around, her mouth open in shock.

Predaqueen wobbled as her weight shifted again. It was much easier to stand now, but her body felt weird. Her head couldn't move as much and her legs were all different lengths, but she still had her tail. Taking a few careful steps forward, she smiled as her tail moved to help her balance.

"Queen?" Vista asked and Predaqueen broke into a big smile. Jumping forward, she wrapped her arms around Vista and pulled her into a tight hug.

"I did it, I did it!" she cheered as Vista started to laugh, finally looking happy. *Yay!*

"Come on," Vista said breathlessly, "we need to show Dragon! She's going to be so proud of you!"

Leading her forward, Vista hopped off the large flat rock they had been sitting on and led her back through the trees to the others.

Predaqueen stumbled after her, still marveling at her fingers. She had fingers!

———

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AN: fluffy enough? I've got at least one more chapter of this 'arc', then it's back to the main story. Next chapter should focus more on the autobots.
“Taylor, wake up!” Amy hissed, her hand on my shoulder. Opening my eyes, I tried my best to glare at her but from the smile on her face, it wasn’t very effective.

“Come on, you need to see this!”

Groaning, I sat up, blinking in the bright sunlight until my eyes were able to focus on the nearby Autobots. They were all gathered around Dragon who was hugging... a small copy of Dragon?

I stared unblinkingly until something finally clicked into place. Was that Predaqueen?!

“Oh my god.” I jumped up, the last vestiges of sleep forgotten as I rushed across the sand.

Predaqueen was wrapped up in Dragon’s arms and being fussed over by the Autobots.

“Taylor!” Predaqueen cheered as I got close. “Lookit! I have hands!”

She bounced excitedly in Dragon’s arms as she wiggled her fingers at me.

“So I see.” Smiling, I knelt down and grabbed one of her hands, making her giggle again, and let my power map out her body while Vista explained what had happened.

Nothing looks out of place and there’s no signs of metal fatigue or joint strain... Wheeljack had told me once that being stuck in one form too long could feel uncomfortable and I’d been a bit worried that Predaqueen’s first transformation might be painful because of that. Thankfully it seemed everything was fine and her T-cog was humming away nicely.

“Is she okay?” Nautica asked, her eyes alight with joy.

Letting go of Predaqueen’s hand, I patted her head as I turned to look at Nautica and Dragon. “She’s fine, though I think she could do with a bit more food. If you can, try to get her to transform a couple more times today so she can get a feel for it.”

“Alright,” Dragon said as she stood up, resting Predaqueen on her hip. “Come on, let's get you fed.”

“I've got your sippy cup if you’d like. Or maybe you’d like to try a real cup now you have hands,” Nautica suggested as they walked away, her hands and mouth moving quickly with excitement.

“She’s going to be getting into everything, isn’t she?” Amy asked with a smirk.

“Oh yes.” And I wished Nautica and Dragon all the best keeping Predaqueen from opening every jar and door she could find from now on.
“I take it this is a big deal?” Weld asked, pointing his drink at the group, horde, coven, whatever you want to call it of girls that were currently making a fuss over Predaqueen, who was clearly relishing the attention.

Unlike the Wards, who were smothered in sunblock, Weld had been forced to coat himself in a layer of sand to avoid blinding everyone.

“What? Oh! Right, sorry, I forgot you weren't here when all...” Chris paused, trying to think of the best way to sum up the last few months. “*this* happened.”

“But yeah. It’s like... being able to transform is a natural thing for the Autobots, just like walking is for us and they were all a bit worried ‘cause Queen hadn’t yet.”

“So it’s like learning to walk?” Weld hummed before taking a sip of his drink. He frowned and glared at the empty bottle he hadn’t realised he was holding.

“Something like that.”

Before he could say more, Flechette -Lily- walked over, more drinks in her hands.

“Can I ask a question?” she said as she passed the drinks out.

“Sure?”

“The people of Brockton Bay, they just seem to accept the Autobots. Is that normal?”

Chris shrugged. “Sorta? I remember there was some trouble at the start, but once they started helping people, the complaints just sorta went away. I guess people aren’t too fussy who comes to help when someone’s kicking in your door.”

Weld chuckled. “Now *that* I can understand. Did I ever tell you about-”

As he and Lily continued to talk, Chris was distracted by his phone beeping in his pocket with a message from Rune.

*BikerBitch: Want 2 meet up l8?*
*Cleverboy: cnt im at a thing with my study group.*
*BikerBitch: oh? Need me to cause trouble?*
*Cleverboy: No!*
*BikerBitch: Kidding ☹️ where r u?*
*Cleverboy: At a beach, cnt say more.*
*BikerBitch: Oh? At the beach with other girls? 🙄

Pausing, Chris tried to think of the best answer, something that would let him get out of this without saying the wrong thing.

Next to him, Lily chuckled. “Whatever she said, just know there’s no right answer.”
“What, how do you know?” Chris looked at her smirking face. Behind her, Weld nodded sagely.

“The look on your face?”

Before he could say anything else, his phone beeped again. Glancing at it, he missed Lily’s comment about ‘too late’, instead his attention was focused solely on the picture he’d just received.

’Something to keep in mind’ the caption said.

“Ooh, black lace?” A voice said from behind him and before Chris could react, Dennis was there, pulling the phone from his grasp.

“Look at this guys! Chris has a girl sending him naughty pictures!”

Chris gaped, his mouth working soundlessly for a moment as his heart stopped.

“Hey!” he shouted, finally finding his voice and trying to run after Dennis, but the older boy was already halfway across the beach, phone held high above his head.

“Quick, quick!” Dennis shouted, “you need to-”

Laserbeak dropped from the sky with a shriek, metal claws closing around the phone, snatching it from his hands and making Dennis scream and dive for cover.

