Transposition, or: Ship Happens

by ensou

Summary

Whatever she expected when she triggered, it wasn't meeting a short white-haired girl or turning into a hyper-advanced technological platform. Of course when you're Taylor Hebert, things frequently don't go as planned.
So. About this story. *Aoki Hagane no Arpeggio*, or, The Arpeggio of Blue Steel, has been one of my favorite series for a while. I found the manga in 2011, and was thoroughly pleased with the TV adaptation despite the difference in characterization. Because manga Iona is fucking hardcore and it is excellent.

I love the ideas of the Mental Models, how the Fog decided to make human-like avatars so they could experience causality and emotion to help better understand human tactics, but inadvertently developing free will and their own personality flaws at the same time.

I also love transhumanism. I’ve always planned for this story to be about Taylor going beyond being human. I wavered for a bit on what series/powers to work with, and ultimately the choices were between Aoki Hagane, GitS, Gunnm (Battle Angel Alita/Gally), and Metal Gear Solid’s Raiden. The last two would have had her scaling up slowly to their level.

But in the end I decided I wanted to go more extreme. So Taylor isn’t a cyborg. She doesn’t have a human brain. She isn’t even really human anymore. And she knows it. So that theme of questioning your own humanity and trying to discover what it means to be human and what defines us (as seen in both Gunnm and GitS) will be showing up in this story as Taylor learns more and more about what she really is, trying to cement her own humanity even as it slips further out of her fingers.

I hope you enjoy it.

Now let’s get this show on the road.

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**Transposition**: The shifting of a melody, a harmonic progression or an entire musical piece to another key, while maintaining the same tone structure, i.e. the same succession of whole tones and semitones and remaining melodic intervals.

— *Musikalisches Lexicon, 879 (1865), Heinrich Christoph Koch (trans. Schuijer)*

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**Diatonic 1.1**

**April 8th, 2011**

It wasn’t that I was worried about it all. Well, I wasn’t worried about *them*. I *was* worried, it was just the worry I felt was significantly more specific. And justified, from my perspective.

I was constantly worried the changes that had happened to me three months ago would be noticed.

That I didn’t need glasses anymore.

That my skin couldn’t be cut.
That I could easily rip a three-inch thick steel plate in half like it was a piece of paper.

That “I”, my whole personality, what made me me, was just software.

That now, I wasn’t human.

Instead, I was a simulation, an AI running on a quantum computer and surrounded by a shell of nanomaterial in the shape of a fifteen year-old girl.

Finding that out had been shock, to put it lightly. Because the way I’d reacted was about as close to ‘shock’ as C-4 is to a hydrogen bomb. Thankfully I’d been alone.

Once I recovered, I’d immediately started to research what had happened to me. And what I found was disheartening. There were stories of capes that had changed somehow when they triggered, their bodies mutating or changing. And there was no way back. It was permanent.

For them, the obvious ones at least, the changes made it hard for them to live a normal life. I was just hoping I still could. Three months in to faking that everything was normal, and it seemed like a distinct possibility. …But I was still understandably a bit paranoid about the entire ‘I am now a mass of tiny machines’ thing. Not to mention I avoided thinking about it as much as possible. That road led to madness.

My dad hadn’t noticed, thankfully, but… well, we didn’t really have the best relationship or see each other all that often.

Now, I didn’t need to worry about myself, my physical well-being. Now, I just had to worry about—

“Hey, Taylor~”

them.

I sighed, shutting my locker door and turning to look at Emma. The girl was surrounded by her usual posse, flanked by Sophia on her right and Madison on her left.

([Reducing primary emotion-emulation processes and sub-threads to 60% operational capacity])

“Yes, Emma?”

My voice was dead, flat. I was so tired of all of this. Of how they tormented me. Of how they constantly worked to undermine, sabotage, and tear me down. The least I could do was not give them the satisfaction of reacting.

“God, Taylor. Could you smell any more disgusting? It’s like you just got worse after what happened,” Emma said, holding her nose shut as the tag-alongs snickered.

I felt my eyebrows scrunch together. Her statement literally made no sense. I didn’t even have sweat glands anymore. I didn’t have any reason for them. There was no need for liquid channels to produce saline that would sap heat when it changed phases. I simply couldn’t overheat. Ever.

But… just… wow. I had actually cared about this kind of stuff? That was like fifth-grade level at best.

I sighed, looking sadly at my estranged ex-best-friend. Emma seemed to notice and it appeared she got irritated at the complete lack of response I gave her. With a “Hmph.” she closed the distance between us, and then passed by, holding her head high.
I just stood there as her group followed behind her, like the good little sycophants they were.

As Sophia walked by, she intentionally swerved and shoulder-checked me. Hard. If I’d been my old self that would have knocked me flat, but as I was now, it didn’t even move me an inch. It was the first time she’d gotten physical with her assaults since …then, and for a while I thought she’d backed off completely from it, letting Emma take the lead with her own brand of torture.

It looked like I was wrong.

I watched her walk away, and she turned her head to look back over her shoulder, glaring at me worse than usual.

Fuck.

I’d have to watch my back for the rest of the day. There was no doubt I could expect something in retaliation for failing to respond to what she’d done, and I had a feeling it would be worse than usual. Before I triggered, she’d done things like pushing me aside on the stairs so hard I almost fell down them. I was also pretty sure she’d been the one to shove me in then.

I shuddered. I was so glad my newly-eidetic memory had only recorded a few seconds of being in that place before I’d broken out by pushing on the door and breaking the mechanism that held it close.


‘…what.’

I shook my head, stopping myself from thinking about the weird thing that I remembered happening and the short silver-haired girl.

The early bell rang, and I made my way through the crowds towards my first period class.

([Restoring emotion system to full operational capacity])

The rest of the morning passed largely uneventfully. Madison was in Gladly’s class with me, but she largely deigned not to speak with me or even focus on me. Usually.

Thankfully, today was one of those days she decided I was below her notice.

As soon as the bell rang I was heading out the door to my normal sanctuary during lunch: the girl’s bathroom.

I used to eat in there. But now, well, I didn’t need to eat. It was rather pointless. I could still taste, but it was more like chemical analysis than ‘tasting’. And there was never anything left once I did eat, my body breaking down the entire thing and using everything, I think I made more of the nanomaterials that made up my body from it, but I wasn’t sure, as I’d never noticed anything changing.

My thoughts were interrupted by the bathroom door opening, a group of chattering girls coming in. I immediately recognized the voices as Madison and Sophia. If I’d been my old self, I wouldn’t have because of how they were covered by the sounds of everything else going on: sink, paper dispenser, etc.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door of the stall I was in.
Oh, fuck.

Shit shit shit shit.

If they found out I was the one in here… well, with the way Sophia had been glaring at me earlier something bad would happen. Bad for me, that is.

The knock repeated.

C’mon, think, think, think. Alright, gotta hide who I am somehow. Maybe…

Focusing on my throat, I prayed to God that my spontaneous idea would work. It should work, but I had no idea. I’d never tried anything like what I was doing.

“Occupied.” I said. And the voice that came out of my throat wasn’t mine. “It might be a while, sorry.”

I wasn’t really. They could go fuck themselves for all I cared.

The girl on the other side of the door muttered something inconsequential and moved away to another stall, knocking again. I breathed a silent sigh of relief and prayed that nothing else would happen.

Madison, Sophia and the rest of them were still chattering away as the other girl finished up and there was an additional sink running.

And then they all migrated out of the bathroom like the jackals they were.

Sighing again, I released my focus on my throat. That was… weird. I hadn’t known I could do that. It had been completely spontaneous, but now it had me thinking. If I had been able to mess with my vocal chords like it was natural, what else could I do?

I’d been… avoiding anything to do with my body and the stuff that made it up for awhile because of how uncomfortable it made me just thinking about it, but maybe now it was time to start trying.

Despite having avoided anything to do with the things relating to my sudden inhumanity, I’d still managed to make some pretty crude armor out of sheets of steel I’d salvaged from the boat graveyard as a costume.

I’d settled on a solid metal plate for my face, making eye-holes by poking through the steel and then filing them until they were a good size. A pair of silver reflective lenses went in them, and then I polished the entire thing until it gleamed, the lenses not even visibly different from the rest of the blank mask. It just looked like my face was flat metal when I had it on. Kind of eerie, but it would definitely protect my identity.

The pieces of armor had leather-ish straps that I’d decided on instead of velcro, as velcro could be easily pulled apart just through solid force, where as buckled straps weren’t going anywhere. The straps threaded through hard metal holders on a form-fitting black suit that was basically like those neoprene suits that divers used, except less neoprene and more… spandex-y. I’d had to save up quite a bit for that, ordering it online from a place that PHO had guaranteed was completely anonymous. And the metal flat holder-things were actually belt loops I’d also found online. For gun holsters, of all things.

That… had required some serious fudging of my age to get them. And also saving up, again. Probably illegal. Okay no, it was definitely illegal, but it was for a good cause, right?
The belt loops were bolted to small (about 2x4 inch) steel plates (again from the boat graveyard, retrieved by yours truly) and a guy I’d found at a metal shop had tapped threads into for only two dollars since ‘it was such a small thing’.

The plates sat under the spandex, the belt loops above, and bolts going through the fabric. I’d squished off the extra metal from the bolt with my fingers, and then filed them down. A piece of fabric then got sewed over the metal. Even if the plates couldn’t do anything like accidentally cut my skin, it still felt weird for the cloth to be suddenly interrupted by hard metal. I think I’d done a pretty good job, but eh, it was my first time sewing, so you have to give me credit.

And thus, my costume was complete.

It reminded me of medieval armor, except less metal. More… light armor? That’s what I would say it was, really. I wanted gauntlets, but I didn’t exactly have the ability to make those with my current resources. So I just had bracers. Well, and upper arm stuff plus shoulder-y things (I think they’re called pauldrons), and a plate for both my chest and back. And then eight pieces for my legs, back and front sections for both my thighs and lower legs.

Say whatever the hell you will about it, but I was fucking proud of my costume. The metal may have been bent and shaped by hand, but it still looked good. A heck of a lot better than a lot of costumes I’d seen new heroes using. It was one of the reasons I’d waited so long before trying to go out, because when the media finds out about a new hero, first impressions are everything. And the costume? That is a huge part of it. With a professional-looking costume I’d been seen as a real hero, not some newbie playing at it.

And I… I really thought I had a chance to make a difference. Maybe that was just a delusion or an excuse I made to myself, something every cape said, but it didn’t make it any less true that I believed in it.

The day passed and my last class was Art, which I shared with Sophia.

…As you might guess, she was staring daggers at me the entire time. If looks could kill I’d have been dead twenty times over.

Somehow, I managed to ignore her and focus on the sketch we had to do, and when class was over I quickly pulled my project out of my backpack and hurried over to the teacher’s desk to turn it in with everyone else’s. My first goal complete, I focused on the next one, getting out of range of Sophia as fast as fucking possible. Hastily making my way out of the school, I headed towards a bus stop that wasn’t the closest to Winslow just to be safe.

That girl… there was something wrong about her, and I did not want to be around her when she snapped. I knew that she couldn’t hurt me, not physically like she would try, but a year and a half of conditioning isn’t broken easily, and I also wanted to keep my secret identity, you know, a secret.

The bus arrived soon enough, and I got on it.

Sophia just worried me.

Emma had been my best friend. We had shared everything. For God’s sake, we were practically sisters. My mom had told us that, and it had resonated with me.

And then.

Fucking AND THEN, high school happened. I come back from summer vacation and expect to see
my best friend again, except something had… changed about her. She wasn’t the Emma I had known. Not the one that had faked camping in her backyard with. Not the one that had giggled with me over stupid stuff in cheesy romance novels we found.

Now, she was suddenly Sophia’s friend and there wasn’t enough room in her life for both of us. And for no obvious reason, she went and started bullying me.

It just… didn’t make sense. People don’t change like that without something huge happening. And all I could figure out was that it had something to do with Sophia, like the girl had somehow managed to brainwash my best friend into a not-Emma.

I wanted to know what had happened to my friend. I wanted to know why she actively tormented me day in and day out. I couldn’t, though, because the only people I knew who could tell me about whatever had probably happened were Emma and Sophia. The chances of me being able to actually talk to them?

Pfft. Less than nil, I’d say.

I was torn. Very torn. On one hand, for the things they did to me, I wanted to kill them, an emotion I never expected to feel towards Emma. It was this smoldering, burning thing, fanned by a year and a half of persecution. But on the other hand, I just wanted my best friend back, the girl I had known for over eight years, shared my life with.

And Goddammit, I wasn’t just going to let this go.

Becoming what I was, I knew I’d gotten at least marginally smarter. But I didn’t expect it to change me to the extent it had. I suppose part of it was that I no longer had hormones, and so the emotional bursts that had happened regularly simply didn’t anymore. I was now able to step back, to look at things more logically, distance myself from the situation.

The evidence said that something was very, very rotten in the state of Denmark.

And I intended to find out what it was.

The bus arrived at my stop, and I got off, walking the rest of the way home. Unlocking the front door, I made my way in, closing it behind me. I headed upstairs and slung my backpack off onto the floor with a ‘solid’ thump from all the books I brought home, a preventative measure against sabotage by the trio.

Thankfully, strength and seemingly limitless endurance definitely helped with carrying it despite its weight. Kicking my shoes off and moving them so they were under my bed, I looked over at my closet door. Almost magnetically, I was drawn to it, opening it and taking out the heavy (well, I assumed it was heavy) duffel bag with my costume in it. Each piece went on the floor, unwrapped from the old dishtowels I had wrapped each metal plate in to protect it from getting scratched up. Even just laid out on the floor it managed to look impressive to me.

Reaching for the mask, I picked it up, staring at it in my hands and the black hood it was sewed to in order to keep it on my head.

Considering my costume was bright silver, I doubted I’d be mistaken for a villain. But then again, there were people like Purity who managed to completely defy a stereotype like that.

Well, I’d just have to prove myself I guess.

Originally, I’d wanted to wait until the summer to go out. But now, again I was getting a funny
feeling, a feeling that *this* was the right time. This weekend.

My costume *was* done…

And if I was being completely honest with myself, I really wanted to get out and just *do* something after waiting three months.

Nodding to myself, I decided that this was it. I was going to do this. It was time.

I collected the pieces of armor and put them back away, and then lay down on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

Sighing, I raised my hands in front of my face. *Better to just fucking get this over with.*

Alright, what should I try? Maybe changing the skin color?

Focusing on that, I stared at my hands intently, willing them to do what I wanted.

(*Manual control locked; required parameters not met*)

After five minutes, I stopped, glaring at them in frustration. Why the hell couldn’t I do this? It hadn’t been like this in the restroom, I’d just… done it. But now I couldn’t even bring up the feeling I’d had when it happened.

Screw it. Maybe it would happen again on its own, and then I’d get a better sense of what was going on.

The night passed uneventfully, dinner a very simple affair without my dad even there. I read my book, learning more about the three capes that everybody looked up to, the level that every cape aspired to reach. The fact that I shared Alexandria’s most prized ability –her perfect memory– made me feel special, in some way. I knew I wasn’t *really*, but it still felt like it.

I wasn’t invulnerable like her, at least, I didn’t think so, but I was strong, I was fast, I was a heck of a lot more damage-resistant than a normal human, and I had a perfect memory. I couldn’t fly, which would have been awesome, but most capes couldn’t either.

So there was that.

I could have done much worse in the power lottery. Like those Case 53’s that were so non-human they couldn’t live a normal life. Or I could have been someone that had serious problems –either physical or mental– because of their powers, like I heard some did.

That would’ve sucked.

But I didn’t. Thank fucking God.

Saturday rolled around, and I mostly stayed in my room.

I was strangely beginning to get this persistent feeling that I was missing something. Like there was something fundamental I was *supposed* to have, but didn’t.

It was a bit uncomfortable, and after a while I stopped writing in my notebook about what had happened with my powers yesterday and moved my attention to my computer and PHO. Nothing really new on there, just the usual stuff: Merchants were being assholes, the Empire Eighty-Eight
was its usual racist self and trying to expand into ABB territory slowly, and the ABB were having none of it.

Though, there was a rumor that the ABB had somehow gotten a hold of a Tinker recently. That was interesting, considering there had been only two capes in the gang before that. I wondered what their specialty was. Partly because I was curious, but also because I had no illusions about what I was going to be doing. I would be getting into cape fights. And according to the internet, “Know your enemies” was important when you were fighting. I was supposed to know myself too, but I think I had a pretty good hold on that.


Yup. That about summed it up pretty well.

Well, there was still that part of me that was screaming that I was taking all of this too well, but… I’d had three months to get used to it. I’d, at least somewhat, come to terms with the fact that I was now one of the most sophisticated pieces of technology in the world.

And it wasn’t like I even noticed it usually. If I hadn’t been told right out, I probably wouldn’t have, either. I would have just guessed I was a normal parahuman.

But since I did, and there was no real way to unforget that, I’d become… more than a little philosophical about it. It was strange, I think, that I was questioning my existence and what humanity really was at the age of fifteen.

But… well, when you’re suddenly not what you were, it tends to make you think. Like, were Case 53s human? Where did the line between human and not get drawn? I wasn’t human. Not… not really. Except I was.

I had been.

I looked physically human. But unlike every other cape who was at least some part organic, I wasn’t. Even Case 53s had more than me in that respect.

I wanted to say yes. That yes, I was unequivocally human. If not human, at least a person.

That because my mind hadn’t changed (that I could tell) I was still Taylor Hebert.

Except, I wasn’t the same Taylor Hebert that had existed four months ago. Now, instead of trillions of little squishy cells, I was reportedly made up of tiny little machines.

And the problem with that was that I couldn’t say, definitively, that I was the same Taylor Hebert. If it had happened gradually, maybe yes. But it hadn’t.

Instead of a heart or a brain, now I had a core that I only knew about in theory, not even sure if it really existed. No arteries or veins. No bones. No nothing. The only things I could say I had were eyes, ears, a nose, a mouth, a stomach, and something approximating lungs.

With the revelation that my body was at least semi-malleable, maybe even those things were up for grabs.

So was I still human?

There was a Case 53 Ward named Weld. His trigger had turned him into living metal. Solid metal, not like me. He was probably the closest person I could relate to. But even then… Case 53s didn’t
know about what they were, it was just one of those things about them. Unlike them, I knew exactly what I was.

Magical robot girl.

I may have been kidding, but it really was true. I knew what I was made of, what my little nanomachines were like, how my core used quantum nondeterminism to run my personality, because I’d been told about it all. But for all it mattered to other people, it was magic. No different than other parahumans.

Except I was.

The definition of AI is “computer systems able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages.”

That was me. I did those things. Just, for me, it was called daily life.

So if I was a computer (as I’d been told), and I could do things like process what I saw and make decisions based on it—which I very well did, because otherwise I’d have been walking into walls all the time— I was technically an AI.

And I seriously worried about what would happen if anybody found out the truth.

There weren’t very good opinions of AI on PHO. People talked them about ‘going Skynet’, something from some Aleph movie made in the 80’s. But basically it was an AI going rogue, taking control of everything, etc etc. And there was one conspiracy nut who was always starting controversial discussions about recent computer developments and how they were “going too far”.