The bird glided across the beach, dropping the phone into Taylor’s open hand, then circling around to land on her outstretched arm.

Chris slowed, coming to a stop by Dennis as he stood up.

“I told you that thing hates me!”

Taylor just glared silently at him, along with Amy. To the side of them, Victoria floated in the air, trying not to smile.

Oh come on!” Dennis said, holding his hands up. “It was just a joke! I wasn’t really going to show everyone!”

Her expression didn’t change. “Vicky, I think Dennis needs to cool off.”

“Dude,” Chris said quietly as Victoria started to float forwards, “run?”

Dennis took off across the beach, barely making twenty yards before Victoria snatched him up and carried him, screaming and pleading, out over the ocean.
The rest of the afternoon passed peacefully. With everyone alternating between talking, snacking on leftover food or just dozing in the heat.

At one point, Vista took it upon herself to teach Predaqueen how to throw a frisbee and it soon spiralled into a game involving everyone.

Eventually, the sun started to set and Rhinox lit a massive bonfire. Warmed by its heat, we watched the darkening sky until the Wards had to leave, returning through the ground bridge until it was only
me, my Autobots and Dad left behind.

“Right,” Dad said, brushing the sand off his shorts. “I’m heading back. Will you three be okay?”

“We’ll be fine,” Vicky said quickly. “Rhinox is staying with us after all.”

I nodded. “She’s right. Besides, Dragon’s got so many sensors around the island that nothing could get close without her knowing. Now go on, I’m sure Hannah is waiting for you.”

Surprise flashed across Dad’s face and while he covered it quickly, he couldn't stop himself from blushing and after a final ‘goodnight’ he quickly left.

“That was mean,” Vicky said with a laugh, bumping me with her hip. “Come on, let’s head back to the tent. I had Perceptor rig up a projector and some snacks for us!”

I shared a surprised look with Amy. “Just how long have you been planning this?”

“Months!” Vicky said happily, spinning on her heel and walking toward the tent.

“But the groundbridge…” I trailed off, Amy and I following along behind Vicky.

“Oh, that wasn’t part of the plan. We were going to throw you both into a dragon-craft and send you here…”

I frowned. I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of being ‘kidnapped’ again. “Would you have at least told us where we were going?”

Vicky just laughed.

##

That night, I lay on my bed, the sounds of the forest lulling me to sleep.

I wasn’t sure how they had done it, but somehow the tent was warded against the heat outside and my room was a comfortable enough temperature that I was lying on top of the sheets in a thin set of pajamas.

I could hear the wind in the trees and the waves on the beach. Below it all, almost imperceptible, I could swear I heard whale song.

It was quiet at first, but the noise grew, echoing louder and louder until it was all I could hear.

The whale moved through the ocean slowly. It radiated age like frost, its skin pocked and scarred from time, and exhaustion weighed heavily on its body.

The others were gone. Starvation, predators and the long march of time had taken them all. Yet he pushed ever onwards, his eyes fixed on the horizon even as he shed his life-fluids from hundreds of wounds.
Behind him, they followed. Sharks snapped at his tail, and giant squids reached out to ensnare him. They were relentless, never stopping, never slowing and never allowing him a moment to rest.

With another push of his tail, the whale groaned, his voice echoing out into the void as he called for help that never came.

Clouds parted and for a time, the sun shone down, shafts of light penetrating the depths.

Without slowing, he rose upwards, basking in the glow as the light warmed his skin. He drew what energy he could from the comfort, even as each movement became more laboured than the last.

Time was running out.

Perhaps sensing the imminent death, the sharks surged forward, the smaller, faster ones moving ahead of the others. Their teeth raked the sides of the whale, drawing more precious fluids from his body.

One of the sharks was faster than the others, smarter, its teeth sharper. It bit down on the tail, tearing through the flesh and the whale bellowed in pain, its movements slowing as the swarm closed in.

Liquid billowed into the void.

I awoke with a gasp, sitting up quickly and looking around in a panic. As my heart slowed down, I reached up and rubbed my face, only to find my cheeks were wet.

Before I could make sense of anything, I heard the zip on my door start to open. It was too dark for me too really see more than a dark shape in the doorway.

“Taylor?” I relaxed at Amy’s whisper.

“Amy? Is something wrong?”

“No, i just… couldn’t sleep.”

“Yeah… me either.” Putting the dream aside, I gestured for her to come in and she sat on the edge of my bed. We made sure to keep our voices down to avoid waking Vicky. The thin walls of the tent didn't really block much sound after all.

Taking Amy’s hand, I gave it a squeeze “You okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just weird. It’s so quiet - Don’t laugh!” She hissed as I tried not to smile. “I’ve never been camping before!”

“I’m not sure this really counts as ‘camping’,;” I said with a chuckle. Without stopping to think, I reached up and pulled Amy down so she was lying next to me. This close, I could see her blush even in the dark.

“Hey,” I said with a laugh.

Amy looked up at me, a faint blush on her cheeks. “...Hey.”
Pulling her close, I blamed whatever alcohol Vicky had given us during the movie for my actions, as I pulled her close and our lips met.

We stayed like that for a time, just holding each other and kissing occasionally. One of my hands drifted down Amy's body, resting where her tattoo sat on her leg. The movement caused Amy to pull away.

“I should go back to bed…” she said breathlessly.

I licked my suddenly dry lips and pulled her closer.

“Stay with me?”

Amy stared up at me, her face glowing red. Then, without saying a word she reached down and removed her prosthetics, dropping them to the floor next to the bed.

Snuggled together, we let the sounds of the ocean lull us to sleep.

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Chapter End Notes

I know this is short, but originally, I didn't plan for this chapter, but I wanted to expand a bit on Predaqueen and the beach stuff, and it didn't flow right with the rest of the chapter, which focused on the Autobots, so i'm breaking it off into this separate chapter.
Chapter 116

[Morning after 15.3]

“Aw man, I know I put it around here!” Nose twitching, Rattrap scurried across the workbench, eyes darting from one hiding spot to another as he searched. “If that brainless cleaning drone picked it up I’m gonna-”

He was so focused on his search that he never realised he wasn’t alone until Waspinator spoke up.

“What Rat-bot doing?” Waspinator buzzed, flying across the room and landing next to Rattrap.

“None of your business!” he snapped.

“If Rat-butt up to no good, Wazzzpinator tell boss-bot,” Waspinator said with a sniff, crossing his arms in an effort to look imposing.

“Alright, alright!” Sitting on his haunches, Rattrap held his front paws up in defeat. “I’m just looking for a collection of springs. I need them for… something.”

After giving him a long, silent, stare, Waspinator shrugged. “Wazzpinator think Camera-bot find them. Uzze them in new video.

Face in hand, Rattrap made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a growl. “For booting up cold! Can’t Rewind leave anything alone?”

“Wazzzpinator could help Rat-butt find more?”

“You couldn’t find your own skid-plates if you landed on them.”

“Wazzzpinator good at finding things!”

“Oh please, ‘Wazzpinator‘ is only good at getting scrapped. You can’t even talk straight, ya useless-”

Stepping forward, Waspinator gave Rattrap a shove. “Wazzpinator not useless! Wazzpinator help all the time!”

Hitting the desk with a grunt, Rattrap rolled over, transforming and glaring up at him. “Y’know we’ve got enough scrapped parts to build two of you, right? Maybe if we did you'd only be half as useless!”

Twisting into a crouch, Rattrap threw himself forward, tackling Waspinator. The two bots rolled over and over, curses and squeaks filling the air as they fought, until Waspinator managed to pin Rattrap down.

“Ha! Waspinator not useless!”

“Slag you!” Rattrap shouted. Getting his legs between him and Waspinator, he shoved the taller bot hard, throwing Waspinator backwards.
With a yelp, Waspinator slammed into a tall, rectangular device that had been left on the workbench. The device slid sideways, swaying dangerously before the collection of glass and metal at the top pulled the entire thing off balance.

It crashed to the floor with the sound of shattered glass and the faint smell of burnt electronics.

Looking over the edge, the two Autobots stared at the destruction.

“Wazzz that important?” Waspinator said quietly, wings drooping.

“Impor-” Rattrap sputtered, “of course it was important you burned out toaster! Taylor’s gonna make paperweights outta ya when she finds out!”

“Me!?”

“Yes, you!” Standing up, he poked Waspinator in the chest. “This is your fault! You’re a walking disaster on top of being useless!”

“Wazzpinator not useless!” Shoving Rattrap back, Waspinator jumped into the air and transformed. “Wazzpinator not useless! Wazzpinator prove it!”

Flipping over, the little helicopter shot out of the room, engines buzzing angrily.

“… good riddance,” Rattrap muttered with a huff. “Now what do I do about this mess?”

##

Flying over the city wasn’t that simple when you were as small as Waspinator. Updrafts and air currents were more of a hindrance at his size, and the tall buildings in the city caused all sorts of turbulence that could knock you off course. It certainly didn’t help that Waspinator was too angry to really think about where he was going, not until he was deep in empire territory.

“Wazzzpinator not uzelezz, wazzzpinator show Rat-butt, Wazzzpinator izz good at job!” His angry mutterings were broken only by the buzz of his rotors as he flew, bobbing and weaving in the wind, anger and indignation driving him forward.

Eventually, after what seemed to be an age, he landed on the roof of a skyscraper to let his engines cool a bit. It was only by pure luck that he happened to spot her.

Flying below him was Rune, weaving between houses on a snowboard, her cloak flapping in the wind.

Systems buzzing with excitement, Waspinator took off, and with a quiet “Wazzzpinator, terrorize!” followed along. She was moving quickly, but erratically, dipping and swinging in a rhythmic pattern, slowing her down and letting him keep up.

She didn’t seem to be running from someone, or even trying to hide. So, that meant she was probably flying like that for fun.

Waspinator never stopped to consider the possible danger as she led him across Empire territory
It was only as he followed her down that Waspinator was started to get nervous. Pushing the thought away, he perched on a broken sign that let him look down at her as Rune landed behind a high fence in a narrow alleyway.

Below him, Rune took a quick look around, seemingly not thinking to look up before pushing her hood back. The large headphones she’d been wearing underneath were so loud even he could hear the faint echo from his perch.

Apparently confident she was alone, Rune started to remove her costume, revealing the dark, loose fitting clothes underneath. Trying to get a better look at her face, Waspinator moved forward, not noticing the exposed wire until his foot landed on it.

His systems crashed as the current surged through him, with a muffled pop of shorted electronics, and his body jerked, sending him sideways off the sign and plummeting to the open bag below.

##

“Are you sure you can’t fix it?” Rattrap asked, poking the device Waspinator had broken.

On the video screen, Kid Win shook his head.

“I’m sorry Rattrap, but without knowing what it was for, I wouldn't even know where to begin.” He paused for a minute, frowning in thought. “What happened to it anyway? And have you tried asking Wheeljack?”

“No,” the autobot admitted with a sigh. “He’s busy checking over the ground bridge. We got a PRT ‘inspection’ coming up and he wants to make sure everything’s working.”

“Ouch, been there,” Kid Win said with a wince. “Whatta they looking for?”