Yeaaaaah, no.

But predictably, any Tinkers who had the potential to make something like AI were closely monitored because the public was so scared of what they could do that we’d have another Nilbog on our hands. Or what would happen if they were affected by the Simurgh.

And me being an AI? I highly doubted that would go over well. I couldn’t even do half the stuff that people thought AIs could, no magic hacking abilities or anything like that. But I doubted that would matter if people knew. So, even though I wanted to be a cape, I was resigned to not ever revealing what I was. Ever.

Sighing and trying to distract myself from the depressing thoughts, I started planning what I would do the next day. I’d decided I wouldn’t go out that night, but instead wait until the next one.

Sleep was another thing I didn’t need, which would make heroeing all that much easier. I could sleep, and I usually did. It was one of the more strange things I’d become accustomed to rather quickly. I decided when I would wake up, and I did. Like how normal computers could be scheduled to wake from their sleep modes automatically. It was one of the few things that corroborated with what I’d been told, something that made it all that much harder to be in denial about.

…The parallels were mildly disturbing, but I’d been dealing with it for a few months at this point. I wasn’t as freaked out by the fact that I didn’t need anything to tell the time anymore because I just knew it. I didn’t mind that I didn’t need to eat anymore, though I still did when I had dinner with my dad just to keep up appearances. I wouldn’t say it was all quite normal for me yet. But it was my life now, every day.
So, I just lived with it. Like I said, some capes definitely had it worse than me, so I should probably be grateful that I ended up with such a relatively benign transformation.

But it wasn’t like it suddenly solved all my problems. If anything, I probably had more now.

Like how to escape your ex-best friend who’s tormenting you at every opportunity while you try to figure out why the fuck it was happening in the first place.

It didn’t help with that.

Too bad, too, because that would have been really helpful.

Sunday was similar, except I was an understandable bundle of nerves. It was hell waiting through the day, really just doing nothing, until my father fell asleep. Once he was, though, I pulled out my duffel bag and all of the pieces of armor, laying them out. The suit went on first, and then I started strapping the armor on, starting at my legs and then my arms. The back-piece was segmented, and so that was a bit more complex.

It was the chestpiece that I paused at. It was missing something. An image suddenly popped into my mind, and I reached my hand out, dragging my fingernail along the metal and drawing it out.

I didn’t notice the metal shavings falling to the floor off my finger, too entranced by the design.

It was about five inches tall and three wide. At the center was a dot. Around it went a circle, and off the top of the circle was a small point, almost like a spike. From the bottom of the circle extended a line that reminded me of a necktie from its shape, with two almost… wings coming off of just above where the line flared to the sides. And on the left and right of the circle there were another pair of lines that followed the circle’s arc, ending in points at sharp angles away from the lines.

Where did that come from?

I’d just… done it.

It felt right, somehow though. Like it was supposed to be there. Like it meant something important.

Fuck, I didn’t need this stuff right now. Picking up the chestpiece, I strapped it on, fingering the impromptu engraving.

Pushing the weirdness out of my mind, I lifted up the last piece of my costume, stretching out the hood and pulling the entire thing over my head, straightening it out.

Time to go.

I slipped out the backdoor silently, moving as quickly as I could off my street and around the corner, heading towards the Docks. I didn’t quite have any place in particular I wanted to go, so once I got to the more industrial areas I jumped up onto a roof and looked around before deciding randomly to head east.

I had to be out for at least an hour before I came across something.

It was a dim orange light, a flame in the street with multiple people around it. It took me a moment to make out their faces, but when I did I noticed that they all had something in common: They were all Asian, and all had red and green on them.
ABB colors.

Well, this should be easy enough. There were only four—

I was stopped from finishing the thought by more people coming out of a short, run-down two story building. By the time they stopped appearing, there had to be at least a dozen.

And then the last man stepped into the light. He was tall. Over six feet and towering over the others around him. If that hadn’t told me right away who he was, the intimidating metal mask and collection of dragon tattoos on his bare chest did.

Lung.

Leader of the ABB. Changer/Brute with a Shaker sub-rating for pyrokinesis. Turned into a giant “dragon” as he fought, complete with metal scales and even wings eventually. One of the more identifiable villains considering how conspicuous his powers were.

Fuck.

No sign of Oni Lee though, which was the only good thing so far. Lung was saying something, and I saw the men around him shifting, pulling out weapons. Knives mostly, but there were also a few guns, and I assumed there were more out of sight.

Being on a roof while they were in the middle of the street made it harder to hear them, but after a few seconds I could. Lung’s voice was low and gravelly, with a heavy accent. And he sounded pissed. “…the children, kill them. Doesn’t matter how good you are, just shoot. You see one lying on the ground? Shoot the fucking bitch twice more to be sure. No chances to be clever or lucky.”

He looked around at his gathered minions, and they all made sounds of agreement.

I was frozen, rooted to my spot while I tried to process what I’d just heard.

(Emotion engine reduced to 75%)

They were going after kids. “Children” he’d said.

What the fuck !?

And it wasn’t just some random thing, either, this was a lynch mob. They were out for blood.

Lung answered one of the guys’ questions in another language that I identified as Chinese, but I couldn’t understand it. Without warning his hand shot out and grabbed another man’s wrist, forcing it at an odd angle as he looked at the watch on it.

They were on a schedule?

If I’d had a cellphone I would have called someone, probably the police or Protectorate considering Lung was involved, but I didn’t, and had no way other way to contact help. Any payphones in the area were either trashed or unusable.

A vehicle pulled up and let out a few more guys, and then after a few seconds of murmured talking, they turned as one and began heading north on the street.

Shit. I was out of time.

Twenty, twenty-five armed men, at least half with guns, and then Lung.
Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.

Out to kill children.

Do or die, Taylor. I tried not to think of how accurate that might actually be.

Just as they were passing below my building, I stepped off of the edge, allowing my armor to pull me down as I fell and landed on the already-cracked cement heavily, adding more from my little stunt.

For a moment, nobody moved. And then some guy yelled something in some language that I didn’t know and rushed forward with a knife in his hand. I instinctively raised my hands in front of my face, and felt an impact against my palm.

Pulling my hands down, I saw the guy looking between his now-bent knife and me fearfully.

“SHOOT HIM!” Lung roared, and all of the men were suddenly scrambling around, trying to put distance between me and them. But I realized what they were doing, and stepped closer into the group, making it impossible for them to fire a gun without hitting one of their own men.

My first attack was a simple punch to a guy’s face. I tried to lighten the blow, but still felt something give way in his face before he fell down in a heap, unconscious.

Whoops.

No time to think about that. I kept moving around, trying to stay in the largest cluster so that all they could use against me was knives. I must have taken down at least six guys before I heard a really loud ‘crack’.

Something hit the back of my head sharply, and I turned around, searching for what had done that while simultaneously reaching behind my head and trying to find whatever had hit me. My hand came back with a small piece of metal, flattened out. Looking up, I saw a man with a gun extended, his hands shaking.

Huh. Guess I was bulletproof.

All of the men around me had also stopped at the noise, and were now looking at me even warier.

Behind them, Lung growled. “Get out of here. I’ll deal with him,” the man rumbled angrily.

Quick to follow their leader’s orders, the guys tried to get away from me, but I managed to take down another three before Lung was suddenly in front of me.

Uh-oh.

“You die here.”

And then a punch hit my face. I could tell there was a lot of force behind it, but it didn’t move me from where I was, and I heard the bones in Lung’s hand snap on impact with my mask.

Hitting an inch and a half of solid steel had a tendency to do that.

He was already getting taller, and had to be at least 6’7” by now. I had to end this quickly, decisively, or he’d just keep growing and getting stronger. I could hear the bones in his hand shifting around as it healed.

Not waiting for him to make another move, I punched his bare chest as hard as I could.
My hand went through him.

([Emotion engine reduced to 30%])

I blinked.

_Um._

Well fuck. That wasn’t supposed to happen. Hurriedly I pulled my hand back, and Lung fell backwards, a gaping hole in his chest. I stared at my hand, covered in dark blood.

Did I just _kill_ Lung?

“_I’LL FUCKIN’ KILL YOU, BITCH!!_”

I looked back down at the man. The hole was closing, and his chest was becoming covered in scales.

Oh. Good. He wasn’t dead. That could have been bad.

Lung was quickly on his feet and lunging for me, engulfed in flame as he roared.

I jumped back, trying to figure out the best strategy. If I could somehow make him unconscious…

I just didn’t know about how to best go about that.

He was instantly in front of me, reaching out for my neck with his left hand, and I pushed the arm to the side. But I didn’t notice his other hand, glowing white-hot and aimed at my chest.

([Threat evaluation: High. All initial parameters met. Level five limiter removed.])

Inches in front of the spot he was going for, a honeycomb-like structure of white hexagons appeared, stopping his hand cold.

What the–

My mind expanded.

Wave-Force armor. I didn’t even have to think, I just immediately knew what it was: A defense system that relied on extradimensional folding similar to a Klein bottle in order to store energy and then release it at a later time, usable by Mental Models.

Mental Models?

A fist appeared in front of my face, bringing me out of my thoughts, but was once again stopped by a set of hexagons. Lung roared in aggravation.

I instinctively raised my left hand, a wave of the shapes expanding outwards with a burst of energy, pushing him back.

It was only then that I noticed the lines on the back of my hand. They started at small circles on my knuckles and crawled up my fingers like lightning, each ending in two branches. Beyond the branches sat that same symbol I’d drawn on my chestpiece, the line coming from the bottom pointing towards the tips of my fingers.

Fog

It meant Fog. A group. A collection. What I was.

Stylized glowing white lines and patterns reminding me of tribal tattoos ran up my arm, and I knew without looking that the same was on my other arm. On the inside of my wrist sat a second design, a circle bisected by a line that ended in branches at both ends, with a line on either side curving around the circle and pointing off along the branches. On the outside of those lines were a pair of small triangles, pointing directly left and right.

Fleet identification.

Fleet?

I was brought out of my thoughts by Lung glowing brighter. He’d also gotten taller, almost by five inches, and scales ran all over his chest and arms.

Available non-lethal offensive combat options?

Nothing I could immediately think of…Well then. Time to think outside the box.

I looked him over, and started cataloging his state. He was on fire. Quite a lot of fire… Lung needed oxygen to do that. And he needed oxygen to breathe. I don’t think he could handle not breathing. So if I restricted that, he should pass out.

Good plan. Now I had to execute it.

The dragon-man ran at me, and I prepared for what I would do. As soon as he got in range, I jumped, his hands barely missing me. I stepped off of his right shoulder, hooking my arm around his neck as I fell to the ground.

Lung grew hotter, but I couldn’t feel it thanks to the Klein field extended all over my body. I was only able to tell because I could see it…
I see infrared?

The confirmation came as soon as I’d thought it. Interesting.

I tightened my grip, feeling metal scales crack and break beneath my arm. Lung elbowed me hard, and then when that failed, tried to reach behind his back and grab me.

I was having none of it, and stuck a set fields directly in his path so he couldn’t reach me. He thrashed around, but I held tight, knowing this would be the only chance I got at this. If I let go now, all my effort would be worthless.

Finally, after what felt like forever, I started to feel him getting slower, and then without warning we toppled sideways, with Lung landing on top of me. After holding him in a chokehold for a few more seconds, I let go, pushing him off of me and standing up.

([Emotion engine restored to full capacity])

Well, that was certainly exhilarating. Not something I particularly would want to do again, but enlightening.

Something inside of me had changed during the fight, and I felt… different. More.

Information streamed to me from nowhere… from [external network access]. Unlike before, I could feel every single one of my little nanomaterial particles. A number of at least ten to the twentieth power of them in my body, orders of magnitude more than the 37 trillion cells in the human body. Enough that I could simulate all human biological processes, and my false blood would be unidentifiable from the real thing under a microscope.

Staring at my hands, I flexed them, watching the white patterns as they moved around.

I was Fog.

But what did that mean? Images came to me, flashes of sea battles, fights, overwhelming firepower. Strength. Resilience. Domination. Pride. That was what it meant. That was who I was.

I was Taylor, and I was Fog.

Chapter End Notes

Nanomachines, son.
It was a noise above me that drew my attention away from the glowing sigils on my hands and the supposed sudden revelation of what I was. I put that aside for the moment, resolving to deal with the matter later, when I had the time.

At the edge of the building I’d jumped off of shapes were coming forward, glowing brightly with a color redder, deeper than red.

I really could see infrared. Fuckin’ A.

It wasn’t like what you see in those pictures of heat patterns and stuff. Because while I could see infrared, it wasn’t all I could see. I still saw all of the colors that I could see before (and it seemed like maybe even ultraviolet as well), but they didn’t interfere with each other, tinting them or anything. I could just… see both at the same time, complementing and even improving the other.

Like… how you listened to music. A good song wasn’t just one instrument, or voice or anything. It was a layering of those things. Each played a different part. But you could still easily pick out voices versus guitars or bass guitars or even violins, since they all sounded different. Yet it was the harmonies, the combination that made it all come together in an unforgettable coherent whole.

That was what it was like.

And it was amazing.

The shapes I saw were like a cross between a lizard and a lion that had been fed pure steroids from day one. They were the size of a panel van, red muscle woven through spiked, bare bone all exposed to the air instead of skin. There was no blood, reminding me of an anatomy model. Just… with significantly more bone.

They leaped away from the rooftop they were on down to the street, and I followed their trajectory as they passed over my head, landing heavily. The creatures turned around, and I could see bright points on top of them.

People.

Two girls and two guys by the looks of it, each doubled up on the things, leaving another pair that were riderless.
The riders slipped off of the monsters and landed on the ground, and I got my first good look at them.

In the front, stepping forward, was a guy in full-body motorcycle leathers with a black helmet made to look like a stylized skull. It was… a pretty cheap costume all things considered, but he still managed to pull it off and make it not look tacky. He stopped when he’d gotten about four feet in front of me.

The others were doing various other things. One of the girls was solidly-built, with no real costume that I could tell: just a plaid skirt, a T-shirt and a bulldog mask. She’d immediately turned and started inspecting the creatures as soon as her feet’d touched the ground.

The second boy reminded me of pictures I’d seen of Renaissance clothing, and he leaned his back against the monster he’d slid off of nonchalantly. But I could see him peering over in my direction, his body language showing curiosity.

And then finally, walking behind the boy in leathers, there was an attractive blonde in a purple and black catsuit with a matching domino mask.

Damn I wished I could pull off something like that as well as she did.

…There was a reason Lung had assumed I was a guy. It was because I really looked like one. No hips, no chest. I was built like a stick, and my armor only reinforced the image. The single redeeming quality I was proud of was my hair.

“That’s something I never expected to see,” the boy started. His voice was low and warm, and he was eighteen or nineteen if I had to guess. He faced slightly in the direction of Lung, who was behind me and on the left, and then slowly turned his head to take in all of the other men I’d gotten before Lung. …Plus all of the destruction Lung had caused trying to get me off his back.

He whistled. “Shit, man, you’re good in my book any day.”

“She’s a girl,” the blonde behind him corrected, the boy’s mask immediately snapping back to me.

I looked at her curiously. How’d she tell?

She seemed to notice me looking, because she adopted this subtly mischievous smile as soon as I focused on her.

“Oh. Uh. Sorry?” the guy offered awkwardly.

I fidgeted. “It’s… it’s fine,” I said, finally working up the courage to respond after a couple of seconds. I’d impulsively changed my voice so that it sounded distorted, like I imagined a generic Tinker’s voice would sound altered.

“Well, thanks for doing that. We’d heard Lung was gunning for us, but couldn’t really think of what to do. So we just said ‘fuck it’ and decided to meet him in the middle. Winging it’s not really my thing, but…” he trailed off and shrugged. “Oni Lee was waiting for us, but we dealt with him pretty easily. He seemed really off without Lung around. Guess we know why now.”

So that’s where Oni Lee had been. Thank God I hadn’t had to deal with them both at once.

The leather-clad boy held out his hand. “Forgot about introductions, sorry. Hi, I’m Grue.”

I looked at his hand, and then warily extended mine, leather meeting skin.
I should probably get some half-gloves or something myself, even if I couldn’t go for those gauntlets right now. I didn’t need gloves seeing how durable I was, but my hands looked kind of weird bare when compared to the rest of my full-coverage costume.

As I gripped Grue’s hand, I noted that whatever those glowing sigils had been, they were all gone now and must have disappeared sometime during his little speech.

Grue shook hands with me, and then pulled back. I allowed my arm to fall to my side as he turned and looked at the purple girl. “That’s Tattletale.” His finger came up and pointed at Renaissance Lad. “That’s Regent.” His finger moved to the girl checking over the massive creatures. “And that’s Bitch. As in, like the dogs she’s with right now. Not the insult.”

Those fucking things were dogs? What the hell!?

I’d never heard of their names before, so they had to be minor capes of some sort. I guess I’d have to do some research when I got home.

Grue turned back to me. “So what’s your name?”

Behind my mask, I blinked at the unexpected question. I still hadn’t really decided on a cape name for various reasons, including the fact that I wanted to keep the truth of what I was a secret.

Tattletale looked over at him. “She hasn’t deci–”

[WaveforceDominionCordonSiegeNautilusFleetMaritimeTempestArmadaRiptideVanguard-]

“Relentless.”

([Designation registered: Relentless])

Where the fuck had that come from?

“Relentless?” Grue echoed.

I just nodded, too stunned to say anything.

It was like my mind had gone into overdrive for a moment, locked onto a single train of thought but moving at Mach 5. Literally a split-second decision fueled by abstract feelings and thoughts that I couldn’t even remember.

And the name that resulted from it. Relentless.

Constant. Persistent. Unforgiving. Interminable. Adamant. Implacable. Unyielding. Unstoppable. A word you’d usually hear in reference to enemies or foes, something or somebody that would never give up. A word used to describe a force of nature like the wind or the sea. A word that screamed “strength”.

It was word that I somehow knew described the Fog perfectly, even without entirely knowing what the Fog was, other than the fact that I was Fog.

There was already a Dauntless in Brockton Bay, and some might have said that my name was too similar, but the meanings were completely different. Dauntless meant being unafraid, undaunted, determination through resolve and spirit. Relentless meant never giving up, and taken a little darker, harsh and merciless. It was quite a bit edgier.
It was exactly what I wanted.

I wanted to be taken seriously. It’s why I had spent so much time on my costume before coming out. I didn’t want to be treated like some fragile fifteen year-old girl, because I wasn’t. I was anything but fragile. And I’d proven it tonight. I’d done what the entire Brockton Bay Protectorate had been unable to do: beat Lung, through sheer determination and force of will. By being merciless in my attack and unforgiving of his error in underestimating me.

Tattletale just stared at me and blinked, her mouth still opened from when I’d interrupted her. I noticed she had really green eyes.

She tilted her head to the side, her mouth closing and forehead furrowing as she examined me like I was some sort of puzzle to figure out. “Huh.” Her confused expression slowly shifted into a wide grin, revealing white teeth. “You’re interesting.”

I had no way to respond to that. Like… thank you? I guess?

Suddenly, she turned to her left and the grin melted. “They’re coming. Time to go.”