“Eh, who knows,” Rattrap said with a shrug, “something about the groundbridge giving everyone cancer or something.”

The geek squad -Perceptor, Taylor, Wheeljack and Nautica- had been deeply offended when the PRT had approached Dragon with the complaint from ‘concerned public groups’ about the groundbridge and any possible side effects.

“That’s stupid,” Kid Win said with a frown, “Taylor… well… okay, she would use it, Tinkers are like that, but I doubt she’d let Amy anywhere near it.”

“Tell me about it, I swear the pair-”

Their discussion was cut off as Arcee walked into the room, the unexpected sound of her voice making Rattrap jump with an undignified squeak.

“Rattrap, you seen Waspinator anywhere?”

“I haven’t seen bug-face all morning,” he said with a huff. “Why?”
“I wanted him to fly overwatch for me and he’s not answering his coms.” Crossing her arms, she gave him a suspicious look. “*That* only happens when he’s sulking.”

Rubbing his neck, Rattrap looked away. “I… think he’s in the vents again… try the boss’s room, I think he was going that way when I last saw him.”

‘Humming’, Arcee turned to leave, pausing briefly to narrow her eyes at him before leaving the room.

The moment she was out of sight, Rattrap started hitting keys, minimising the call and quickly bringing up Waspinator’s tracker, hoping against hope that the little pain in the skid plates hadn’t done something stupid.

He had.

Waspinator’s tracker showed him leaving the base and crossing the city, his flight erratic but gradually winding its way into Empire territory before cutting out. Rattrap swallowed the cold dread that was slowly seeping through his body.

Hitting another button, a small image of Waspinator appeared on screen. Next to it, a number of graphs plotted his spark status, energon levels and more.

Letting out a puff of air, Rattrap tried to relax at the readings. Bug-face, wherever he was, was at least alive, his spark healthy and strong. It was just his location data that was corrupted.

“Aw for booting up cold!” Running a hand down his face, Rattrap forced himself to calm down and think. “Okay, I can fix this. I just need to find the little bug, bring him home, then *murder him!*”

Quickly entering a password he wasn’t supposed to know, Rattrap deleted Waspinator’s tracking data for the day just before resetting it to the base just as Arcee came through the door.

“He’s not there, can you bring up his tracker?”

“Already done… not much there though. Looks like he turned it off.”

“I didn’t think he knew how to do that…’” Arcee said thoughtfully.

“You’d be surprised,” Rattrap said quickly before catching himself. “Then again, he mighta done it by accident.”

“Right.” Arcee pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don't have time for this, I’ve got a patrol. Do me a favour and let me know when he shows up.”

Shaking her head, she left the room and Rattrap let out a relieved sigh. Closing the map, Rattrap paused when he saw Kid Win frowning at him.

Kid Wins lips were moving, but no sound came out. Looking down, Rattrap hit a button, unmuting the call. “... how much did you hear?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“Everything,” Chris said. “You also hit the screenshare function…”

“I know this looks bad…”
“Bad!? He’s *lost* in Empire territory! Do you know what they will do if someone finds him?!”

“He’s fine!” Rattrap insisted. “He’s probably just stuck in a birds nest again!

Frowning, Kid Win reached for something off screen. “I’m calling Tay-”

“No! Please!” Waving his hands, Rattrap moved closer to the screen. “Look, just… give one chance to find him first? I mean, If you tell Taylor she’s just gonna panic and she’s supposed to be relaxing!”

Kid Win glared at him, but Rattrap pushed forward.

“Look, this is my mess, I’ll fix it. Just give me one chance, please?”

##

Entering the Gym, Rune took care not to slam the door behind her and lifted her bag higher on her shoulder. The damn thing was heavy today.

She paused briefly when her phone buzzed with a message.

[From Fido: Waspinator is lost somewhere in Empire territory. If you see him, can you send him home?]

She snorted at the message. If the dyke had lost one of her toys, that was her problem.

Ignoring the smell of stale sweat, blood and cheap cleaning chemicals, she walked through the gym. Around her, the rest of the patrons continued their workouts. Most of them were men, their oversized muscles covered in sweat, with a few women scattered about. Many of them had tattoos, all of them were white.

One or two of the men paused, turning their heads to watch her pass, but she ignored them. She didn’t like the way they looked at her, but she didn't fear it. None of them would dare touch her after all.

The first time she came here, Melody -Cricket- had informed them all what would happen if they bothered *any* of the women who came here.

“Hey runt.” Of course, it seemed like people needed reminding every now and then. One of the men dropped his weights with a clang. His biceps were bigger than her head and he was practically sweating steroids and protein powder as he swaggered towards her.

“Hey there sweetie, looking for something?”, She gave him her best ‘unimpressed’ look, eyes moved up and down his exposed chest, lingering near the waist. “Certainly not what little you have to offer.”

The man's face flashed red, veins on his neck and head standing out, but before he could take so much as a step she pulled the knife from her belt, her hand lashing out, and he froze.

“Do yourself a favor.” She smiled sweetly as he paled, trying to raise himself onto his toes without
any sudden movements. “Fuck off. Understand?”

He nodded and with a flick of her wrist, the knife vanished up her sleeve, her power keeping it against her skin. Stepping around him, she carried on forward.

Melody was waiting by the ‘changing room’ door, a smirk on her face.

“Dump your shit then go downstairs.” The sound of her artificial larynx was harsh and grating. “Don't bother getting changed.”

Nodding, Rune quickly found her locker and stuffed her bag inside it.

One of the far walls had a door on it marked ‘staff only’ with a set of stairs behind it that led down.

The basement had likely been meant for storage or some shit, but Brad -Hookwolf- had turned it into his own personal playpen.

A pit had been dug into the floor. Ten-foot deep and nearly the size of the room, the walls were lined with wood and the floor covered in a layer of sawdust. The smell of stale blood and vomit added to the pervasive smell of sweat from above.

Rune wasn’t the first to arrive. Nearly two dozen people stood around the pit, either talking among themselves or passing money back and forwards. To her surprise, Wehrmacht was also there. The Gesellschaft cape was standing on the far side of the pit, talking to Hookwolf with that same damn smirk on his face.

In the pit, two men were going at it. They were both bloody, bruised, and clearly exhausted, yet they continued to fight.

The smaller of the two had short dark hair and lean muscle. With a vicious jab to the taller man’s jaw, he sent his opponent sprawling. The downed man weakly tried to stand while the crowd roared. The victor walked forward, stamping and kicking the other man.

This wasn’t right. Normally, the fight would have stopped by now. Deaths attracted attention and made audiences nervous.

“What's going on?” Rune asked the nearest man. He spared her a brief glance, just long enough to see who had spoken before turning back to the fight.

“Joe was caught selling info to the cops!” the man shouted back, not sparing her another look.

Now she understood. This wasn’t a fight, it was a prolonged execution. Rune fought to keep the distaste off her face.

On the opposite side of the pit, Wehrmacht said something to Hookwolf, who nodded.

“Enough!” he shouted and everyone fell silent as he jumped into the pit. A crude blade emerged from his arm and he used his other hand to snap it off. He threw the weapon to the man who was still standing.

“No Mercy for traitors,” Hookwolf growled. “Finish it.”
The man looked at the weapon, then at ‘Joe’ on the floor. He was barely moving now, his breath coming in bubbling gasps. Rune guessed the man’s ribs had broken in the fight. One of them must have punctured a lung.

“Hookwolf,” Joe gasped, “please-”

A booted foot came down on his jaw with a crunch and a spray of blood and teeth. Rune tried not to be too obvious about looking away.

"You swore loyalty to me! To our cause!" Hookwolf shouted, stepping forward and putting a bare foot on Joe’s chest. “Then you try to sell me out to the cops?!"

A blade burst from his foot, killing the man instantly.

Clearly exhausted, the winner fell to his knees, head back as he panted for breath.

Hookwolf loomed over him. “By the way, Karl, did you really think I wouldn’t find out?” Hookwold snarled in disgust, “That you’re the cop. Joe was squealing too.”

Karl paled, his grip on the improvised weapon tightening.

“You both betrayed me. Now, choose. Kill yourself, or fight me.”

Karl looked at the weapon, then at Hookwolf.

##

Entering the changing rooms, Rune tried to settle her stomach.

She didn’t care what they had done. No one deserved to be stuck in a pit with Hookwolf.

“Kill yourself, or fight me” she mimicked, her voice not able to match Hookwolfs deep rumble.

“Like there was a fucking difference. You’re dead either way.”

Well, she supposed there was a difference. People who fought Hookwolf got an actual burial and their family was spared any further punishment so long as they kept their mouths shut. It was part of some fucked up sense of ‘honour’ that Hookwolf seemed to have.

Opening her locker, she grabbed her bag and hauled it out, flipping open the top.

Purple eyes looked up at her and Rune felt her heart stop.

##

“Aw man, take it easy will you!” Rattrap snapped. Clinging to Kid Win’s shoulder as he flew across the city was not Rattrap’s idea of a good time.

“Why did I agree to this again?” Kid Win muttered, following the glowing trail on his HUD that showed Waspinator’s flight path.

“‘Cause you’re too nice for your own good,” Rattrap said, patting him on the shoulder. He didn’t
bother reminding Kid Win that he'd threatened to break into his phone and tell everyone who his secret girlfriend was.

After crossing half the city, Kid Win landed in a small alley.

“This his last location?” he asked, setting Rattrap down.

“Yeah… tracker’s accurate to a few feet, so he should be nearby.”

Putting his nose to the ground, Rattrap started sniffing, moving in a slowly expanding circle while Kid Win lifted into the air again, taking a moment to tap out a message on his phone before checking the window ledges and shop signs.

On the ground, Rattrap froze. There was a rustling coming from under a nearby skip. Nose twitching, he creeped forward, peering into the gloom.

With a yowl, a cat came diving outta the shadows, knocking Rattrap off his feet so it could sink its teeth into his flesh.

“Hey! Get off me!” Rattrap shouted, twisting in the cat’s mouth as the pair rolled across the floor in an angry ball of fur, teeth and hissing.

Kid Win’s shout of surprise went unheard and, without thinking, he drew his pistol, firing a warning shot at the ground.

The light and the noise spooked the cat and it quickly took off, ducking under cars and through small gaps to keep its prize away from Kid Win.

“Aw man, I’m gonna be lunch!” Rattrap wailed as the cat ran.

##

Rune slammed her bag closed, her heart running a mile a minute. She was seeing things, she had to be. There was no way one of those fucking toys was in her bag!

Taking a breath to calm herself down, she carefully opened the bag. The same purple eyes looked up at her. She was so fucked!

“Where izz thizz?” the thing asked, its high pitched voice making a ‘buzzing’ noise that was painfully loud in the empty changing room.

“Be quiet!” she hissed, trying to shield her bag from the sight of anyone who might look into the room. “How the fuck did you get into my bag!?”

“Wazzzpinator not know. One minute, Wazzpinator watching bad girl undrezzz, the next Wazzpinator wake up in bag!”

“Watch me-!” she cut herself off. Nevermind that. It didn’t matter if it saw her unmasked. He’d followed her! She’d led a fucking hero right here. Everyone knew Brad lived above the gym, she’d lead the heroes to his fucking home!
The mood he was in, Hookwolf wouldn’t even give her a chance to explain. He’d just skin her alive!