*What?*

Grue nodded, following Tattletale’s lead in climbing up onto the beasts they’d been riding, the others doing the same. “Another cape’s going to show up in less than a minute, so we’re going to get going, alright steel girl? Just… be careful, okay? The world’s not as black and white as you might think it is,” she said, grinning once again. But there was a dullness in her eyes that didn’t match her expression, instead of the bright spark I’d seen before.

“It was nice meeting you, Relentless,” Grue spoke from atop the creature he and Regent were seated on.

“Yeah,” I agreed. They seemed nice enough.

Without another word, the beasts turned and began running down the street, jumping up onto a building near the end and then continuing over rooftops, quickly accelerating and leaving my field of vision.

*Not as black and white?*

As I tried to figure out what she meant, at the edge of my senses I heard a motorcycle. It was obviously tuned or altered in some way since it didn’t sound like any motorcycle I’d heard before. It got closer, and once it came into view, I realized who exactly the cape that Tattletale had been talking about was.

Armsmaster.

Legends Tinker, with a specialty in miniaturization. Leader of the local Protectorate and Wards. … And a childhood hero of mine. Oh god.

Somehow I managed to have butterflies in my gut despite it being made of solid nanomaterial.

He pulled up a few yards away, looking between me and Lung, who was a couple of feet behind me. “Did you do that?”

I nodded. “Yeah,” I confirmed.
He got off his bike, walking over with his trademark halberd in hand, a weapon about six feet long and ending in an axe-like blade. “How?”

“I… uh, got him in a sleeper hold,” I supplied.

His blue visor turned in my direction for a moment as something sharp and pointy came out of the tip of his halberd. A needle? “Impressive, for a new cape.”

I allowed myself to enjoy the compliment for what it was worth.

Armsmaster looked back at Lung and poked the needle into the man’s neck, withdrawing it after a second, the needle retracting as well.

“What was that?”

“A tranquilizer. It should keep him unconscious until he’s in proper custody. You’re very lucky he didn’t wake up before I got here.”

“I’m… pretty sure I could have knocked him out again,” I stated honestly. The man had lost all of the height and scales he’d gained in our fight within minutes of being unconscious, and so I was pretty sure all it would have taken was a really hard blow to his head, just like anybody else.

The blue-suited man’s lips thinned slightly. “Yes. Well.”

His halberd suddenly folded up, the handle splitting into three sections in order to do so, and he reached over his shoulder, holding the weapon against his back. A magnet grabbed the folded-up halberd with a solid click, keeping it in place as Armsmaster bent down. He lifted Lung, heaving the infamous gang leader over his shoulder, and I could hear the multitude of servos in his joints handle the movement easily.

I probably would have found that cooler if I wasn’t made of freaking nanomachines.

A cage exploded out of the back of his bike, making me start, but Armsmaster didn’t even blink as it unfolded. He transferred the captured cape into the miniature cell, the bars of its opening locking in a cross-pattern as soon as Lung was in place.

Armsmaster turned back to me. “We should talk about what happens from here.”

“…Okay?” I agreed hesitantly, not really sure what he was talking about.

“First, what’s your name?”

“Relentless,” I told him with pride. It… wasn’t just a name, it was now who I was. As much as I was Taylor and I was Fog, I was Relentless. It was my identity, atomic and indivisible.

I could almost see his eyebrows raise behind the blue visor. “Relentless?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“New trigger?”

I shook my head. “A few months ago.”

“Well, I commend you for taking time to prepare, not many capes have the patience to do that before going out. Most Brutes go out the first time in practically nothing other than a basic suit, much less plate-steel armor.”
I grinned behind my mask at his approval. “Thanks.”

He nodded. “Have you considered joining the Protectorate?”

I froze. He thought I was old enough to be in the *Protectorate*?

I knew I was unnaturally tall for my age, five-foot-nine, when I got turned into what I was, and I knew that my armor and vocal disguise were pretty good. But I didn’t think they were good enough to make him think I was an *adult*.

Wow. And he’d just assumed that, too.

“Um… thanks for the offer, but I don’t think that’s for me. I’m a bit… independent,” I answered cautiously.

No lies, but also not the whole truth.

I didn’t want to join a team, *any* team, because the chances of my secret getting exposed rose exponentially. Also, the Wards, the underage division of the Protectorate which was overseen by them, sounded just as drama-filled as highschool from what I’d read on PHO. And I didn’t need any more of that than what I already had, thank you very much.

“Alright,” he responded, not pressing the issue. There was a slightly awkward silence. “Who gets the credit for Lung?”

I stared at him, stupefied. Completely speechless.

“Just listen to me. Every decision has its consequences. Lung is a major villain, and you played a part in bringing him in.”

*Played a part!? I did all the work!*

“But as the leader of the ABB, he’s in charge of both the gang in this city as well as neighboring ones. Along with that, he has two powered subordinates: Oni Lee and Bakuda.”

“Bakuda?” I’d never heard the name. Maybe the new Tinker I’d heard about online?

“A new cape. Bomb tinker,” he said, confirming my thoughts. “She was responsible for the Cornell bombings. Lung convinced her to join him, and brought her to Brockton.”

A specialty in *bombs*? That was fucking dangerous. And she’d already demonstrated she wasn’t above using them for terror tactics.

“Think about what could happen if you take the credit. Oni Lee and Bakuda will both be trying to free Lung. …And to get revenge on the person who did it. And these aren’t C-rank villains.”

“You want me to let you take the credit.” It wasn’t a question.

I wasn’t liking where this was going. At all.

“Well, you could join the Protectorate, which comes with a support system and protection for its members, or you could lay low…”

No. The part of me that I still hadn’t entirely figured out, that still felt slightly foreign, rejected it. I wouldn’t give up my accomplishments so easily, if at all. And especially not such a major one. I had my pride, and it wouldn’t let me do something like that. The normal part of me was in complete
I was more than a little irked he had even suggested it.

“Option three. I do neither. I take the credit. As I should, since I was the one who dealt with Lung. And if they come after me, I handle it with the help of whatever allies I can make,” I said, looking pointedly in his direction.

That group that I’d just met, for one. They seemed to owe me, and I could use that.

His mouth shifted into a frown.

The excitement I’d felt about meeting Armsmaster had disappeared. This was not how I imagined he would act. Trying to take credit for something he didn’t even do? What the fuck, man?

Not cool. Not cool at all.

“I think I’d like to take that option, please.” I wasn’t asking.

I saw his jaw tighten. “Understood,” he returned tightly.

No. You do not get to resent me just because I wasn’t willing to roll over and give up the credit for my accomplishment. That’s just fucking ridiculous.

He finally seemed to notice the tension that was starting to fill the air and decided to do the smart thing. “I’ll be going then. Goodnight, Relentless.”

“Goodnight,” I replied coldly, watching him get on his bike and ride away, Lung still in the cage behind it.

Jeez. Talk about a fucking wake-up call. Less than five minutes and he completely ruined my image of him.

I noted that all of the guys I’d taken out before Lung were still on the ground, and some were starting to groan.

He hadn’t even tried to help me deal with them!

…

You know what? Fuck it. I got fucking Lung on my first night out. I couldn’t care less about some two-bit washed up Asian punks. I may have accidentally given them some broken bones or a concussion or two, but let them deal with that on their own. It was their own fucking fault for coming out tonight.

I jumped from the middle of the street up to one of the adjacent roofs and began the quick trip home.

Fog

I stared at my hands as I lay face-up in my bed, and white sigils manifested themselves when I pulled energy forward into my combat systems.

I am Fog.

I was still struggling with the knowledge, knowledge that felt like it belonged, that I couldn’t imagine
not knowing, now.

Wave-Force armor. Klein fields. Folded higher-level spatial dimensions. Mathematical equations for processing energy containment and gravitational fluctuations that I could execute like it was what I was born for. Manipulation of subatomic particles and quantum effects. Of antimatter and negative matter and strings and branes. Capturing the latent energy of the universe, of quantum foam and virtual particles.

I had these designs that I felt almost compelled to build, gravity-based propulsion systems and lasers so powerful they could emit energy a hundred thousand times hotter than the center of the sun.

Nothing to hold or contain them though, which felt… weird. Like I was missing something. Like I was supposed to figure it out on my own.

And of course, then there was what it all would be made of.

Nanomaterial. The same stuff that made up me, my shell, my body. The same stuff that I could now feel in such exacting detail that there was literally no distinction between me and it.

It’s hard for people to imagine numbers like “septillion” (that’s ten followed by twenty four zeros, or a trillion trillion), much less imagine that many number of things. It’s simply too hard to quantify. There’s no frame of reference, no comparison.

I knew exactly how large that number was, because I currently had 7,676,138,965,369,493,019,508,402 little tiny machines making up my body.

…That’s a million times greater than the number of grains of sand on the Earth. A thousand times the estimated number of stars in the entire universe. (But still only about ten drops’ worth of water molecules.)

I didn’t need to count them. I didn’t need to think about them, or anything. They were just there. There wasn’t any need to focus, like “oh, there’s one in my foot, oh look, now there’s one in my neck”, no, they were all in focus.

I wouldn’t say it was anything like a hive or a swarm or something, because the nanomachines were literally incapable of acting on their own. They were too simple for that, too small to even begin to consider autonomous functionality. It was like a bunch of those super-small RC cars instead of a collection of coordinated Roombas.

But at the same time, I didn’t have to constantly think about directing all of them like RC cars, moving them around. They just… did. It was entirely subconscious. Before, it had been like a heart beating: completely involuntary. Now it was like breathing: automatic in the background, something I did without thinking, but I knew that now I could also control it directly, the way you can hold your breath, hyperventilate, alter your intake volume, etc.

Before I had been static. Frozen. And now I knew that that was wrong. I was supposed to be like this, to be… fluid. Mutable. Was this what it was like to be an auto-biokinetic? Except I wasn’t exactly biological.

I made my skin jet black. All that effort yesterday, and now I could just do it, the surface nanomachines twisting and shifting with ions in highly conjugated carbon rings so that instead of reflecting light, they absorbed it the way pigments did. And with this, the degree I had pushed it just now, they had even made carbon nanotubes and oriented them completely vertical, making my surface black beyond belief.
I reset my skin tone.

I could do anything with this.

A red and black half-glove appeared on my hand, exactly like the one I’d been thinking getting tonight, and then shifted into the gauntlet I’d imagined before, just as easily.

This was a seriously powerful trump card. I could make clothes out of it. Even my armor! I could easily simulate my armor with this, and it’d be just as strong, hell, stronger than the steel version.

That… slightly annoyed me. I put effort into that costume, and the first night I get to use it, it’s rendered obsolete. Like, what the fuck? Couldn’t I have gotten this earlier so I didn’t spend all that time working on it?

I blinked as I realized just what all this meant. I didn’t have to look like such an underfed stick of a teenage boy. I could look like a normal girl. I could be pretty.

I’d never been particularly vain, but my appearances had always bothered me, and now it was something I could change at literally anytime. Of course, any changes I’d make would need to be done slowly. Suddenly changing my body type would get noticed really easily. Over the course of a few months or something would be better.

But a few months for something like this? I didn’t mind waiting at all.

A few months was nothing.

It should have been overwhelming. Yesterday, I was just an AI in a body of nanomachines. Now I was a completely fluid construct, able to do literally anything I wanted with my nanomaterial. Now, I knew that I truly did have a core, and if I so wanted to, I could push it out from behind my center of mass and stare at it, but I didn’t need to because I already knew what I would find.

Now, I was Relentless of the Fog.

I’d slept—as much as I can– for about three hours once I’d calmed down from all of the revelations. I’d tweaked my body just a little, barely anything, but it was a start. By the end of May I’d look like an actual girl. With a real chest and everything. And when I was out in costume, I could use it to make the difference between me and my normal life all that much larger.

I could barely contain my excitement.

Unlike what it felt like, the next day was a day like any other. But it wasn’t, because today my clothes were made of nanomachines and yesterday I had beaten Lung in unarmed combat with a fucking chokehold.

Not even the thought of school could bring me down.

I still had to go through the usual motions, though: wake up, eat breakfast with Dad, get backpack together, go to bus stop, get on bus, sit awhile, get off bus.

And then I was there. Winslow, my own personal hellhole.

Oh boy.

I walked into my computer class casually. It was one of the only classes that none of the three shared
with me, so I didn’t have to worry about their stupid “pranks”. I’d always done well in this class, and it was one of the few that would be pretty hard to sabotage anyways. But that didn’t matter.

The important thing was that after we finished our in-class assignments, we were basically given free reign. The school had some sort of internet filter, but it didn’t block out PHO, the Parahumans Online forum.

I just wanted to find out more about the four people I’d met last night, really.

[Accessing...]

That [connection], the one new thing that had been exposed yesterday that I hadn’t entirely understood implicitly, shifted from its previously inactive state, and a bundle of new information was suddenly available to me.

What the…?

“Grue”. And “Tattletale”, and “Regent,” and “Bitch” They were all there. And I knew that it had come from the Parahumans wiki.

*Holy fucking shit, I’m internet enabled now, too?*

I tried not to show my surprise or excitement/child-like glee over the fact that I had goddamn internet access in my fucking head.

…And then I caught a glimmer in the reflection of the computer screen in front of me, and my excitement disappeared in an instant.

My eyes were glowing, looking more robotic. And it wasn’t dull, either. It was bright.

*SHIT.*

I cut the [connection] immediately, and my eyes shifted back to normal. I looked around, checking, but thankfully it seemed nobody had noticed.

God. That had been fucking close.

Alright. No using the [connection] unless I was either alone or in-costume.

Still, I had the information I’d wanted on the four capes, somehow knowing it had come from the PHO wiki. Tattletale had virtually nothing, just stub text. Regent had literally nothing. All I’d gotten was his name.

Weird.

There was some basic stuff on Grue. Active for three years, petty crimes, hired muscle, yada yada. It was only just recently he’d started high profile work. Like robbing an ABB casino with his team. No wonder Lung was after them.

I’d figured out that they were the “children” he’d been talking about last night. And I guess, from his perspective, they were. So was I, for that matter.

For Bitch, however, there was a huge amount. Her real name was Rachel Lindt, and it had details on everything from her trigger to what she’d been doing lately.

So that was what happened when you had no secret identity.
The one thing, though, that I picked up definitively from both Rachel and Grue’s pages, was that they were villains. Not traditional villains. More like, soft-core villains.

They had seemed nice. Friendly, even. Not how you’d think of villains as acting. Especially when it was clear I was a hero, or a rogue at least (which I was now leaning more towards after my revelations and the Armsmaster incident). They were almost… tame. Rachel was wanted for assault a bunch of times, but she hadn’t even tried interacting with me.

And then Armsmaster had been a dick. He hadn’t started out that way, but as the conversation had gone he’d gotten more and more brusque and abrasive, ending with that fucking ridiculous request to give up the credit for Lung.

Tattletale’s words echoed in my ears. “The world’s not as black and white as you might think it is.” Was this what she had been referring to?

I sighed.

I was getting nowhere with thinking about it, so I pushed it out of my mind. What about me?

This time, I intentionally suppressed the connection, instead opening a browser window on the computer in front of me, sighing at how slow it was in comparison. But I wasn’t going to risk my secret identity for mere convenience.

Typing my name into the wiki’s search field, I was mildly surprised when it went directly to a real page. Created just this morning, but I had a page. Nothing more than a name and “captured Lung the morning of Monday, April 11, 2011” under “Achievements” and “First appearance” dated as today as well, but it was mine.

I was officially recognized as Relentless.

The boards had two threads talking about me. One detailing Lung’s capture and the eventual release of the fact that it had been a “new cape calling themself Relentless”, and the other dedicated to the revelation of my existence and what people knew so far (zilch, in case you were wondering).

…I’m not going to lie, my ego felt pretty good.

\textit{This} was what I had done, and people were already talking about what my powers could possibly be when one of the major informants said that I was some kind of Brute.

Exactly what I wanted them to think.

When my wave-force armor came out, I’d probably be labeled as a Shaker as well, doubtlessly a pretty powerful one once they learned \textit{exactly} how strong it was. Right now it couldn’t hold much, but I got the feeling that if I worked on it, I might be able to seriously increase the amount of damage it could take at once and how much energy I could hold in the Klein field before I had to release it.

I was apparently already pretty durable –being bulletproof wasn’t anything to scoff at–, but the now-accessible capacitor-like energy storage manifold just took that to new levels.

Add on the Changer/Stranger rating due to my malleability, Tinker because of what I could build, Thinker because I could see/hear beyond human standards and do ridiculously complex math in
microseconds, Mover for my speed, Master because of the control over my nanomaterial, and a Blaster subrating if I built those lasers, and I had something in almost every category.

…Yeah I’d be keeping that suppressed as long as possible, though I knew it would all probably come out eventually.

As long as I could keep my true nature and identity a secret, everything else was inconsequential in the end.

I spent the rest of the class researching things that I might be able to build that could hold the gravity engine. It was about the size of a jet turbine and had an open rear for gravity pulse emissions, so cars were out. By the end I had an idea for what I wanted, at least in the short-term, which was limited by how quickly I could make more nanomaterial.

Next class was Gladly. Unlike Friday, though, today it seemed Madison was intent on trying to irritate me. Not a good sign, as it usually meant that all of them were going to pick on me.

…Aaaand there was a puddle of juice on my preferred seat. Sighing, I eyed it, annoyed, and then just scraped it off the chair like a squeegee.

I looked back over at Madison, carefully schooling my features to give nothing away. Her eyebrows were scrunched together in a combination of confusion and glaring at me. It would have been slightly cute, except it was Madison and the thought of her name and cute in the same sentence made me want to gag.

I sat down just as Mr. Gladly –excuse me, Mr. G– entered the room. Class went sideways when he stuck us in groups to share homework together. Julia tried to toss mine over to Madison, whose group was sitting next to ours, but just as it left her hand my arm shot out and snatched it out of the air.

Maybe a bit unnecessary, but it would be a cold day in hell when I would let that bitch get her hands on my work and try to pass it off as her own. I’d had enough of that shit with Armsmaster last night.

Greg presented, and he almost completely flubbed it, but stumbled along with the stuff we’d come up with enough that we’d still get a decent grade. We didn’t win “Mr. G”’s prize, but I couldn’t care less about that.

The bell rang a few minutes later, and I packed up my bag. As I was about to walk out the door, Gladly pulled me aside.

“I’m glad to see you’re doing better, Taylor. I have an idea of what’s going on. Not who’s doing it, but they seem to be giving you a pretty hard time. It’s nice to see you aren’t letting them get to you anymore.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

Motherfucking what!? He knew what was going on and did nothing? This man wasn’t qualified to be in any sort of oversight position, much less a fucking teacher.

([Emotion engine reduced to 73%])

“Yeah,” I agreed, with absolutely no sincerity at all. “Thanks. Can I go now? I have class.”

He smiled, clearly not having picked up on my sarcasm. “Sure. Have a good day.”
I just nodded and headed for the door, pushing it open and stepping into the hallway. I froze as the doorway closed behind me, Emma, Madison, Sophia, at least six or seven other girls were there, waiting for me.

*Oh, come on.* I didn’t need this shit right now.