“Hey!” Melody’s electronic voice snapped from behind her and Rune very nearly screamed. Instead, she closed her bag roughly and turned around to face the woman. “Get your wraps on and meet me in the ring. You’ve been slacking off and the boss knows it.”

“Yeah… whatever.” Rune did her best to seem calm, even rolling her eyes for effect.

When Melody was gone, she opened her bag once more.

“Okay, you stupid fucking insect. You need to stay quiet! If anybody finds you, anybody, we’re both dead! Do you understand that?!”

Waspinator flinched, sinking deeper into her clothes, his large eyes seeming to almost shine with tears. He looked so pathetic that Rune felt a momentary flash of guilt.

“Look.” She sighed. “This isn’t a nice place, do you understand?”

“Then why zztay?” God, his voice was annoying, did he really have to ‘buzz’ like that.

“It doesn’t matter.” Pulling her clothes out of the bag, she hefted it into the locker. “You just need to stay here and stay quiet. I’ll take you home as soon as I can, okay?” And if she was very lucky, the Autobots would forget all about this place. At least until she could find a way to warn Kaiser that didn't result in her death.

“Until then, stay here!”

Not waiting for a reply, she changed clothes as quickly as she could, shoving everything into the locker and closing the door with a slam. She could do this, she just had to act natural for an hour or so, then she could sneak off.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to turn around and walk out of the room.

##

Huffing, Kid Win laid on the ground, his arm reaching into a pile of rubble. Somewhere in the darkness, he could hear the cat growling at him, and Rattrap’s near non-stop complaints.

“Why don’t you just transform?” Kid Win hissed, pushing his arm deeper.

“I don’t have the room,” Rattrap snapped. “I’ll end up stabbing the stupid furball! or ripping its mouth open! Does that sound fun to you?”

“Ugh.” He frowned at the mental image that caused and pushed it aside with a huff.

“Hey, mister, what you doing?” a voice called.

Looking over his shoulder, Kid Win saw a small group of kids standing on the other side of the road. One of them even had his phone out.

“I’m…” He sighed. “I’m trying to save a friend from a cat…”
The children stared blankly at him. Eventually, the one who had called him spoke.

“Capes are weird.”

With that, the kids quickly left, leaving him up to his shoulder in rubble.

“This is going to be all over PHO…” he groaned, letting his head fall against the rubble with a thud.

“Ey, how do you think I feel,” Rattrap called. “I’m the one being chewed on by a cat!”

##

Sitting in the dark, Waspinator huffed. He was bored. He couldn’t sleep, not if this place was really that dangerous, and he couldn’t call the others either as his radio wasn’t working.

Wiggling, he slowly untangled himself from Bad-girl’s costume and clambered to the top of the pile. He didn’t care what she said, he was going to find out where he was.

First, however, he had to find a way out of this locker. Looking around, he pushed at the metal walls. He couldn’t open the door from this side, but the metal was pretty thin, so if he had something sharp, he might be able to cut his way out.

Thankfully for him, the lockers were in pretty bad condition, and the metal above him was covered in rust.

Trying not to make too much noise, he used his sharp fingers to climb up the side. Holding on with one hand, he pushed and pulled at the rust, causing flakes to rain down on him. Eventually he had a hole big enough to crawl through, with some careful positioning of his turbines.

The room he found himself in wasn’t very clean. The floors were dirty and there was a carpet of dust on top of the lockers.

Shrugging, he lifted into the air so he could reach the ceiling. Pushing at the cheap foam tiles, he found one that was loose enough that he could lift it and slip into the crawl space above.

“Rat-butt would like thizz place,” he muttered, squirming his way through the narrow gap.

It was slow going and filthy, but he slowly made his way through the building, using small holes in the tiles to look down at the people below. Most of it was boring, with various people just lifting weights or jogging on machines, and Waspinator would have thought nothing of it had some of those people not had gang tattoos.

He took pictures of them all, just in case.

One of those people was larger than the others. His head was close-shaven with a swastika on the back of his neck. When he moved, people stayed out of his way, and Waspinator even heard him give orders to the others.

Assuming that meant he was in charge, Waspinator did his best to follow the man when he left the main floor.
Trying to stay as quiet as possible, Waspinator followed him into a small side office that was just as filthy as the locker room. He listened as the man made a phone call, taking care to record his face and every word he said.

“-Look,” he said sitting back in his chair. “I have twelve monkeys ready to go. You want any more than that and you’ll have to wait… No, I can’t. Do you *know* how many heroes are *in* this city these days?... Fine. The truck will be at the docks, usual bay. Pick up at 1… good.”

Hanging up the phone, he stood up and walked out of the room.

Waspinator stayed where he was. The conversation didn’t mean much to him, but Boss-bot would likely know what it meant.

Confident the man wasn’t about to walk back in, Waspinator loosened a tile and dropped into the office.

The peeling walls were covered in newspaper clippings about sports and nude pictures of women. Ignoring them, Waspinator landed on the desk in front of a pair of monitors.

He nudged the mouse with his foot and the screens lit up with a password prompt.

Grumbling to himself about the filthy desk, he started moving through the paper that was scattered about until he found a small yellow sticky note, creased and faded with age. ‘P4ssword’ was scrawled across it in messy handwriting.

“People say wazzzpinator stupid,” he muttered, tapping at the keyboard.

The prompt vanished, replaced with the desktop that showed more naked women.

Not really sure what he was looking for, Waspinator poked around at random files and even found some emails. There wasn’t much; most of them spoke of mundane things, like orders for more equipment or confirmation for space rental at the docks.

Not having the time to really dig into the computer, Waspinator brought up a browser and entered a web address.