“Look at her. Nobody likes her. Why is she even here?” Julia started.

Sophia glared at me. “What a fucking loser.”

“Ugliest girl in our class.”

Oh, you just *wait*, bitch. Give me two months, and you’ll be eating your own words.

The stream of insults continued, insulting my chastity, reputation, integrity, appearance, you name it.

And as they did, they moved towards the end of the hallway, the group spanning the entire width and pushing me back into a corner. I couldn’t easily leave without cutting right through all of them, which wasn’t exactly something I wanted to do as it would bring me closer to them, not further away.

“What’s the matter Taylor? Upset?” Emma taunted. She must have seen something she liked, because as soon as she did, her face twisted into a vindictive smirk, an expression that was so unlike the Emma I knew.

And then she went for the finishing blow, hammering the final nail in the coffin. “Enough to cry yourself to sleep for a week straight?”

…

Oh, she did *not* just go there.

…

Yes, she *did*.

I saw red. My fists clenched, my nanomaterial flexing. The feeling of electricity and power crackled throughout me like I was touching a live wire, only barely contained by the shell that was my body. My Klein field strained under my control, just begging to be released.

((Warning: Severe primary consciousness instability detected. Emergency countermeasures taken. Emotion emulation processes reduced to 1% operational capacity.))

And then it felt like a bucket of ice water had been poured over me. I took a deep breath, unclenching my fists.

“Wow, Emma,” I said calmly, and it seemed to throw her completely off-balance. “Well, at least you can’t get much worse than that. So I guess that means you’ve got absolutely nothing now, huh? I don’t know what the hell happened to you at the end of that summer, but to make you this much of a bitch it must have seriously fucked you up.”

Her face paled. It seemed I’d hit the nail right on the head.

Sophia growled.

“Oh, you had something to do with it too?” I asked, looking at her. “No wonder Emma latched onto
you. She always was the easily-influenced type. You know, in middle school, I actually got her to believe she’d always loved strawberry ice cream, when four years earlier she absolutely hated it? It’s been her favorite flavor ever since.”

“Shut UP!” Emma yelled, her eyes closed tight, hands in white-knuckled fists, and face as pale as bone. Madison appeared visibly unnerved while the rest of the group was shifting around uncomfortably.

Sophia stepped closer to me, and I could see pure anger in her eyes. The tendons in her jaw popped out in stark contrast on her face from how hard she was clenching it.

“Before you do anything, you should probably know that Gladly’s standing about twenty feet away, watching us,” I informed her casually.

And he was. He wasn’t stepping in, just standing there and looking at what was happening. But I had no doubt that if Sophia laid a hand on me, even someone as shitty a teacher as he was would get involved. Hopefully.

The fire in Sophia’s eyes burned like an inferno, and the muscles in her right bicep strained like she wanted to do nothing more than punch me right now.

Hm. If she attacked, how should I respond? I could catch her fist, and then twist her arm around her back and into a hammer lock. Painful, not too painful, but definitely uncomfortable, and she wouldn’t be able to get out of my grip.

“I’m not afraid of you anymore,” I stated, continuing to make backup plans for if she got aggressive. “I don’t know what you did to my best friend, but I will find out what happened. This wasn’t who Emma was, and I know that she wouldn’t be like this unless something really horrible happened to her.”

“STOP!!” Emma screamed.

I didn’t look at her, still locked onto Sophia’s eyes. “So I’d be careful, Sophia. You know what happens when you push someone too far into a corner and they get really desperate, don’t you? When they have absolutely nothing left to lose?”

There was a flicker of something in her eyes, like I’d actually managed to pierce her rage and connect for a second.

And then, shock of the century, she actually stepped back.

Huh.

Looking me in the eyes one last time, muscles still straining with tension, she turned around and stalked away.

I glanced over the other girls, who now looked torn and like they didn’t want to be there at all. Madison was staring at Sophia’s back, while Emma was actually hunched over, hands on her ears and … shaking? There were faint wet tracks beneath her eyes and her lips were moving like she was soundlessly repeating something over and over.

It was… strange. I hadn’t seen Emma this upset since seventh grade. I’d imagined moments like this, where I would bring her and her friends to tears the way they had done to me, but now that I had, I felt… empty. No happiness, no vindication or sense of justice, just… nothing. A hollow, Pyrrhic victory.
It was petty, and I could just hear my mom telling me off for engaging in some ultimately insignificant crusade of retaliation when I didn’t even know the whole story of what was going on.

I stared at Emma, knowing she could still hear, even now. “I wasn’t lying, Emma. Mom called us sisters. I believed it, and I know you did too. And she always said that family… family doesn’t give up on each other, ever.”

I hiked my backpack higher on my shoulders, stepping forward towards the hole that Sophia had left in their group. They parted like the Red Sea to let me through.

I had one final parting statement for Emma as I walked by her.

“I hope you feel better, Ems.”

And I meant it.

((Regulated emotion emulation process restoration: 3:16:22 until 100% capacity. Current level: 1.77%))

They didn’t bother me the rest of the day. None of them even looked at me except Sophia, and I couldn’t decipher her looks at all. It was like a mixture of hate, loathing, confusion, doubt, and intrigue.

It gave me shivers.

I was left with nothing else to really do, and didn’t even try keeping my attention focused on class. Instead I drew models and designs in my notebook based on the pictures and designs I’d seen online, figuring out how all the new parts would get integrated, and what I wouldn’t need anymore.

Which ended up being a lot.

After school I headed east, walking for about ten minutes before I slipped into a small, dark alley. Extruding more of my nanomaterial from my surface I shifted my clothes into my armor, replicating it perfectly. Just… much stronger.

Stupid inconveniently-timed power reveals.

Jumping on top of the building next to me, I started off in the direction of the Graveyard.

The Boat Graveyard was a holdover from when Brockton operated as an actual “Bay”, where one of the major economic sources was trade and fishing.

And then Leviathan arrived.

Behemoth had been around for four years by then. I was only one year old when Leviathan first appeared, so I couldn’t remember what Brockton had been like before. I’d grown up seeing derelict, rusting steel giants on the shore and in the bay, like someone had just forgotten them there.

They’d accumulated over the years, until I was about six, and then there simply weren’t any more ships left to abandon. Countries had stopped trying to use boats for transportation after the few hundred that Leviathan destroyed, crippling trade, while the naval military branch of countries was nothing more than a placeholder at this point, a relic of better ages. Most ships were either in dry-dock, scrapped, or museum pieces.

I had this strange sense of familiarity, of rightness, that this was how it was supposed to be.
But at the same time there was this… indignation, almost? Like I was annoyed at Leviathan for claiming the seas as his own. Not because he’d pushed humans out (that made perfect sense), but more that… he wasn’t supposed to be there?

…I felt like I was eight and some other kid had stolen my favorite swing.

I landed on the edge of the shore, staring at the hulking mess of rusting iron and steel spread out in front of me.

There were boats of every kind, tugboats, freighters, fishing boats, trawlers, and even a couple of tankers at the outer edge. It had a certain eeriness to it, the sound of the offshore wind whistling through the rusted hulls and cracks. The slapping of the waves breaking against the haphazard collection of ships.

I headed towards the area I’d gotten the steel for my suit from, eventually reaching a small cleared-out location deep in the graveyard, hidden unless you were actually looking for it.

Jumping onto the deck of the ship I’d come to think of as my favorite, I made my way into the bridge. It had the best view I’d found, facing out towards the sea. Once I got there I let my mask melt away and sat down on a destroyed seat near the windows.

The Boat Graveyard was the perfect place to make more nanomaterial: Metals, silicon dioxide, carbon, trace elements and minerals. Everything that couldn’t be used as it was could be synthesized, but having more of what was immediately needed would make things faster.

It took less than a thought to collect a golf-ball sized sphere of nanomachines in my palm, defaulting to a silvery sheen without any color or texture.

Feeling slightly playful, I bounced the ball a couple times in my hand, eyed a ship about a hundred eighty meters away, and, with a grin, lobbed the ball of nanomaterial through a hole in the glass before me.

It flew straight, and I held the nanomachines together as the ball ripped through the rusted outer hull like paper. After passing through what felt like three more walls, I relaxed their bonds and on impact with the next wall the ball went splat like a giant paintball, coating it with millions upon trillions of little tiny little machines.

I shifted the nanomachines from their inert state to active, gathering them into small specialized cells and directing the cells to start consuming the surface they were in contact with, collecting the material to build more nanomaterial.

This… was going to take a while.

Growth would be exponential, but it would take a bit of time to ramp up, which was why I’d given it such a generous seed amount to start with.

Which meant I could only make smaller stuff. For now.

For now, I told myself.

To help it along I threw three more blobs at various other ships, starting colonies there as well.

And then… all I could do was wait.

Sighing, I got up and walked out onto the deck, leaning over the rail at the bow. The salty air flowed
across my face, blowing my hair out behind me. The April breeze wasn’t quite warm, but it wasn’t cold either.

Dark clouds bloomed on the horizon, heavy with water. Intermittent flashes burst in the upper atmosphere, illuminating the inside of the towering masses momentarily.

It was probably only because of my ability to see electrical impulses and radiation that I could actually notice the lightning. The clouds moved quickly, and I estimated they’d make landfall in a little under thirty minutes.

Without any outward signal, I stepped through an already-present gap and dropped off the side of the ship.

I hit the surface of the water feet-first, and allowed myself to sink, the thirty-four feet to the bottom being covered rapidly. I landed silently, silt thrown up from my feet touching down. It settled slowly, and I started walking forward once it had.

This was probably my favorite part of not being organic anymore.

Fish darted away from me, staying out of my way as I moved through the surprisingly clear waters, following the path created by the maze of ship hulls and metal sheets around me.

For all the ships that you could see above the surface, there were two below it, especially further out.

So sad… to be abandoned like that.

I loved this, though. How calm everything was. The silence. Like the other world was just a dream, and this was all that mattered.

Like this was where I belonged.

Walking up the side of one of the many ships underneath the waters, I moved onto the deck and lay down, the surface only a couple meters away, giving me the perfect view of the oncoming squall.

Above me, the storm arrived, and lightning crashed as raindrops fell on the surface of the bay. Thunder rolled through the water, loud and strong, the only direct effect the storm had on the water I lay in.

Something in me yearned to be out there. Among the rain on the sea. Among the lightning in the clouds. To be free, feel my graviton engines running and my particle accelerators at full capacity. To have the sea at my sides and the sky in my grasp.

But for now, I had work to do.

Levering myself up off the deck, I made steps from my Klein field and climbed out of the bay, walking over the waves towards the shore even as the storm continued to rage around me.

Time to find some criminals to catch.

Chapter End Notes

Taylor OP pls nerf.
Monday, April 11, 2011

Unfortunately, it seemed that simply wanting to find stuff does not translate to actually finding anything. Which was weird, considering I was in the Docks and stuff was usually pretty sketchy.

It was sobering to realize that I'd gotten pretty damn lucky last night, finding Lung and then being able to fight him.

Which… probably contributed to the total lack of activity that I was seeing. The ABB was probably pretty rattled, and without the backing of Lung, were trying to keep a low profile.

As I left the Graveyard, I’d taken a moment to alter my body –and my armor to match, slightly improving it at the same time– after realizing I’d neglected to do so in the alley after school. And… okay. Yeah. I’ll admit it. I made myself really, really attractive. Way prettier than Emma, even. Gorgeous. …Not that anyone would get to see it under the armor. But you know what? Fuck it. My body was a mass of nanomachines and I’d do what I fucking wanted with them, thank you very much. I had the ability to look as beautiful as I wanted, and there was absolutely nothing wrong with taking advantage of that, dammit.

Try and tell me you wouldn’t do the same thing in my position. Because we both know that’s a lie.

Anyways. Roof-traveling was pretty fun, being able to jump from three-story buildings to five-story apartments with no effort. I’d played a little bit with my durability and strength before. Mostly just testing, because I couldn’t do anything surreptitiously in the city before my costume was done, but I’d been able to lift a few tons in the Boat Graveyard without anybody seeming to notice.

My testing on that had been limited more by how unwieldy it had gotten than weight of the things I lifted. And of course, I now knew that I could exert pressures in excess of 250 tons –which I’d ballpark calculated today from some numbers I’d looked up after having punched a goddamn fucking hole through Lung’s chest– from how I’d ripped out bulkheads and sheared and bent the steel to make my original armor.

So, uh, yeah. I was pretty damn strong.

I found myself idly wondering if there was anybody stronger than me in Brockton right now. If anybody, it’d probably be Glory Girl. How much could she lift?

[Accessing…]

–Fucking hell!

I still wasn’t used to that. Right. Access to the entire internet in my head without any effort at all, triggered just by wanting to know something. At least right now, my mask covered my entire face, so my eyes didn’t look like tinkertech. …Though the lens-covered eye-holes in my mask were probably glowing white or something.

Anyways. Glory Girl could lift at least 1 ton and said that she could lift a tanker truck –30-ish tons– if she really wanted to, according to both PHO and the wiki.
Cool. So I might just be the strongest person in the bay.

I felt myself grinning. Yeah, okay, that was pretty damn awesome. It meant I had to be seriously careful about my strength, though. And I was, usually.

I’d just panicked and gone full-out last night with Lung. Totally understandable. Totally.

(No but really, Lung was scary as fuck.)

That made me think, though. My body was solid nanomaterial. A block of silver nanomachines that only emulated human skin and other organs on the surface (heat, color, squishiness, etc.). What would happen if I specialized certain nanomaterial to a particular function, or actually constructed real parts in my body? Nanomaterial was sort of a “jack of all trades, master of some but not all” thing. It could be anything, build anything, and did a decent job at it, too, but it wasn’t the same as something that was dedicated to the task.

But what if I had a dedicated muscular system that was literally made only for being that? Or I layered myself in some sort of material that had stronger molecular bonds than my nanomaterial could form between each nanomachine for durability?

Could I be stronger? Faster? Less… vulnerable? I mean, sure, my Wave-Force Armor was freaking impressive, but it had a limit, one that I felt I could increase with work, but there would always be a limit. And my body… it could hold up against… what was it called? Small-arms fire? Yeah. But I doubted that it would hold up against anything much better than that.

And considering the fact that it was only a matter of when, not if I encountered tinkertech weapons, I needed to be prepared. Lasers I should be able to handle with my Armor. Radiation, too, though I think I was naturally immune to that. Gravity… up to a certain point, like lasers. Anything else I’d have to figure out as I went, and I didn’t like that. I liked being prepared. It was what had saved my skin against Sophia, Madison, and Emma more than once.

Being prepared meant you could react immediately instead of needing to regroup in order to retaliate. It meant the difference between being at a disadvantage and being able to press forward.

It was one of the things Armsmaster was famous for, and why he could adapt to any situation and come out ahead.

So the more I learned about what I could do, the more I learned about how to use everything at my disposal to become the best I could be, the safer and more effective I could be achieving my objectives, whatever they were.

There would be trade-offs, as with any changes, but if I could mitigate them as much as possible, they would become less of a problem holding me back. The biggest downside I could think about to making a more static body was losing my ability to disguise myself as well. Oh, I could probably still imitate any humans, but I wouldn’t be able to become anything like I could now.

…It would protect my Core better, though.

Yeah. That decided it. Anything that could protect my Core better was high priority. It was part of why I had originally made my armor so ridiculously overkill. Granted, I hadn’t known for sure if I actually had a Core, just the words of that silver-haired girl, but better safe than sorry. …Especially when you were told that it contained you now. Apparently less squishy than a human brain, but still a vulnerable point.

Now, though, I knew she’d been telling the truth. And… that kind of made everything more real. I’d
believed her, for some value of “believed”, because why would she want to lie to me? But despite both my rationality and the whispers even further at the back of mind that said it wasn’t, I’d still kind of held onto the ridiculous and ever-decreasing chance –however extremely small it was– that it had just been a hallucination, that I was a normal parahuman, and I wasn’t just a computer program.

Nope. It was well and truly confirmed.


…Wait. What the fu–

“Hey!”

I jumped. Not across another gap between buildings, but ten feet straight up into the air. Literally.

Good god, if I’d still had a heart it would’ve been going at jackrabbit speeds.

I turned around. A short girl, twelve or thirteen if I had to guess, stood at the opposite edge of the building, dressed in a skirt with white and green lines traveling over it in waves and a green top that had some kind of armor plating integrated in it. A green visor covered her eyes.

To her left, on what appeared to be an oversized skateboard with a red glow under it –antigravity of some sort–, stood a boy with a red visor-slash-helmet and full body armor.

Vista and Kid Win. Local Wards. Vista had been on the team since… 2008. Kid Win since the end of 2009, according to his wiki page.

How the hell had I managed to not notice them? I had nigh-perfect hearing and sight.

Except… my attention was limited. Damn. Note to self: No zoning out in the middle of running around.

“Sorry. We didn’t mean to startle you,” Kid Win said. “Just wanted to talk to you. You’re Relentless, right? The one who got Lung last night?”

I nodded.

He smiled slightly and crossed the gap, Vista at his side, and held out his hand. “Really nice job on that. I’m Kid Win.”

I shook it, and Vista did the same. “Vista,” she provided shortly.

Huh. She was… different than what I expected.

“Relentless. But… you already knew that,” I said, trying to project a sense of confidence when I really didn’t have any at all.

He nodded. “Right.” And then he turned his head towards Vista, looking at her, and then back to me. “We weren’t really expecting to see you out. We were on a standard patrol route and didn’t recognize you at first. Armsmaster told us what your armor looked like, but from far away it’s more difficult to tell who’s who so we came over to check.

“With that said, we were maybe wondering if you’d be interested in patrolling with us?” he asked.

My first impulse was to reject them right out. But I squashed that and actually thought about it. They could be trying to make up for Armsmaster’s shitty first impression last night. Or they were honestly
just interested in the new cape. It was tempting. They both had over two years of experience with this sort of thing, whereas I... had a grand total of one night.

I weighed the consequences.

Pros: Experience. The more I could learn, faster, the better. I'd gotten lucky with Lung the night before, and I knew it. So anything that would improve my abilities was important, and there wasn’t any better way to do that than interacting with people who knew what they were doing. An eidetic memory seriously helped with that.

Cons: ...I'd have to interact with people from the very group I didn’t want to be part of.

But, this could be a nice balance of what I wanted: not too much interaction, drama, or the risk of someone finding out what I was, but still learning and making good with the local heroes.

So I nodded. “...Alright.”

He smiled slightly. “Great. We’re going to be going through the Docks, looping around the north end of downtown, and then heading back to the PRT building.”

Vista walked forward, past me, and I turned around to see what she was doing. The space between the building we were on and the next just ...disappeared, like someone had just pinched them together.

Holy shit.

Now I got why she was considered such a high-power Shaker.

Kid Win drifted forward after her on his hoverboard, and I followed, significantly slower than I’d been going before. I kind of wanted a chance to look his board, see how it worked and if it was anything like my graviton drives or how I could manipulate strings. I doubted he’d let me though, and that might get me labeled as a Tinker, which I didn’t want. Just Brute and Shaker, please.

“You’re a Brute, right?” Vista asked, speaking up for the first time and echoing my thoughts. “That’s what Armsmaster said.”

I frowned slightly behind my mask. Were they fishing for information?

“It’s better to know now in case we run into anything than if in the middle of a fight,” she added. “So that we can prioritize and organize things better.”

Should I just tell them? That was a pretty good reason, and my strength wasn’t a secret after Lung. The only thing they wouldn’t know about was my forcefield, and that was a pretty big tactical advantage in a fight. It would seriously affect how Vista and Kid Win could act or whether they would consider me a vulnerability.

Eh, it’d come out eventually anyways. Better to just be upfront about it and have some control over the information they got.

“Um, actually Brute-slash-Shaker,” I said.

Kid Win looked over at me as Vista compressed another gap between rooftops, this time including the two-story difference. Jesus.

“Shaker?”
“Yeah. I’ve… got a force-field I can put around me,” I told them. “Here.”

I manifested my Armor at the edge of its range, about twenty feet away, surrounding us in a dome of white hexagons. After a couple of seconds I dismissed the panels and formed another one above my outstretched hand.

Vista suddenly reached over and prodded it, running her hand over the smooth surface and then pushing against it.

“So you’re a tank, then,” she stated.

Absently pulling the definition of the term from the internet, I thought about it. I could take and deal out a lot of damage, but I also had good maneuverability. “Yeah, pretty much. I can still move around, though.”

Kid Win quirked a smile again. “We saw. You were going fairly fast there for a while, and then you slowed down and we were able to catch up.”

Ah. Right.

“It must be pretty nice, though. Not many Brutes are able to do things like that. Usually it’s something like extreme durability, or super-strength, but not enough that they can jump or move really fast,” Kid Win commented.

It was nice, to be fair. It was… freeing. Knowing that it was highly unlikely anything would ever be able to seriously hurt me, and if it did I could probably get away. I couldn’t feel pain anyways. Pain was a symptom of your body telling you something was wrong, potentially dangerous. Pain, for humans at least, was important.

Me? I didn’t have anything like that. I was nanomaterial, plain and simple. If something cut me, I could just fix it. Or not, for that matter, since surface wounds wouldn’t likely impact me in any way.

Though… if I did build myself more specialized parts, it might be good to have something similar to pain, if more… advanced and specific, just so I’d know instinctively when something was wrong and what it was.

I heard the sounds of a commotion and turned my head to the left to focus on it. “Something’s happening.”

Kid Win gave me an appraising look before turning to face the same direction. “Console, we have a possible altercation in progress south our location, permission to investigate?”

…Yeah, I definitely wouldn’t like having to do that constantly. It felt wrong to think about being under someone else’s leadership.

He must have gotten a positive response, because he nodded at me, and Vista bridged the gap over the street. We moved faster –Vista running to keep up with Kid Win and I– closing in on the sounds I could hear.

We stopped at the edge of the closest building, looking down on the street. There were people moving between a building and a panel van, carrying stuff out. Some of them had black objects sticking out of their waistbands which I identified as pistols. And then one guy was directing them, a black guy with a sub-machine gun who was yelling at the others to “move it”.

Vista looked over the scene, and then huffed, appearing frustrated.
“Console, we have what looks to be a Merchant drug transfer and a possible lab. At least seven civilians, likely more. Small arms, though one of them has a sub-machine gun. Orders?” Kid Win spoke once more. “No, no parahumans,” and then “…Understood.”

He turned to me. “We’re moving on.”

“What.” My voice was flat with disbelief. They wanted to just leave this? What the fuck?

Kid Win sighed. “Look, we aren’t prepared to deal with that many people, and especially not that many armed with weapons. Vista and I may know what we’re doing, but one stray bullet and we’re dead. Part of being good at this is knowing where your limits are. Console will inform the police, and the police will handle it, okay? It’s what they do. If there were capes here, it might be a different story. But we’d still wait for backup and the PRT before engaging. But as it is, with just civilians, well, it’s just not worth the risk.”

I… heard what he was saying. But making the connection between the words and the meaning was hard. They were saying they weren’t going to fight something like this. And that didn’t make any sense to me.

I got that the police would be able to fight them. But they wouldn’t be able to nearly as efficiently or effectively as I could. Looking at the situation, I didn’t want to just leave it. This is what I had been searching for, something where I could make a difference.

“I… I’m sorry, I can’t accept that,” I said, facing Kid Win. Vista’s eyes held a measuring look in them as she listened to me. “You guys can go, but I’m going to deal with this.” I took a few steps sideways, towards the building’s edge, and turned back one last time. “…It was nice meeting you.”

And then I stepped off the side of the building. I vaguely heard Kid Win calling out my name behind me, but didn’t pay attention. They weren’t important anymore in this situation, having elected to be non-combatants.

I landed, not on the sidewalk like I had last night, but on a panel of my Armor. With little effort, I tilted the panel forty degrees and pushed off of it, easily clearing the distance between the two sidewalks and landing in front of the men.

The men around me started reacting, the lead one predictably yelling “Cape!” He raised the gun in his hand and pointed it at me. “Shoot!”

His finger closed around the trigger, and even before the first spray of bullets emerged I had my Armor in place. Gunfire surrounded me, and I just stood there, my Armor around me, waiting until they all ran out.

Which they did.

The sub-machine guy’s gun clicked empty first, and then around me the pistols started doing the same. I waited a second or two for the smoke to clear, letting them see the way their bullets hung in the air, stuck where they’d impacted my Armor.

I allowed the bullets to drop with little metal clinks, and grinned behind my mask. “My turn.”

[Klein field status: 4% of current total capacity]

I released the acquired kinetic energy outwards in all directions as a concussive wave, and the men were thrown backwards, landing roughly on the pavement a few feet from where they’d been standing.
Most of them were dazed just from that action, but a few others weren’t, and made to get up and run.

Nope. Not today.

I quickly moved to meet them and knocked them out, binding their hands and ankles with thin strips of nanomaterial that I made to look like plastic zip-ties which I’d simply pulled from a pocket underneath one of my armor plates, when in reality I’d created them right there.

I moved onto the downed guys and did the same for them.

Brushing off my hands, I looked at the building. There were probably a few—

“What the fuck’s going o– SHIT!!”

Yep. Still some guys in there.

They man who’d been coming out of the door and seen me dropped what he had in his hands and rushed back inside, and I followed.

The building was an old apartment building, a simple three-story deal with a few broken windows and parts that showed signs of neglect. The inside was similar, the plaster walls cracked and aging, dirt on the floor, and some unidentifiable substance splattered on the ceiling.

I followed the sounds the man made as he ran upstairs, and pursued him, taking stairs two at a time.

“Jake! There’s a fuckin’ cape!” he yelled. He was on the second floor, a couple rooms down, and I could smell a number of chemicals in the air, probably by-products of whatever they were cooking in the place.

There was another sound, this time the tinkling of glass breaking, and I made my way to the door it had come from, trying to open it.

Locked.

…Not exactly a problem for me.

I pushed the door open, ripping the deadbolt and latch through the wooden jamb, the flimsy metal chain popping apart from the force I used.

“Fuck!”

Entering the room, I looked around. Lots of glass containers, a few burners. Probably a meth lab then. Or at least some sort of amphetamine.

There were four people in the room, two who looked like they’d been packaging stuff up, probably for the guys who had been taking it to the car, the guy I’d seen who’d run back up here, and finally one over by the counter on the right with all the lab equipment.

All of the first three had dust masks on. Well, I guess when it came to drugs the Merchants were at least semi-intelligent instead of just plain idiots.

Two of them had guns pointed at me. I picked the one on my left to deal with first. His eyes widened and the gun in his hands jumped as he fired a few times before I reached him, but my Armor had already taken care of the bullets. Instead of being dramatic, I just let them fall to the floor this time.

I grabbed the gun out of his hand when I reached him, and then squeezed.
The gun crumpled and folded, and the guy in front of me whimpered, raising his hands. The others around the room did the same, even the other guy with the gun, which he just dropped to the floor.

They all jumped when it went off on impact, the bullet lodging itself in the wall.

Fucking stupid Merchants.

I did the same thing for them that I had for the ones outside, nanomaterial bindings on wrists and ankles. They wouldn’t be a problem anymore.

I eyed the lab setup, and ultimately just went over and turned off the two burners that were on.

I’d call this a success.

Satisfied with my work, I made my way out of the building.

Vista and Kid Win were nowhere to be found.

…Well, shit.

They’d probably had to go on without me and continue their patrol. I’d imagine they had a schedule, and whoever was directing them had told them they weren’t allowed to do anything.

Plus, I had to consider it from their side: I was a new independent, not part of their team, and had shown that it was highly unlikely I could get hurt by anything these guys could do. I wasn’t their responsibility, and it wasn’t their job to get me out of anything I got myself into.

That didn’t mean I wasn’t slightly annoyed by it.

I waited the two minutes until I heard police sirens getting closer, and then jumped up onto a roof and left.

Honestly, the fight had been underwhelming. It didn’t even come close to pushing me the way Lung had. It was just some druggie Merchants with guns, not even really a threat to me.

I… I wanted something more. Something that was meaningful. I was Relentless of the Fog, and I wasn’t meant for such small things.

I idly checked the nanomaterial in the Graveyard that had been at the back of my mind and was pleased that in the time since I’d left it had almost managed to double itself, eating through the metal surfaces it had spread out on as it replaced the material that was there. Another hour and it should have accomplished that. Another five hours, and it would have doubled again. And again. And again. Rinse. Repeat.

Exponential growth. Ain’t it just magical?

Instead of getting lost in my thoughts and getting surprised again, I paid attention to my surroundings, not wanting something like what had happened with Vista and Kid Win to happen again with less friendly parahumans.

I made it home by seven –having absorbed my armor in another alley–, beating dad since his car wasn’t even in the driveway. Frowning slightly as I made my way inside, I went to the kitchen and got the leftover lasagna we’d frozen a week ago out and started to preheat the oven.

My view on food was… different now, and not just my sense of taste. I didn’t need to eat, that and
definitely changed how I viewed it in general. However, this morning’s meal had confirmed my suspicions: my body simply made more nanomaterial out of whatever I consumed, replacing others that had denatured or malfunctioned in some way and were effectively irrecoverable. Constructing new nanomachines was easier than repairing old ones, and the broken ones were simply broken down and re-used or discarded.

Let’s be real, the human body does the exact same thing. You shed about forty thousand skin cells every hour. That’s a almost thousand times more than the amount I lose in the same period of time. Everything that wasn’t used in production got discarded too. So… uh, yeah. I ate stuff, literally atomized it, and whatever I didn’t need was released and just floated away.

Cool, huh?

Most of it was carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen anyways. I used a good chunk of the carbon –about two thirds of it–, but I was more after the weirder stuff. Iron and nickel were pretty common. Manganese, chromium, molybdenum, selenium, and tungsten were rarer. Mercury would have been super handy, since I needed to synthesize that when it was needed –as I did a bunch of other things, too–, but people tend to freak out when there’s mercury in food. Which is understandable, since it’s really poisonous to humans. I could have used it, though.

But Taylor, you’re saying, how are you made of all these heavy elements yet still weighing what a human does?

Because each nanomachine actually counters its own weight by lessening the effect gravitons have on it, despite still having the same mass. This lessening is controllable to some degree, and basically means that no matter what mass I am, I only weigh as much –or little– as I want, within certain limits. I couldn’t use it to fly or be weightless, for one. Nanomaterial itself can’t completely counter gravity. So with the number of nanomachines in my body as it was, I’d always weigh something, even if it was comparatively little.

The oven beeped to let me know it was done preheating, so I opened it and put the lasagna in, setting the timer for an hour and fifteen minutes.

And then… I confronted the bane of every student. Homework. A perfect memory does not make it any less tedious, let me tell you. I finished a few worksheets, did my Trig in five minutes, all of which was spent writing out the steps since I solved the problems as soon as I saw them, and then finally finished with working on an English essay. Another fun factoid about being a computer: English essays and literary analyses do not get easier just because you can crunch numbers really fast.

Trust me, I know.

I heard Dad’s car coming down the street all the way from the stoplight, and started setting the table for dinner after clearing my work off of it.

The lasagna wasn’t quite done yet, but it was close, so I took the foil off the top to let it finish. Leftover green beans were in the fridge, so I got them out and put them in the microwave, setting them to cook.

The car pulled into the driveway and shut off, the door opening and then closing with a muted ‘thud’. The loose board in the front steps groaned, and then the door opened seconds later.

Shoes came off in the mudroom. Car keys got tossed into the small bowl on the side-table in the hall.
“Hey Taylor. That smells pretty good,” my dad said, coming around the corner into the kitchen.
“Thanks for doing dinner.”

I smiled at him. “Of course, Dad.”

Ever since the locker, my relationship with my father had improved. I don’t know if it was because I was making more of an effort or he was, or even both of us, but the results were the same.

Seeing each other every morning at breakfast time now that I was never tired and could wake up whenever had contributed in large part to it, I suspected.

He wandered over to the fridge and got a beer out while I opened the oven again and checked the lasagna. It looked done… And by looked, I mean both normal human visually and infrared-heat visually.

Heh. Using infrared vision to help cook lasagna. Just a day in the life of Taylor Hebert, people.

I put the oven mitts that were on the counter on and pulled the Pyrex dish out of the oven, placing it on the stove, and then used a metal spatula from a drawer to start cutting sections. Once that was done

Dad picked both plates up from the table and placed a square of lasagna on each one while I got the green bean out of the microwave and brought them over, letting Dad serve himself as I waited and then did the same.

The plates went on the table, my dad sitting down and starting to eat as I got myself a glass of water and joined him.

“So how was school?”

I grimaced internally, not wanting to get into the clusterfuck that was my situation with Emma right now.

“It was okay. Math and chem are boring, I think I’ve worked too far ahead.” And have an innate understanding of everything from n-dimensional manifolds to analytic combinatorics and complex variable function theory.

“Gladly’s class was… the usual,” I finished.

Dad made a sound of understanding.

“I was researching some interesting stuff, though. Not for a project or anything, just on my own.”

“Oh?”

“Mmhm. Old World War Two ships and newer planes and stuff,” I told him.

“Well, I don’t know about newer planes, but Brockton actually had one of the shipyards they used in the War, you know?”

I looked at him in interest. I hadn’t seen anything about that, but then again I’d been using the slow, cumbersome school computer.

“Really?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Destroyers and subs came out of here. It’s why the Bay had such a nice channel,
even before tankers and cargo ships started using it.

“If my father were still around, he’d be able to talk your ear off for hours about this stuff. It’s what he was interested in. Knew just about everything about every ship that came out of here,” Dad said, smiling. “He loved it. Even had some models.”

I grinned. “Wow.”

It was rare I heard anything about my dad’s parents. They’d died before I was born, so I didn’t even get to know them.

“Actually, we might even have them somewhere in the attic, packed away if you’re really that interested. Can’t think of anything else that would’ve happened to them. If you want, we can go look after dinner.”

“Really?”

“Sure. If anything, he’d be glad that someone was getting something out of them. They’re not doing anybody any good just collecting dust up there,” he said, wiping his mouth with his napkin.

I nodded, slightly excited by it actually. World War Two submarines were pretty small, not even nearing the giant size of modern nuclear subs.

Dad and I finished dinner, clearing the table and putting the dirty dishes in the dishwasher while the lasagna we hadn’t eaten went in the fridge for the next day or the day after.

Once the kitchen was clean, my dad looked over at me. “Well, come on. Let’s go searching.”

He headed upstairs, and I followed as he pulled down the stairs to the attic and tramped up them. At the top he pulled on the metal pull-cord that turned on the single bare bulb in the room, and looked around.

“I think it’s over in the corner,” he muttered to himself, before walking in that direction and dragging a box out. Dad opened the flaps, peeking inside and then folding it back up. “Yeah, here we go.”

He picked it up and I moved to the side to let him go around me. I clicked the light off as we went back down the stairs, and followed him down the hall to my room, pushing the door open and then setting the box on the floor a few feet from my bed.

Dad knelt down and opened the box again as I went to my bed and sat down, and began pulling things out of it. A couple folders went to the side, and then he reached in with both hands and pulled out something long and cylindrical in cloth that he unwrapped and then held out to me.

A model sub. I took it, looking it over.

Dark plastic, with little holes running along the sides at the front, and lines strung between posts on the deck. A white ‘257’ was painted above the foremost holes, and on the conning tower.

USS Harder, SS-257.

I had information about this sub. I don’t know how, but I did. Statistics, point of origin, commissioning date…

Dad held out another object to me and I placed the submarine to the side on my bed, taking the next model from his hand.
A destroyer.

A destroyer with ‘468’ painted on it.

**USS Taylor, DD-468.**

The data I had conflicted. It said she was built in Bath, but if Grandpa had a model of her, it had to mean she was built here, in Brockton.

“Taylor?” My dad was looking at me. “What’re you thinking?”

I shook my head. “Sorry. Sorry. Nothing.” I laughed. “It’s just… funny. This is a model of the USS Taylor. Spelled like my name. Two thousand tons, sixty thousand horsepower with a range of sixty-five hundred nautical miles and three-hundred thirty six crew members.”

Dad looked surprised, and then he laughed. “You sound just like him, now, you know.” He shook his head. “I bet he would’ve loved to talk to you about this stuff.”

He put his hands on his knees and then pushed himself upright, standing. “Well, there’s a few more in there, and some other things too. I’ll leave you to it. If you’d like we could probably make a couple shelves and set them up in here.”

I grinned. “I’d really like that.”

Putting the *Taylor* to my side next to the *Harder*, I stood up and walked forward, wrapping my arms around my dad in a hug. “Thanks, dad.”

I could hear the smile in his voice as he responded, patting my head. “’Course, Taylor.”

I don’t know how Dad had missed it, but there wasn’t just another destroyer or two, there was another destroyer, another Gato-class sub, the light cruiser *Nashville*, and to my extreme surprise, a model of the USS *Wisconsin*.

Brockton must not have just been a shipyard, but one of the major ones. A quick check of the internet confirmed my suspicions. The company running it had lost contracts in the seventies from steadily worsening late deliveries, however, and ended up folding soon after.

There were pages of documents and photos, even some blueprints. Handwritten notes in margins that I assume was from my grandfather and his experiences seeing and even being on a few of the ships.

I poured through it all, consuming it.

It didn’t last long.

I wrapped all of the models up and put them back, for when Dad and I would get to put some shelves in my room, probably this weekend.

And then… I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

It may have looked like I was doing nothing, but I was running through physics simulations, tests, doing research online and modeling different configurations of my first project.

The biggest issue was power. For all the knowledge I had, it felt like I was missing something, something that would be able to provide gravitons directly to the engines and thus the thrusters. Instead… I was going to have to do some hacks.
To generate enough power to continually produce the gravitons that would be required for the thrusters (and also providing electricity), I was going to have to use antimatter. Specifically, an antimatter/matter reactor.

Not nearly as efficient as I would have liked, especially since it would irradiate its surroundings and need regular replacement, but it would work.

Meanwhile, the nanomaterial over in the Graveyard was proceeding along nicely, having replaced the entire surface of whatever floor/wall/whatever they were on by one o’clock. The nanomaterial that had been used on my Merchant victims as zip-ties, however, had been cut off and tossed in a trashbag, and it seemed like they were currently being put in a dumpster.