Immediately, a file started downloading. As soon as it was done, Waspinator hit ‘run’. The computer didn’t even ask for a password as it started to install the monitoring agent. It wouldn’t take long for the program to start accessing contact lists, internet history and emails, using them to spread outwards, infecting more computers as it went.

Wondering what else he could do, Waspinator closed the browser. His eyes landed on the computer’s background image when he got an idea.

With a few clicks, the image changed. Soft pink curves were replaced the hard lines of muscles rippling under dark skin, the two men locked in a lover’s embrace.

He never understood the way humans obsessed over nudity. Even Taylor had a few pictures laying around. Still, it was only a shame there wasn’t a webcam attached to the computer. Waspinator would love to see their faces when they saw this.
His amusement was cut short when a noise outside made him jump.

Trying to hide, he bump into a nearby cup. Hissing in fear, Waspinator took off, trying to reach the ceiling before anyone came in. He was in such a rush that he never saw the paper cup fall, its contents spilling out across the uneven desk and down onto the floor. Some of it landed on a frayed extension cable that ran alongside the desk.

There was a muffled pop as the cable shorted and the lights went out across the building.

###

Rune grunted as Melody drove her fist into her side, then followed it up with a jab to the face that she only barely managed to block.

Her arms throbbed as she stepped back, looking to get some space. Not only was Melody taller, but she also had muscle from a lifetime of fighting on her side.

Darting forward, she lashed out at Melody, hoping to put her on the defensive. Instead, Melody stepped to the side and slammed her knee into Rune’s stomach, driving the air from the girl’s lungs and dropping her to the mat.

Leaving her on the floor, Melody stepped away and snatched her artificial larynx from where she’d hung it on the ring.

“What is your problem?” she snapped, her eyes narrowing.

“It’s nothing,” Rune managed to say between gasps. Once she was sure she wasn’t going to be sick, she stood up and rolled her shoulders in an effort to relax her muscles.

“What’s his name?” Melody said suddenly.

“What?” No, she did not squeak, thank you very much.

Melody gave her a knowing look. “Talk or I’ll just keep hitting you.”

“I...” she huffed and hoped her blush just looked like she was hot. “It’s Lewis... he’s a guy from my school and we’ve got a date tonight, okay? I’m allowed to have a life.”

Keep things simple, she told herself, being as truthful as she could be. After all, Fido did go to her school, she knew that much, and his name could be Lewis.

Melody cocked her head to one side, her eyes narrowing. “He’s one of us?”

“No, he’s not Empire, though he’s fine with us.” Okay, that was only half a lie. They never ‘talked shop’, but she somehow doubted Fido would support the Empire.

“Fucking teenagers,” Melody ground out, her larynx keeping her tone flat. “Just don’t get knocked up like a dumbass.”

“I’m not stupid,” Rune snapped, slipping into a ready stance and waiting as Melody circled round her.
“Dating outside the group is always stupid,” Melody countered, hanging up her larynx, then dashing forward to strike.

Gritting her teeth, Rune deflected the hit away from her face. This wasn’t going to be fun.

She blocked two more shots to the face, then in a flash of anger, kicked out, catching Melody in the thigh and making her stumble.

Before she could follow up, however, the lights went out and people started shouting.

For one horrifying moment, Rune thought it was the Autobots, that they had cut the power and were about to storm the building. She glanced at Melody who was glaring at the people around them, apparently unconcerned but annoyed at the interruption.

Before Rune could say anything, someone stuck his head into the room.

“Hey, anyone seen Brad? Some idiot tripped the breakers. Looks like they spilled a drink in the manager's office.”

Rune couldn't stop the relieved chuckle that escaped her. Maybe she’d have a chance at getting the tinker-toy out of here after all.

Unfortunately, the sound drew Melody’s attention, reminding the older woman that she was still here. Pointing at Rune, Melody gave her a warning look, then pointed at the center of the ring.

With a groan, she took up position. Of course the bitch with echolocation wasn’t going to let her go that easily.

This was going to suck.

##

Staggering back into the locker room, Rune hissed as she touched her bruised jaw. Melody, the bitch, had gone almost exclusively for her face.

Glancing around quickly to make sure she was alone, Rune pulled her locker open, staring in horror at her bag. It had clearly been moved around, her clothes half pulled out and the tinker-toy nowhere to be seen.

*Oh god…* had someone got into her locker? It wouldn't be hard, two seconds with a screwdriver could open them after all. But then, why hadn’t anyone said anything?

“Izz it time to leave?” Waspinator looked down at her from his perch on top of the lockers, his sudden appearance nearly making her scream.

“What are you *doing* up there?!”

“Wazzpinator wazzz bored,” he whined, eyes glowing in the dim light.

You were…” Her short nails dug into the fabric of her bag as she longed to strangle his neck. “Just
get in the bag,” she said finally, pulling it open and holding it up for him.

“Hmm… no.” Crossing his arms, Waspinator looked away from her.

“Why?” she ground out. She felt like she was dealing with a child.

“Cauzzze you bad girl, you mean to Wazzpinator and Wazzzpinator not trust you.”

“Listen to me you fucking stupid little insect!” she hissed, “Do you even know who Hookwolf is? This is his place, and if he finds you, he will kill us both! Do you get it? You are going to get us both killed!”

“Wazzpinator not scared,” he said petulantly.

“Well I am!” She hated the way her voice wavered, she hated admitting it, but she was scared.

Waspinator turned to look at her, his glowing eyes seemed older somehow, weary in a way she’d never seen before. Then, in a blink, it was gone.

“… Okay Wazzpinator be good.” Hopping off the locker, he dropped into her bag.