Hm.

I waited a minute or two, and then gathered the nanomaterial into a vaguely spider-shaped thing. Eating through the plastic bag was easy. Climbing out of the dumpster was a bit trickier, but I solved it by squeezing my nanomaterial through the gap at the edge of the flap and then re-forming the spider-thing outside.

It took a good hour and a half of rather impressive jumping and running on my part to bring the nanomaterial back to me, but I used the idle time to continue my simulated experiments.

Eventually though, it reached my windowsill, where I squeezed it through the crack and had it jump and land on my chest.

…Wherein it promptly melted into my body.

Ah, to be a fluid mass of nanomachines.

Satisfied that all was now right, I set my internal wake-up time and made sure that my nanomaterial would continue replicating while I was out before finally falling into the blank dark nothingness I called sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of setup and building towards the coming week.

Chris is very much a people-person, shown in his scene of recruiting Chariot. He picks up social cues, notices details, draws connections, and can steer conversations around. However, he also has a tendency to self-denigrate himself and focus on his flaws and failures. In a fight, he’s a very good shot with his blaster.

There isn’t a very good characterization of Vista prior to Leviathan and Gallant and Aegis’ deaths. All we see is that she’s a competent fighter, and trusts her teammates to have her back. She has a bunch of scars and is proud of them, having sewn up a particularly large one on her chest by herself when she was only eleven. She’s got a bit of an inferiority complex, tending to over-compensate or get annoyed when people bring up her size, age, or lack of physical maturity, and especially if they think she’s unskilled or incompetent. In general, though, Missy is a fucking badass.
Colin Wallis

He stared at the interior of his weapon, surrounded by screens and data readouts.

Kid Win and Vista had spoken of Relentless with a certain amount of respect after meeting her, and seemed suitably impressed with her abilities.

Colin had to admit, anyone who could choke Lung unconscious was not to be messed around with.

It still grated on him, though. Their first meeting stayed on his mind, reviewed over and over again to try to understand what went wrong. She'd all but spat in his face, and he hadn't seen it coming, not with all his practice and social software at his side.

The personality didn't fit the profile. Relentless had seemed like she wasn't in any hurry to step into the limelight, like she was looking for results over recognition. Besides, most Brutes didn't come to their first fight with plate steel armor. That spoke of patience, of caution. He would have assumed she wouldn't want to take the risk, that she'd be willing to either lay low or throw her lot in with the Protectorate.

And then out of nowhere... pride. Defiance. Suddenly, she talked like she wanted to make a name for herself. No, he mused, she didn't want to give up her achievement. It meant something to her. Meant more than tangling with Oni Lee and Bakuda.

To be fair, beating Lung was not a small feat. Maybe she was just that confident in her abilities. She'd revealed more during this second appearance of hers: energy-absorbing (and, interestingly, energy-releasing) forcefields to go along with her Brute abilities, plus some form of enhanced senses. Relentless was not a foe to be taken lightly, by any means, and there was always the possibility she had more up her sleeve, more creative uses for what she had or support hidden in the shadows. For instance, the odd readings and unusual durability Kid Win had noted in her costume suggested she'd commissioned Tinkertech, rather than 'mere' plate steel as he'd previously thought.

But, still. It grated on him.

And maybe it was because she demanded the credit. Maybe he wanted it for himself. But... no, that wasn't a good reason. There was a better reason.

It grated because he was fairly certain that he could have recruited her, if he'd handled it better. If he'd recognized how poorly she reacted to having her abilities underplayed, to the idea of hiding her accomplishments. Yes, he couldn't have seen it coming, but that was no excuse - his social simulations agreed. Even with the unexpected personality she displayed, he could have recovered that conversation. He could have moved away from the topic of recognition, and instead focused on the benefits of joining the Protectorate, rather than the danger of being in the line of sight of the ABB. Results over risk.
Instead, he'd driven her off, stabbed right at that hidden pride. Misjudged her and said just the wrong thing. It happened far too often for his liking. Worse, he could understand what she was thinking.

Armsmaster rarely let someone else take credit for his work, after all. Not unless he got something out of it that was worth more.

Publicly acknowledging her achievement probably helped, but at that point the damage had already been done. Maybe Hannah could talk to her. He could handle reporters and the media, look good on camera, but she'd always been better at personal conversation. People were just too unpredictable, parahumans especially, and no amount of practice and modeling would tell you where a new cape's social minefields were, what topics would set them instantly on edge.

Even he had his issues, but he did his best to be more than them. To be better than them.

As he made adjustments to his Halberd, surrounded by what little data Chris had collected on Relentless's recently revealed forcefields, Armsmaster recognized that on this issue, he had to be better.

There was no such thing as 'good enough' when you were a hero.

He had to do better.
Waking up the next morning, I noticed I had made a rather significant error in overestimating the speed of my nanomaterial’s replication in the Ship Graveyard.

Unlike the first batch of six pounds, which had easily doubled within five hours, replacing the surface they had been on, I’d made the mistake in automatically assuming my nanomaterial was replicating at the theoretical optimal rate. Instead it only replicated on the edges, wherever it was in contact with non-nanomaterial. So, for example, if it replaced a door and then kept replicating, it could only do so at the edges of the door going outwards.

There were two solutions. The first: do nothing. Keep things the way they were. Nanomaterial production would be much slower, but it would keep with my original plan of replacing the ships as they were so that nobody would notice any changes. The second: go balls-to-the-walls, dispersing my nanomaterial as much as possible so they could chew through and utilize every surface on the interior of the ships as much as possible, essentially an ever-expanding thin film dissolving the inside of the ship and leaving only the shell of the hull behind.

The determining factor was that the boats I was converting were primarily underwater, if just barely. I could move the nanomaterial I’d created to ships further under the water-line, which would greatly lower the chance of what I was doing being noticed.

Honestly, I really wanted more nanomaterial. My first project was going to need around fifty tons of the stuff, which was small compared to what I was beginning to contemplate, but everybody has to start somewhere right?

And if I did go with the dispersal method, it would only take fifty-six hours to get to that amount, compared to the likely hundreds if not thousands it would take doing what I was right now.

It might have been a bit arrogant, but I also felt like the Graveyard was mine. It was part of my domain, and all that was there was as well. Yet… that was tempered by the knowledge that if I acted too conspicuously, it would draw a great deal of attention that I didn’t necessarily want.

Still, I decided to take the more aggressive route, consuming the interiors of ships so that at least their sonar and thermal profiles would remain the same to anybody who was watching.

Collecting my nanomaterial into vaguely fish-shaped things, I swam out of the holes I’d made when throwing the original seed nanomaterial through the hulls at supersonic speeds. Instead of keeping the two colonies separate, however, I brought it all together. It took some moments of confusion, and for a short while I could scarcely tell which parts were inside and which were out, but shortly a much larger faux-fish swam deeper into the ocean.
My goal was a number of the ships further out, one with a big hole in the side that I could see, or rather feel, through the strange senses I’d had since Monday night. There wasn’t quite any way I could describe it, other than I could just sort of… feel beyond my body, sense all the metal surrounding me and the various objects on the ocean floor, and tell the different temperatures of all the currents I swam through.

Then I continued onwards, a little slower.

Reaching my targets, my vision and senses fuzzed into nothingness as I scattered my fish-self all over the inside of the ships. Bringing my focus back my humanoid body, I blinked and shivered as if waking from a deep sleep. I hadn’t been asleep, of course, but in contrast, it had been similar to an extremely lucid dream.

Now that that was done…

_Fifty-six hours_, I told myself. Nearly two and a half days. But I was patient. I could wait. I had all the time in the world, after all. I was effectively immortal, being what I was. Which… was an extremely sobering thought, and a can of worms I definitely didn’t want to get into right after waking up.

No existential crises before breakfast, please.

On that note, I got out of bed and trudged to the bathroom to take a shower.

Like many things I was doing, it wasn’t necessary. I was never unclean, anything unwanted simply failing to attach to me. But… it was the small things that made me feel more normal. They kept me sane through routine, providing structure. Plus, Dad would start questioning things if I just stopped. I could get away with not eating lunch at school, but that was about it.

It wasn’t like anybody cared about that, anyways.

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School… Fuck. School that day.

Ugh. What a mess.

It started off normal enough, for the first couple of periods at least, which I only shared with Madison. In a repeat of yesterday, she didn’t try anything. Just left me alone, sitting there. It felt really, really weird. Off. For a year and a half they’d gone after me practically everyday, and now they just… stopped?

It seemed too good to be true.

And God, do I wish I hadn’t been right.

Third period was Math. The teacher ran over the bell for class before us, and so the ten-minute gap between classes was spent waiting outside in the hallway, me in particular standing at the back of the group of students milling around outside the door.

Oh, and I shared Math with Emma.

Do you see where this is going?

Let me make it easier for you and explain something about Emma. Emma gets easily flustered. She always has. She has trouble reacting to situations immediately. So she works things over, lets them simmer, plots and plans for later.
And now? Now was no different.

I should have expected it, to be honest. I should have known she wouldn’t take what had happened the day before lying down. She had to have the last word.

The moment I saw her walking towards me, with at least one other girl next to her, I knew something was wrong. Her entire body language radiated cold anger, a desire to fight back.

“Oh look, if it isn’t Taylor,” Emma said, her voice scathing. If looks could kill… Well, I’d probably just absorb it with my Armor. But she definitely looked like she’d like nothing more than to burn me with just her eyesight, the way she was staring at me.

(Emotion emulation processes reduced to 76%)

I sighed. This was so stupid.

It looked like what had happened yesterday hadn’t changed anything between us. Still, it also seemed like she was getting defensive, lashing out because I was getting too close to the mark, and she was afraid I’d find out whatever she was hiding.

Instead of saying anything, I just stared at her, waiting for her to get on with whatever it was she planned.

She began speaking with a sickly-sweet tone. “You know, I’ve been hearing some rumors about what’s been happening with you lately—”

Yeah, okay no. Fuck that.

I turned off my hearing and stopped paying attention to her, instead continuing some of the simulations I’d been working on the night before.

Packing problems. Specifically stuff like wire routing, optimal weapon placement, propulsion requirements, and arbitrary auxiliary systems while considering weight distribution and control. I had a design footprint, and fitting everything in was a fun non-trivial problem—even for me—, since everything I had was so fucking configurable but had to be within certain limits, especially in regards to balance.

Yes I could reconfigure everything on-the-fly, but it was more interesting this way, and gave me something to do.

A sudden sharp feeling on the left side of my face shocked me out of my thoughts.

I slowly turned to look at Emma—turning my hearing on at the same time—, who was flushed and scowling at me. Everybody else in the hall had halted their conversations, turning to look at us.

(Emotion emulation processes reduced to 64%)

I stared at her, raising my hand to my cheek even though I knew there’d be no real physical effects, just the fake blush my surface nanomachines gave me. She’d slapped me. She’d actually slapped me.

Emma smirked at me. “You’re just weak, pathetic bug, aren’t you Taylor?”

I leveled a half-lidded glare at her. “Fuck off, Emma.”

“Cat fight!” somebody down the hall yelled. I ignored them.
Her smirk dissolved into a scowl. She opened her mouth to respond, probably to say something childish and inane, but was interrupted by the previous Math class streaming out of the classroom, allowing us to go in, the teacher holding open the door.

Emma walked away, but not without giving me a withering look that told me she wasn’t done with me.

Other classes passed slowly, the trio and their group having returned to their previous tactics, spitballs in my hair, hunting me down after lunch during our break period to try and undoubtedly do something to me, etc.

I solved those problems by tearing them apart on an atomic level as soon as class was over and going to the school library, respectively. It was a shitty library, being Winslow, but it had some things of interest, engineering books and such.

It was the classes after lunch that were annoying. Not because of the continued harassment, which I ignored, but because of the looks I was getting: Madison’s almost-cute-but-it’s-Madison scowls that were mixed with confusion, like she was only keeping it up as an act. Emma’s smoldering glare that said she’d like nothing more than to retaliate, and that she was more than likely thinking up something that she thought would be able to hurt me.

And then there was Sophia.

Sophia’s apparent doubt, confusion, and intrigue from the day before had melted away, leaving only hate, loathing, and assured promises of pain.

Honestly, of the three, she was the one I was worried about the least. Practically all of what she did to me was physical. Tripping, hard shoves, shoulder-checking. It had worked when I’d been a bag of flesh and sixty percent water, but now it did absolutely nothing. There was no way in hell she could hurt me, even if she had my Union core, since it was harder than anything else I knew of.

Huh. There was a thought.

I’d resolved to create an actual physical structure for myself, substituting the fluidity and situational flexibility of being made purely of nanomaterial for possibly increasing my strength and durability, but there were things that were going to prove problematic.

For instance, if I made my skeleton out of solid tungsten, or even just tungsten carbide, I was suddenly going to weigh a lot. As in, my previously twenty-one pound human skeleton wholly replicated would weigh more like three-fifty to four-hundred forty pounds.

So I needed something lighter. I could have made do with hollowing the bones the way birds did, but I wanted something better.

…I was going to need to do more research and simulations, but maybe looking at what my Union Core was cased in would help. I wanted it as protected as it could be as soon as possible.

The school day continued, passing by while I vaguely paid attention in class, but I kept running simulations both for my project and for my potential body at the back of my mind. They were very different, one dealing with structure on a macro level, the other on an atomic level, which made each of them interesting from the contrast.

I managed to ignore and avoid Emma, Madison, and Sophia throughout the day, making my way to
each class as fast as possible, deliberately avoiding any route they took.

After school, however, it seemed that my luck had been exhausted.

It wasn’t immediately obvious, walking towards the bus stop, but I soon noticed that I was being followed. Getting caught the day before by Kid Win and Vista had definitely been a wake-up call.

Anyways. I was being followed. And since I knew it wasn’t Madison or Emma—as they got picked up by their parents—, there was only one person who it could be.

I sighed.

I didn’t want to deal with this, but I also knew that avoiding it would just make it more annoying to deal with later.

Obligingly slowing down a little as I neared a rather shaded alley, the person behind me sped up. Just as I reached the mouth of it, they pushed me sideways. I allowed the force to act as it would were I still human, even stumbling a little like my old clumsy self.

I was forced along a couple meters until we were no longer easily visible from the street. A hand grabbed my shoulder and pulled my backpack’s strap off my shoulder, spinning me around and making me drop my bag as it swung around my body before pushing me hard enough that I stumbled backwards and then fell, keeping up the charade.

My attacker pounced on the opportunity, landing on me hard enough that had I still been made of flesh and blood, the air would have been driven from my lungs. It still was, I just didn’t exactly need air and it didn’t hurt.

The one on top of me was, of course, Sophia. Who else do you think it would have been, I mean seriously?

Her hands held my arms down, and I acted as though I was struggling to get away, keeping up the charade.

“Being on the ground suits you, Hebert. Back where you belong.”

I stopped struggling, and just stared at her.

([Emotion emulation processes reduced to 81%])

“What the fuck do you want, Sophia?”

Faster than I expected, she released my left arm and punched me across the face. I moved my head sideways with the force of it so she wouldn’t break her hand, and simulated my skin turning dark red and a broken lip from the hit. The punch would have seriously dazed me were I human.

She grabbed my arm again quicker than I would’ve been able to react after the blow, holding it down again.

“That was for yesterday, and this,” she punched me again, from the opposite side, “is for being such a weak little bitch in the first place.”

I coughed. “Weak?”

“That’s all you are. A pathetic little worm. You know you’re a nerd, you’re flat chested, scrawny.” Oh, the irony. I had to keep myself from laughing at her. “Nobody likes you, nobody wants you for
a friend, you’re not good at anything.”

If I hadn’t been acting, I would’ve raised an eyebrow.

“What the fuck are you on, Hess?”

“Nothing. This is just your reminder that everyone has their place in life, Hebert, and you should stick to yours: at the bottom of the pile. This shit you’ve been pulling lately? Doesn’t do anything. You trying to to act better than you are only just embarrasses you and irritates me, get it?”

I coughed again, internally rolling my eyes.

She was completely psychotic. It seemed my feelings about her being fucked in the head had been right all along. Well, at least it felt good to have it proven.

“Nod if you understand, and maybe I’ll let you run away and go home.”

Okay. No. Fuck this shit. A week ago? I might have put up with this. But with the last few days? No. Just, no.

I brought my left leg up and kneed her harshly in the back, right in the kidney, hard enough that she’d definitely have some internal bruising.

The look on her face as she crumpled over me, eyes wide in pain, was absolutely priceless.

Before she could recover, I rolled my hips to the right, shifting her off of me enough that it would be believable that I could get out from under her. Which I did.

My left arm I got away from her hand, but when I did the same for my right I didn’t draw it towards me, instead grabbing her forearm and pulling it back as I stood up, locking it behind her.

Grabbing her left shoulder with my other hand, I pulled her to her feet and pushed her to the side of the alley, slamming into her from behind and using my weight to press her hard against the brick, not allowing her left arm to move either.

She struggled a little, again reacting and recovering faster than I had expected her to, but against me? Against Taylor, against Relentless, who could shear steel like it was tissue paper?

She wasn’t going anywhere.

“What were you saying, Hess?”

I could smell blood, and guessed that she’d cut her face or head against the brick from how hard I’d pushed against it.

“I’m weak, right? That’s what you were saying? Someone who just runs away, who doesn’t fight back? You have no idea what I’m capable of,” I hissed, leaning over so that my mouth was closer to her ear. “Or did you just forget what I told you yesterday?”

“Fuck… you,” she said weakly, but with a tinge of pure rage behind it.

I could feel her trying to exert more force, and I allowed my arms to move a little from her efforts, as if she was actually affecting me, but ultimately achieving nothing.

“I don’t think so. I have questions that I want answers to, and I’m pretty sure you’re one of the only ones who’s got them.”
Sophia spat against the brick, and then laughed.

“What happened to Emma?” I bit out, annoyed.

Her laughing only got worse, until it devolved into coughs after a few seconds.

“I swear to God, Hess. I’ll break your fucking arm if I have to.” It wasn’t an idle threat, my right hand growing a little tighter and barely twisting a bit to show her I was serious.

She coughed once more, and then stopped. “Maybe I was wrong about you.”

I scowled. “I don’t give a fuck if you were ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ about me or whatever fucked-up views you have. What happened with Emma?”

She winced as I increased the pressure just barely a bit more. “Fuck, Hebert. Who knew all you needed was a little more serious push to grow a fucking spine?”

I growled. “Emma, you bitch.”

“Emma? You want to know about Emma? Fine, I’ll tell you what happened,” she said. “One day, a girl and her daddy were out for a ride in their fancy expensive car. Except they weren’t in a very nice part of town. Too bad, because a few guys got together, and they stopped the car and pulled the girl and her daddy out, throwing them against the ground and pulling out knives.”

What?

“They cut some of her hair off. ‘Anything but the face’ she said. One of them got on top of her, and the others held her down. Nose, eyes, ears. That’s where they put the knife. But they didn’t cut her. Yet.”

If I’d still had blood, it would have frozen in my veins. This was nothing like what I’d expected. I don’t know quite what I had, but it hadn’t been this.

((Emotion emulation processes reduced to 57%))

“It looked like she’d given up, but then she started fighting back. She proved herself, that she wasn’t worthless, so someone stepped in and helped out.”

Who?

“And so the girl and her father lived to see another day. She wasn’t some weak, pathetic bug,” Sophia said, almost spitting the words out. “She was a survivor.”

Emma…

“The girl didn’t need anything weak anymore. So she got rid of it. And when her weak little loser of a friend showed up at her door, she got rid of her too.”

((Emotion emulation processes reduced to 22%))

Holy fucking shit.

I could remember that. That was the day after I’d gotten home from camp and gone over to Emma’s house, worried because I hadn’t heard from her since her phone had gone dead in the middle of our conversation.
The first time I’d met Sophia.

I’d been so confused. Emma hadn’t acted anything like I expected her to. For a moment, she’d looked like she was wavering on something, like she wanted to reach out but couldn’t.

And then I complimented her on her new haircut.

The one that she’d gotten from being fucking assaulted. I’d honestly thought it looked good, too.

But now… now I knew how that had been the complete worst thing I could have said. The reminder of what she’d gone through.

She’d immediately clammed up, her posture stiffening, eyes hardening slightly.

“Go home, Taylor. I didn’t ask you to come over.”

“This was just an excuse to cut a cord I’ve been wanting to cut for a long time.”

“Do you think it was fun? Spending time with you, this past year? I wanted to break off our friendship a long while back, even before your mom kicked the bucket, but I couldn’t find the chance. Then you got that call, and you were so down in the dumps that I thought you’d hurt yourself if I told you the truth, and I didn’t want to get saddled with that kind of guilt.”

Lies.

All lies.

I couldn’t tell at the time, but now, looking back, detached from the situation and viewing it less emotionally, I could see the lies.

Because I knew Emma, and she couldn’t hide shit from me. Hell, she practically went out of her way to tell me everything, and that’s not how someone looking to “break off a friendship a long while back” would act.

“You know, she thought you might be strong. That you’d fight back if you were pushed. But you never did. I didn’t really care at first, but you were just so fucking weak, you deserved it.”

No wonder she’d reacted so badly when I’d started bringing up what’d happened and old memories yesterday.

“Now I think she doesn’t even care,” Sophia said. “We just do it because you’re fun to fuck with.”

I pressed her harder against the brick. “That ends now.”

“If you aren’t such a spineless pussy anymore, sure,” she said, and I was almost stunned at how quickly she acquiesced. “You’ve messed up the status quo, and I can respect that.” I was honestly surprised she knew what the term even meant. “But you better watch your back, ’cause the moment you slip up, you’re dead meat, Hebert.”

“Fine.” Not much else I could say. “I’m going to leave now. If you tell anybody–”

She gave a short laugh, cutting me off. “Why the fuck would I do that? I’m not some weak bitch that needs someone else to handle my shit.”

Ugh. “Whatever.”
I pushed her against the wall one more time and then stepped back, letting her go. She whipped around, and I tensed, preparing myself for anything she did. But instead, she just rotated her arm in its socket.

Her face had a couple cuts on her cheeks, and one on her forehead and another on her nose as well. She was well and truly banged up. And she’d probably be pissing blood for the next week, too, with how I hit her kidney.

“Shit, Hebert. When the hell did you learn how to do that?”

“Self-defense class,” I said flatly, lying through my metal teeth.

Sophia’s eyes held a bit of anger and annoyance, like usual, but they also had something new: a hint of grudging respect.

I didn’t even want to think about that right then, so I just put off dealing with it for later.

I rolled my eyes and reached down to grab my bag off of the ground, slinging it onto my back before slowly walking backwards towards the mouth of the alley. Sophia smirked slightly, but I didn’t give her the pleasure of a reaction and just turned to the left and walked away once I reached the sidewalk proper.

I had been planning on taking the bus home, but now… now I didn’t want to.

((Emotion emulation processes restored to 76%))

I wanted to fight something. Get rid of the slight anger I felt about what Sophia had told me.

It was like an itch, and I wasn’t particularly against scratching it anyways.

So instead of going home, I walked sixteen blocks, making sure nobody was following me by moving through different streets, and then went in an alley and with a few jumps scaled up to the top of a three-story building.

I hid my backpack behind an AC unit and then altered my body and shifted my clothes and a bit of extra nanomaterial into my costume.

Instead of intentionally seeking out anything that was going on, I just wandered around Brockton, going from rooftop to rooftop. I wasn’t particularly slow, either, I had to be doing at least forty-five or fifty miles an hour. And this time, I kept my focus on my surroundings, unlike what had happened the day before with Kid Win and Vista.

I ran around for about an hour, and then…

Well, and then I ran into her.

Her being Squealer.

Now, before I get into this, let me explain something.

The Merchants? Not the smartest people. They’re too busy being high or pushing drugs to be smart. Squealer is an excellent example of this.

Squealer is a Tinker. Specifically, a Tinker specializing in vehicles, which… was actually rather ironic considering my projects. Anyways. She made vehicles. And she made them as in-your-face as possible. Take that asshole with the “tuned” muffler and spinning rims and weird undercarriage
lighting that’s sitting at a red light, and then takes off with squealing tires and the annoyingly loud ripping sound and multiply that by 4,000.

That’s Squealer.

She had the potential to be an amazing Tinker, supposedly. But she couldn’t think past her next fix, so her planning was practically nonexistent, ending with constructions that looked like Frankenstein’s monster in monster-truck form.

So when I say I saw her latest… thing, I mean I saw it in the sense that it visually assaulted my eyeballs with extreme prejudice.

But, this was perfect for what I wanted. My first parahuman since Lung, which had been more desperate flailing around if I’m being completely honest.

There weren’t any people in the area other than what appeared to be other Merchants, likely because they had enough sense to stay away from anything that involved capes, which was good news for me because it meant I didn’t have to worry as much about collateral damage, even if I would try to keep it to a minimum.

…Fighting a high Tinker with a giant car-truck-panel-van-thing was probably going to involve unavoidable damage, though.

I crouched on the edge of the building, looking down on the street and trying to form at least something resembling a plan before I engaged them.

Well, first off, it would be best if I could separate Squealer from her construct. It had some serious armor plating, which might make things trickier, but not by much. It was the other hidden tricks she probably had built into that thing that I was more wary of.

Unfortunately, I had no idea what those were. Which meant that I’d likely have to improvise as I went on.

Squealer sat there, in the front of the thing, while two doors on the rear were open and Merchants were transferring some stuff. Likely drugs, knowing the Merchants. I wouldn’t have been surprised if some of it had come from the lab I’d taken down the day before.

Even as I watched, the Merchants closed the doors up, which meant they were finishing up and I had to move in.

Squealer, then the rest of them, I reminded myself.

Taking a deep breath, I backed away from the edge a few feet and then ran forward, leaping off of the building’s edge and out towards where Squealer sat.

The engine began turning over as soon as I landed.

Damn.

Drawing my fist back, I punched the roof of the vehicle as hard as I could, my sigils manifesting on my arm.

Surprisingly, it didn’t break, though it did bend quite a bit. That meant that the armor was really thick.
The other Merchants had noticed me, and were starting to draw weapons as I prepared myself for another strike.

And then the construct beneath me moved.

Not forwards, either, but in reverse.

I didn’t have any handholds, nothing to grip, and even as I tried to dig my fingers into the metal, I was thrown towards the front of the vehicle, sliding onto the hood where I finally managed to drive my fingers into the metal and grasp it, holding me where I was.

I looked up, and saw surprise written on Squealer’s face through the windshield. And then there was a flicker of recognition.

“YOU!” she mouthed. There was no way any sound was escaping the cab of this thing, but I could read her lips well enough. “You’re the fucking bitch that messed with our guys yesterday!”

Her expression twisted into anger so fast it almost gave me whiplash. “You’ll fuckin’ pay for that!”

With sharp motions, she reached to the side, simultaneously halting the vehicle and making me slide around a little. And then we started moving forwards, accelerating quickly.

Um.

I looked up again.

Something hit my back. I tried to absorb as much of the impact through my nanomachines as possible, but still. Ow.

...Was that a wall we just went through? Is she trying to kill me or something?

We went through another. And then another.

She was just driving me through a building. Literally through the building.

I got my armor up around me before the second wall, but it was just plain annoying.

After five impacts, we finally stopped, the truck-thing’s tires screeching on pavement. Probably because we were outside and she wanted to see if she’d done anything.

I just looked up at her.

“Nothing, huh!? Well I bet you’ll feel this!” she yelled, still silent behind the glass. In any other situation it might actually have been a bit funny.

At some unknown cue, electricity began snapping and arcing over the armor of the vehicle.

I would have laughed if she could hear me.

Electricity couldn’t hurt me. It was my fucking best friend. The power that touched me ran up my arms and legs, crackling over my entire body and causing me to feel like I’d touched a live power-line, the energy dancing through me like lightning distilled and given liquid form.

I didn’t let it go to waste.

Faster than she could react, I was in front of the windshield window in front of Squealer, glowing
symbols running all over my body. I had to look like some sort of demon.

Stopping had been the worst thing she could do right now.

I drew my left hand back and in a blink, pounded it into what appeared to be glass.

Except it didn’t break.

Oh, it shattered somewhat, there were spiderweb cracks from the impact, but I’d fully expected my arm to be through the window and up to my elbow in the compartment.

Tinkertech is bullshit.

Squealer’s eyes were wide, and frantically she moved around, looking for something on one of the panels as I began hammering on the glass, trying to get it to the point I would break.

And then something hit me off of the vehicle.

And it hurt.

God damn. She’d somehow fried at least 6% of the nanomachines in my body with that thing.

I looked up, trying to find the threat. It wasn’t hard to spot. Sitting atop the vehicle was a giant barrel-shaped device, the light inside of it getting brighter again as a loud whining sound built up.

Squealer had a fucking tactical laser on her truck.

I mean, okay, it had nothing on the ones I had blueprints for and could build out of my nanomaterial, but it was still pretty impressive for a human.

The laser fired again, but I just barely got my Armor up before it hit, translucent hexagonal panels manifesting halfway between me and the vehicle.

Except this time, the beam didn’t cut off, it just kept firing in a continuous stream.

[Klein field status: 11% of current total capacity]

[24%]

[46%]

[61%]

[78%]

Yeah, okay, this needed to stop. It wasn’t funny anymore.

[89%]

I dumped all the energy in my field into my core power systems.

And then I moved.

I’m pretty sure I broke the sound barrier, considering how the windows on buildings around us rattled in their casings.

Instead of aiming for the windshield, I went for the driver’s-side door.
There was barely a seam there, but barely was all I needed to shove my fingers in, grip the metal, and pull it away from the main body with the ear-piercing squeal of metal being deformed by force.

Props to Squealer, it took a couple seconds, but considering the door was designed to open and less than a foot thick? Even if it had had bank-vault quality bolts I still would have been able to pull it open in under a minute.

With a final screech, I tore the door off of the frame. It had to weigh at least a quarter-ton.

For a moment, I had a glimpse of Squealer’s face, a mixture of rage and fear, before another metal panel dropped down and blocked my view.

But before I could do anything about it to get to her, something beeped and then roared as what I figured was the entire driver’s seat launched into the air like an escape pod with solid rocket boosters, except having way too fast an initial velocity to actually be that. Maybe some sort of rail-gun-like launch mechanism.

The point is, she got away. And was moving far faster than I had the ability to keep up with at that point.

Damn.

Her disappearance had clearly caused the entire vehicle to shut down, with no signs of power, and my glowing sigils faded as well.

I paused.

Could I…?

Hm.

I looked back at the numerous holes in a building behind the truck-thing, trying to see any Merchants, but I couldn’t, and likely they’d all gotten away at that point.

…Leaving me with a giant tinker-tech vehicle that clearly had some serious power behind it.

Why yes, yes I did think I was going to try and scavenge a Tinkertech vehicle with unknown capabilities for parts and components to make eating the whole Boat Graveyard easier.

She had to put some kind of generator in this thing, considering the amount of power that would have been needed to run that laser.

I stared at the console littered with gauges and buttons and switches. How the fuck did I pop the hood on this thing?

If I even could considering Squealer was gone and had appeared to take something with her that allowed the thing to run at all.

With that thought in mind, I backed out of the compartment and went back to the front of the vehicle and looked for the seams. Finding them wasn’t hard. Pulling them apart wasn’t either, significantly easier than the door, which I mean, I guess made sense? Except if this thing used something volatile for energy and had less shielding on the powerplant compartment than the cabin, that was just stupid.

The guts of the thing looked like nothing I’d ever seen before.

Then again, this was Tinkertech.
At first glance, it seemed haphazard, bits of wires and cables running between places, metal struts and gears and axles at random places.

Staring at it for a few minutes, though, it began to make sense, if just barely. *This* was for the brakes, and *that* was for the steering system, and *that over there* was part of the drivetrain.

And finally, nestled in the center and a bit to the left, was some sort of contained object that was significantly more partitioned off than anything else and radiating more heat as well.

I had a hunch that was what I wanted.

Looking around and making sure I was alone (I was, though I didn’t expect that to last for long with how much of a mess we’d made, meaning I needed to hurry up), I stuck my arm next to the giant module and let my nanomaterial flow around it, mapping it and all the connections it had out.

There was surprisingly little, which meant this was probably something Squealer used that could be easily swapped out and replaced or used in something different. Which made it all the easier for me.

At the connector ports found on the device—which surprisingly appeared to be completely sealed— I disconnected everything attached to it, cataloged the connections and where they ran off to, and then had my nanomaterial eat through the supports and bolts that held it in place before lifting it out.

It was lighter than I expected, but then again, I guess nearly *everything* was light to me.

Keeping my attention split so I knew when other people started arriving and I had to split, I poked around a bit more.

*Oooh, is that anti-grav?*

Yeah, I couldn’t pass that up. I really wanted to see what sort of methods Tinkers used to manipulate gravity, though it was probably nowhere near as elegant as what I did.

You can’t get much better than twisting gravitons and forcing space-time to bend to your will.

Repeating the process I’d gone through with the… thing I had on the ground next to me, I pulled out the strange module that had significantly more wires and weird bits attached to it. Much more like what I expected of Tinkertech.

Well, at least I’d have something to try and reverse-engineer in my free time.

Sirens and engines sounded at the edge of my hearing, which was my cue to leave. Grabbing the two parts I’d successfully extracted, I made stairs out of my Klein field and ran up to the roof of the building next to me, and then took off in a random direction.

I’d take the parts to the Graveyard, make sure they were sufficiently hidden, and then head home, dealing with the Tinkertech through the nanomaterial I had in the Graveyard.

Sounded like a plan.

Unfortunately, dealing with the Tinkertech was much easier said than done.

I’d gotten home around five-thirty, dumping my bag and doing my homework before starting dinner for my dad.

In the back of my head, though, I’d been poking around the anti-grav unit I’d left behind with some
of the nanomaterial I had in the Graveyard. I’d also purged the nanomachines Squealer had destroyed while I was there, replacing them with functional ones and leaving the remains of what there was left of the originals to be recycled.

Never let it be said that I didn’t mind my environmental impact.

Despite my best efforts, however the anti-gravity system worked continued to elude me. It was like… there was an outline of functionality there, something that could make sense, but it just… didn’t.

I had a feeling I was missing something fundamental.

Well, it wasn’t anything I particularly needed immediately, more a fun project to keep me interested while everything else was waiting for my nanomaterial to replicate.

The power supply I’d gotten, on the other hand, worked perfectly. I had an inkling it was a fusion generator of some sort, and the power output ranges I got from testing matched that. It was nowhere near enough for my graviton engines, but it would be sufficient to help make the antimatter I’d be using.

I just had to keep in mind that Tinkertech had the annoying tendency to break down randomly.

It would work for at least a couple weeks, though, I hoped. By then I should be bootstrapped far enough that I could build something more efficient on my own.

I couldn’t wait.

…it really didn’t hurt that all of this kept my mind off of Emma and what I’d have to deal with the next day.

Chapter End Notes

Tungsten is heavy.

Sophia was surprisingly fun to write.

It’s a bit monologue-y. Taylor seriously needs some friends. Or at least someone she can talk to about things. Hopefully that’ll get resolved soonish.
Tuesday, April 12, 2011

I don’t have problems falling asleep anymore. If I want to I just do. Like pressing a power button. Boop. Sleep mode.

I suppose that makes me lucky.

It means I’m not kept awake by errant thoughts or an overactive imagination. Worries about the next day or things that I’ve done or failed to do don’t haunt my waking hours, like they might for other people.

Because I’m not other people.

Because… I’m not human.

Or did simply having these thoughts, these doubts, realizing that those problems are something I don’t have anymore, make me all the more human despite myself? Despite the fact that I… I’m not?

Not flesh and blood, not even having something close to resembling a human brain, instead simply a collection of synergistic programs, intertwined and entangled to provide the most complex and accurate facsimile of a human mind without being the actual thing.

A fake. An imitation.

Did… did I even have a soul?

I didn’t know.

And I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

Wednesday, April 13, 2011

School the next day was weird, for a number of reasons. The first being that the first time I saw Emma, it looked like all she wanted was to storm over and tear me a new one, but Sophia grabbed her arm and whispered something to her, all while keeping her eyes locked on mine.

Emma’s eyes hardened as she continued glaring at me, but when Sophia let go of her arm, she made no move to come over to me, instead just sniffing and turning away.

And from there the day only got stranger.

“What’s that?”

“Huh, what?” Greg said, hurriedly closing his notebook and crossing his arms over it.

Good god, could you be any more obvious?
It was third period, Gladly, and we hadn’t started class yet as the man fumbled trying to get his slideshow for the day working, so instead people were talking and doing whatever.

I ran over the flicker of memory for a second, my check only confirming what I thought I’d seen.

“You… draw?” I asked incredulously. He flushed.

“Ah… er, what are you talking about?”

I just leveled an unblinking stare at him.

It really helped that I didn’t actually need to blink.

Greg fidgeted uncomfortably, and then looked away, down at the notebook under his arms. “Ah, um, yeah, I guess. Maybe, you know.”

“People?” The thing I’d seen him working on looked like a profile of some sort.

“Designs,” he corrected, and then flushed further. “I mean, nothing important. Just uh, sketches.”

They hadn’t looked like sketches, actually they’d looked pretty professional.

His evasiveness was only further piquing my curiosity.

“How can I see?”

His eyes widened. “I, erm, I guess? Sure?” he said hesitantly. “It’s nothing, really, just like, stuff.”

He shifted the notebook around, and then almost warily handed it over.

I took it from him, and then opened the front cover. The first page held a near-perfect replica of Eidolon in costume. Side profiles, angles, everything. There were sketches, some in pencil, others inked, some incomplete, others even colored in what had to be marker—though it was different from any marker I’d seen—

And it wasn’t just Eidolon’s usual costume, the next page held more, alternatives with different cuts, pieces, but all retaining that iconic green, shaded in and giving a sense of depth.

I moved on to the next page, but instead of Eidolon there was Alexandria. Her standard costume, and then a number of different ones, some hard armor, others soft, but all keeping the lighthouse and her black and steel-grey color palette.