With a trembling sigh, Rune pulled a sweater on over her workout clothes and made for the door, fingers tapping at her phone as she walked.

Biting her lip, Rune sent Kid Win an address one street over. She couldn't risk leaving Empire territory right now, but she didn’t want to bring him here either.

Moving quickly through the gym, she was almost at the door when Melody let out a sharp whistle.

Taking a breath to calm down, Rune looked over her shoulder.

“Good luck on your ‘date’.” Melody smirked, pointing at her cheek.

Flipping the older woman off, Rune stepped through the door, slamming it behind her.

“Fucking bitch,” she muttered, “at least I can get a date. Don’t know why she doesn’t just go full-dyke already.”

In her temper, Rune stormed all the way to the meeting point. She let her bag fall from her shoulder with a thud and dropped heavily down on a low wall.

“Ow!” Waspinator muttered and her bag wiggled as he tried to escape. Eventually he found the opening, crawling out while rubbing his head.

“Wazzpinator land on head… Why bad-girl do that?”

“Just… be quiet.” She rubbed at her head as well in an effort to lessen the headache she could feel building. “I am in so much trouble. First with Fido and now this? Fuck, I’ll be lucky if Kaiser doesn’t just nail me to the fucking wall…”
Making out with Kid Win had been fun. Then, Leviathan had come and she’d fucking unmasked herself to him.

She didn’t regret that, if she was honest with herself. But it was growing increasingly clear that she was fucked. She couldn’t keep hiding things from Kaiser. The Empire didn’t forgive ‘betrayal’ after all.

When they had first recruited her -fuck, just admit it, they bought your ass-. They’d bought her and she’d been fine with it. Why? Because she was away from her ‘boring’ family and free to do whatever she wanted.

It was all just one big game. Go commit crimes, run away from the Wards, just a big game of ‘cops and robbers’. Except it wasn’t a game anymore. She’d been shot at three times in the last month. The police were getting more aggressive and the other gangs more vicious. Even that sand-nigger, Miss Militia, had been quicker to shoot at her.

The kid gloves were coming off and people like Brad were looking at her like… like they looked at Othala or Kaiser’s bimbos. All the while Kaiser kept talking about her ‘duty’, about her need to ‘prove herself’.

She wasn’t stupid, she knew what they meant. They wanted her to kill. And not just in an ‘oops, I hit him too hard’ kind of way. They wanted her to go out and kill in cold blood.

*Cause then they really will own you*, a voice muttered in her head, but she did her best to block it out.

She had to end things with Fido, before she ruined both their lives. She didn’t have a choice.

Caught up in her thoughts, Rune never noticed the little robot climbing up the wall until she felt him press against her side, making a twitch in surprise as he tried to wrap his arms around her.

‘...Thank you for helping Wazzzpinator...’ he said quietly, his big eyes shining up at her.

Huffing, Rune felt a stab of guilt. Waspinator was irritating, but he was so pathetic that she couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

Carefully, she put a hand on his back.

‘Yeah well… just don’t tell anyone.’

‘You could come with uzz if you want?’

She let out a bark of laughter. ‘Yeah, that ain’t happening. I’m not *that* pathetic.’

Sitting in silence, it only took a few minutes for Kid Win to appear, skimming over the rooftops on his hoverboard. Rune noticed that he’d changed his armour again, adding more of those ‘connection ports’ as he called them.

Honestly, most of it went over her head, but he always got so excited when talking about a new idea that she was happy to just sit and listen to him ramble on.

‘There you are!’ Leaning over the front of Kid Win’s board was a large brown rat, his nose
twitching in irritation. “You glitch-ridden son of a diode! Do you know how worried I’ve been?!”

The moment the board was close enough, the rat jumped onto the wall, transforming into a silver and brown robot. Grabbing Waspinator, he pulled him close.

“If you ever do something like this again, I’m gonna-!”

Whatever he was going to say was cut off as Waspinator pulled him into a hug.

Rune stared at the display in shock while Kid Win looked on with amusement.

“You do get used to them,” he said with a smile that made Rune’s stomach clench tightly. “Thanks for finding him Nat, I’m not sure what the Autobots would have done otherwise.”

“Yeah, yeah… just keep things quiet. I’m in enough trouble these days as is.”

“Is something wrong?” She didn’t need to see his face to know he was frowning as he stepped off his board. The bruises on her own face were more than visible at this point. “If you ne-”

She silenced him with a finger on his lips.

“Down boy. It’s my problem, I’ll deal with it… but thanks anyway.” Raising herself on her toes, she gave him a quick kiss.

“Now get outta here before someone sees you. I’ll text you later, okay?”

He opened his mouth to argue, but she made a shooing motion with her hand. With a sigh, he scooped up the Autobots and climbed onto his board.

“Alright, I’ll talk to you later.”

Giving him a warm smile, she watched as he flew off. Maybe… just a couple more days would be okay?

AN: I'm sure some of you have noticed my lack of updates recently. This is because I have recently moved home and between moving, decorating and work, I don't have much free time.

To make matters worse, my computer suffered hardware failure a couple of days ago and money is tight enough that repairing it is going to be... problematic.

So, I'm as reluctant as I was to do this, I've opened up a patreon page for anyone who wishes to support me.

What’s more, I will be accepting commissions.

Right now, there are only 2 tiers; a basic $2 a month for those who just want to throw some tips at me and a higher ($20) tier for commissions.

Commissions - These are 2k-2.5k words and can either be an update to any fic I've posted, or a new
idea from the commissioner.

[My Patreon page can be found here](#)

Now, something I need to make clear. I will continue to work on my fics regardless. New chapters will continue to be posted as they are completed. I will not paywall anything or start holding chapters hostage. This is just to take some pressure off me.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!