Moving through the sketchbook, it was the same for a number of capes, some I recognized: Legend, Hero, Armsmaster, Miss Militia, Vista, Faultline, Triumph, Dragon, Shadow Stalker, Gallant, but there were also others I didn’t. Sometimes there were even three or four pages dedicated to a single person, notably Arsmaster and Faultline. And Arsmaster’s alternate costumes were intricate, areas magnified to show how sections of the armor meshed and interlocked.

Dragon’s… were totally unexpected. Instead of the dragon armor, it was tight suits that made her look… robotic, but human. A segmented section over her spine, and armor that lay over itself in parts like scales. It reminded me a little of Kid Win’s armor, or that one Aleph character that he’d based it on… Iron Man, but deep purple, practically black, and more dragon-y.

And then, as I flipped to the next page, moving on from some cape named Atlas, I froze in shock.

It was me. Well, not Taylor Hebert me, Relentless me.
It was my armor, but not. I assumed that was because there were no pictures of me out yet, just a
description of my costume. It still had the steel plates, but… different, more refined, professional.

“She’s a really new cape,” Greg suddenly said, and I looked over at him. “But it’s super rare that you
get a girl in armor like that. The whole black-knight theme, I mean. The last one was Galahad in
Sacramento. She’s” –he nodded at the page, indicating he was talking about me– “got some sort of
super-strength –I mean, she choked out Lung– and this force-field that does kinetic manipulation.
And yesterday they got some pictures of these really awesome symbol things that show up all over
her when she gets serious, like she’s going into overdrive or something.”

They got pictures of my fight from Squealer yesterday? How?

I went over the fight in my head, looking at every angle, and then groaned internally. Traffic
cameras. And what looked to be a security camera on a corner-store a couple doors down from
where we’d been fighting.

Greg flipped to the next page and pointed at the notebook, and I saw there were really well-done
sketches of my sigils. Not all of them, only what I assumed was visible from the angles they’d gotten
the pictures, but there was still that iconic symbol I’d carved into my chestpiece.

Fog.

I flipped to the next page.

And then froze.

The alternate costumes were different. More different than any of the other alternates I’d seen for the
other capes. Instead of my plate-armor, it was a number of form-fitting super high-tech suits. Some
were pitch-black, others had silver parts, and some of the black ones even had characteristic white
lines and accents that I could tell based on the shading were glowing, matching my sigils.

They were like the Dragon designs I’d seen, but less cybernetic and plated scale, more hard armor.

“I tried to do the medieval theme a couple times, but it just didn’t feel right, with the amount of black
that dominates her costume, and the fact that they’re saying her armor is tinkertech anyways… well, I
just went in that direction.”

Wait… what? Why do they think that?

“And there was this really awesome Earth-Aleph movie last year that had these cool black helmets
with these hard-cut lines and geometry that seemed to fit perfectly, so I used that as inspiration in this
one,” he said, pointing at the one I’d been looking at.

They were… beautiful.

On the page after there was a body armor design that was like a meld between Dragon’s and the
alternates I’d seen so far, with flexible-looking undersuit and black armor panels in the areas that my
normal armor had, plus a bunch of extra places, like a complex line of chevrons starting at my neck
and ending at my lower back as armor over my spine.

“These are… really good, Greg.”

And I wasn’t just saying that. Who knew someone like Greg, one of the most socially awkward and
introverted people I knew, could do something like this?
“A-ah, um, thanks? It’s just a hobby. I started it doing character designs for the DnD group I’m a part of, and then I started doing capes just ’cause, y’know?” I looked over at him.

“Do you put these on PHO?”

“Oh, um. No?” he said timidly.

“You seriously should,” I told him. “I think people would really like them.”

“You think?”

I nodded. “Really.”

“Oh. Um, maybe I’ll do that, then. If you really think people would like them…” he replied.

“Allright, time to get started!” Gladly called from the front of the room, forcing me to reluctantly close the sketchbook and hand it back over.

Greg’s designs made my current armor feel almost… inadequate, having seen what I could have instead, the sorts of things I could do. My plate armor had been a design of necessity, because there was only so much you could do when working steel by hand –literally– and I’d spent a good section of my budget on the undersuit and fastening parts for the plates.

…Only to find out it was totally pointless the day after I used it the first time.

But the point was, with what I’d had I thought I’d done pretty well. Now, though, I could do almost anything, just like my clothes, and I’d seen just how far that could go in those drawings.

I sighed, forcing myself to stop thinking about it and focus on class, even if it was Gladly.

With Madison, Sophia, and Emma not bothering me today, I felt confident enough to abandon my lunch spot in the bathroom and venture up to the secluded rooftop of Winslow.

It was open to students normally, with rusting benches in places and a tall, seven-foot wire fence at the edge of the building. I sat on one, staring out on the neglected grounds and simply enjoying the warm mid-April breeze as I kept running my simulations. I’d mostly finished my big project, and now was focusing more on figuring out what to do with my body. I was pretty much done and ready for testing out my first configuration, but knew that I’d have to probably go through a bunch of revisions before I finally got what I wanted.

Releasing a huff of air, I started cannibalizing my internal nanomachines, ripping apart the molecules into their constituent materials, and then beginning to process of constructing my skeleton atom by atom.

It was gonna take a while.

“Hi.”

I jumped at the sudden intrusion on my thoughts, turning to look at the source of the voice.

A medium-height girl with strawberry-blonde hair sat a foot and a half to my right on my bench, looking at me.

“Hello?” I replied hesitantly. Why was she talking to me?
“Nice weather, isn’t it?” she said, closing her eyes contentedly and leaning into breeze.

“Yes?” I agreed. “…Um, who are you? …And why are you here?”

She turned back to me and opened her eyes –very blue eyes, I noted–, giving me a wide disarming smile. “I’m Brianna!” she said, holding out her hand.

I stared at her for a moment, and then looked down at her hand, slowly moving my own forward and grasping hers, shaking it.

Social ritual complete, she drew back, continuing to smile at me. “I just wanted to see if you were doing okay. You know, with those bitches bothering you again.”

I blinked and stared at her.

Whaaaa…?

The way she casually cursed was completely at odds with her bright voice. Was she talking about the trio?

“Um… yeah? I guess so?”

“That’s good,” she said, putting her hands on the edge of the bench and leaning on them. “I thought they were leaving you alone, but then they started pulling that stupid stuff again this week.”

I eyed her. “Why are you talking to me?”

Her smile dropped a bit. “I just wanted to. And I wanted to say I’m sorry I haven’t before now. I felt really bad when they were doing all that stuff last semester, but I …couldn’t,” she said, sounding a bit apologetic. “But then I saw you sitting here, and it was perfect timing.”

“Okay…”

I wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that.

“Anyways, I was wondering you wanted to hang out sometime or something? My friends and I are going to the mall this weekend, if you want to come with,” she said. “It’s not like it’s a big deal or anything.”

I hadn’t been to the mall since Mom died and Emma…

And this was the first time someone had talked to me for no reason since last school year, practically.

What the hell. Why not.

“Sure, I guess,” I replied.

“Great!” She reached down, unzipping her backpack and taking out a notebook and a pen, flipping through the pages to find a blank one before writing down something and tearing out the page. She folded it up until it was a smaller rectangle, and then held it out to me. “Here’s my number. What’s yours?”

I froze, the piece of paper in my hands.

Technically, I didn’t have a cellphone. Except…
Maybe I *could*? I mean, I got internet, right? Could I do the same with cell networks?

Yes, the answer came instantly.

Huh. So all I needed was a number, and I didn’t even really need that.

I needed to be careful, though. Choose a number that didn’t exist. Maybe just make something up? But what if I gave her a number that somebody already had? Then again, the chances of giving her an already-used central office code for our state was like fifteen in nine hundred. So I randomly generated a suitable seven digit number, resolving to check later and make sure that the CO code wasn’t already used. If it was I’d just give some excuse that I got a new phone or something.

Satisfied, I rattled off the number, which Brianna wrote down in a different notebook. “I’ll text you after school, ’kay?”

I nodded.

The bell suddenly rang, and Brianna looked up at the sound, before bending back over and packing her stuff away. “It was nice talking to you!” she said, smiling once she was done.

I nodded, still a bit off-balance from the entire interaction.

Brianna swung her bag up onto her shoulder and began heading towards the door to the rooftop. “See you later!” she called, looking over her shoulder and waving.

I just smiled and waved back, unsure of what else to do.

And then I was left on the roof, struggling to understand what the hell had just happened and what it meant.

Unfortunately no answers presented themselves, and I went through the rest of the day practically in a daze, between dealing with and repeatedly going over my introduction to Brianna and constructing my skeleton.


…I was probably going to have to go out and buy a couple bags of charcoal to eat.

Don’t look at me like that.

I seriously needed the stuff. Unlike *you* squishy water-based humans, I was planning on being at least seventy percent carbon, and my nanomachines were mostly exotic materials and metals. Carbon was in limited quantity and I needed more, and nuclear synthesis could only get me so far.

Thankfully, however, using carbon meant that my weight shouldn’t change all that much, since oxygen atoms—which are like sixty five percent of a human’s body mass—are heavier than carbon and the difference could be easily made up by adjusting my retained nanomaterial’s apparent weight.

So I wouldn’t be falling through the floor or squashing any chairs just by sitting on them anytime soon.

I only had part of my spinal structure done so far, but it was progress. The tests I was continuously putting it through as I constructed it were doing well, but then again that was to be expected after having simulated it down to an atomic level and running those same tests virtually.
I’d successfully avoided thinking about Emma and what to do about her throughout the entire day … though I didn’t know whether to consider that an accomplishment or not.

Once school was over and we were finally released, I was itching to go out again in my armor, but my desire to continue working on my skeleton and to check on the nanomaterial in the Boat Graveyard won over, so instead I headed towards the Docks.

I knew there was a hardware store relatively close to the route I was taking, so I angled towards it and spent fifteen dollars on a pair of seventeen pound bags of briquettes. The checkout guy looked at me dubiously before asking if I needed any help with them, and I laughed to myself as I told him I was stronger than I looked and could handle it.

I happily walked off with my newly acquired raw material, eventually entering an alley, adjusting my body, and manifesting my armor once I’d gotten close to where I wanted to be. I made my way up to the roof with panels of my Armor, and then started continued on my journey to the edge of the Docks.

Rather than actually going into the Graveyard itself, I instead stopped on the last building before the Bay, sitting down on the edge and tearing open one of the bags before realizing my mask was in the way.

…Okay, yeah, I could have just absorbed the stuff into my body like a giant amoeba, but as I’ve said repeatedly, it was the little things that kept me sane and grounded, and eating using my mouth was definitely one of those things.

So I simply reabsorbed the bottom half of my silvery mask and began munching on my snack.

Please don’t ask me what it tasted like. I don’t think I can accurately describe it in a way that humans can comprehend. Nonetheless, it was carbon. With some extra stuff, but that just gave it flavor.

I checked over my nanomaterial as I ate, satisfied with the progress it was making in replicating. Only another twenty four hours and it would be enough for my first project.

Of course, that didn’t mean I would be stopping anytime soon. The ship I was chewing through at that moment was more than double the mass of my project, and I fully intended to convert the entire thing to nanomaterial. As well as all the other ships in the Graveyard.

Once I hit fifty tons of nanomaterial was when the conversion would really start to take off. Doubling that every hour… I could have the Graveyard done in a couple of days.

And oh, how I wanted that.

I wanted my engines. My hull. It was an almost all-consuming need I had. I was Fog, and I felt incomplete as I was.

Soon. Soon.

I sighed, pushing aside the desires I couldn’t fulfill and focusing on the fusion generator in the rear of the ship I’d left it on, thirty meters out in the bay. My antimatter setup was working nicely, as inefficient as it was.

Oh well, beggars can’t be choosers.

I should have enough by the next day for at least testing my project, but I wouldn’t stop it anytime soon, the more I had the better, and there was no telling how long that tinkertech generator would
I licked my fingers as I finished off the second bag of charcoal, putting them aside to throw away later. My spine was coming along nicely, almost done by that point, and I paid close attention to all of the segments that functioned as vertebrae, making sure they had full mobility.

I kind of wanted to try out some of the alternate armor I’d seen in Greg’s notebook, but I knew that wouldn’t be very smart, since he’d recognize it immediately if pictures got out and then wonder how the new cape he’d been drawing had one of his own designs when only one person had really gotten a good look at it.

Yeaaaaah. I didn’t want Greg figuring out my identity, thank you.

Well, maybe he’d actually post them on PHO, and then I’d have a perfectly good reason for changing my outfit to match.

250-XXXX: Hi Taylor!

I blinked. So that’s how text messaging worked inside your own head.

Hi, I sent back, figuring that was the best response.

What r u up to?

Not much. Just hanging out right now. And you know, eating the Ship Graveyard after a light snack of charcoal.

Cool. Sat 10am @ Middleview work?

I didn’t really have anything else going on, so… Yeah, sure.

Alright :) came back. and then immediately after. Sorry, gtg, have work. Ttyl!

It was… weird having someone actually invite me to something. It hadn’t happened since before high school. Before Emma. But it was kind of nic–

“Hey.”

I jumped. Again. God fucking damn, what the hell!? Seriously? That’s the third time this week!

Why was I having so much trouble being aware of my surroundings?

I turned to look at the girl sitting next to me on my left, though I already knew who it was from her voice.

“…” I just stared at Vista, before finally getting a hold of my voice. “Hi?”

I looked around for the second Ward that she was with, though I couldn’t see anybody. “Where’s your partner?”

“No partner. It’s just me today,” Vista replied, looking in my direction.

“I thought Wards patrolled in pairs?” I asked, slightly confused. That’s what all the stuff I’d read online said.

“What, I’m not good enough to be on my own?” she asked, irritation creeping into her voice. “Or is
it because I’m too young? Because I’m not old enough?"

Ooookay then. Don’t question Vista’s capabilities. Clearly a touchy subject.

“No, no, I just thought… you know…” I scrambled to recover. “I didn’t expect to see you alone.”

“Well, you thought wrong,” she huffed, annoyance still present.

“Sorry,” I apologized, though I wasn’t quite sure for what. It just seemed like the right thing say.

She nodded.

Vista was quiet for a minute before she spoke. “I’m not technically on duty or patrolling, so no ‘buddy’,“ she said, making air-quotes with her fingers. “I’m just getting away for a bit.”

I nodded slowly, turning to look out at the bay and the sunlight coming from behind us sparkling on the water.

“You fought Squealer yesterday?”

“Mhm,” I confirmed.

“They brought in that giant van-tank thing, there was some pretty serious damage to it,” she commented.

“Yep.”

Vista turned to me. “They upped your ratings. Again.”

I paused, and then slowly turned to her. “What?”

She nodded, turning to look out at the bay. “Brute six, now. And Shaker four, Mover four, Blaster two.”

I almost snorted. Blaster two? Wait until they saw my cannons, and then we’d see who was Blaster two.

“They really want you on the Protectorate. Miss Militia’s been telling Armsmaster that they need a good versatile heavy hitter-slash-defender and you’re practically perfect.”

“Yeah, thanks but no thanks,” I said. I was only more sure of my decision now. After finding out what I could really do with my nanomaterial, and the high possibility that would be restricted if I joined something like the Protectorate, I was all the more protective of my autonomy. Not to mention the thought of being under somebody else’s command and having to follow orders really rubbed me the wrong way. “…Is that why you’re talking to me?”

“No.” She hesitated. “Okay, maybe a little bit. Armsmaster did tell Kid Win and I to talk to you if we ever saw you again, try and improve relations and all that shit. But I couldn’t care less about that.”

“So what then?” I pressed. There was no way she wasn’t here for a reason.

Vista shifted uncomfortably before taking a deep breath. “You aren’t human, are you?”

I froze. And not just metaphorically, no, I froze. All of my nanomachines, everywhere, halted.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuck.
What did she want? How did she know? How had she figured it out? Was she going to tell everyone?

“I’ve got this sort of… sense, of where I can push and pull,” she said, holding her hands out in front of her, and I vaguely noticed that the distance between them was changing even without her moving them. “I know where I can stretch and twist and compress everything. But I can’t do it to anything living, and people are these sort of sticky areas that stop it.” She looked back at me. “But you…”

And suddenly my left arm was ten sizes smaller.

Everything felt wrong and disorienting and my nanomachines were giving me garbage feedback and it was all I could do to keep them exactly how they were–

Just as quickly, something shifted, and things made sense, I had control again, but my arm was still way too small.

“What the fuck!?” I screamed. “Stop that! Let go!”

My arm was instantly back, proper sized, looking like nothing had ever happened to it.

I breathed heavily, glaring at Vista, though she wouldn’t be able to see it behind my mask. She still seemed to get the message.

“Sorry! I didn’t know it would be like that, I was just trying to show you what I meant!” she rushed out.

“Don’t ever do that again,” I growled menacingly, my sigils flaring up all over my body and my fists clenched tightly. My Wave-Force Armor surrounded us, trapping us in a sphere of white panels.

Vista nodded immediately. “Okay, okay, shit. Sorry.”

I kept glaring, but allowed my combat systems to go dormant again and forced my hands to relax, my Armor fading away.

“What do you want?” I ground out. Was she going to blackmail me or something?

“What?” she asked, sounding surprised.

“What do you want from me?” I repeated.

“What do you want from me?” I repeated.

“I… What? I’m just curious. You’re different. The first person who I could ever do that to. Are you some sort of special Case 53 or something? Is that why you wear a full-body suit?” She glanced at my gloved hands. “Your hands look normal, though.” she noted, sounding confused.

I didn’t say anything.

She huffed. “Shit, okay. Look. Just, can you tell me if I’m right or not?”

I remained mute.

The portion of her face I could see flickered with annoyance, and she turned away from me to face the bay.
The silence remained for eight minutes, before she finally spoke up. “I don’t like the Wards,” she said softly. “That’s why I’m on my own.”

What?

“Not the others, the people, I mean like… the organization,” she clarified, waving her hand in a vague manner. “We don’t do shit normally.”

Her hand went down.

“They send us on routes that are low-risk but high-visibility. We do PR events, smile and talk about how great it is. But we never actually fight unless there’s like two Protectorate babysitters and it’s practically guaranteed that we’ll win. And the Youth Guard tries to limit even that. We’re only allowed a certain number of hours, and the Protectorate basically tells us exactly how to act.”

“I mean… isn’t that their job? To provide oversight and make sure you’re safe?”

“Yeah, but I’m thirteen! I’ve been a Ward for over two and a half years. You know how many times I’ve actually fought? Seven. Seven. And one of those was today. Not that I even really got to do anything. They treat me like I’m made of fucking glass because I’m the youngest and a girl, even though I’ve been on the team longer than everybody else!”

Okay, I could see how that could be… frustrating. I mean, I’d had three fights in as many days, and my first week wasn’t even over yet.

“So why are you, then?” I asked. “On the Wards, I mean.”

She frowned and turned away again. “My parents,” she said, and I could hear a tinge of irritation. “Ah.”

“Yeah, fucking ‘ah’.” She drew her legs up to her chest, hugging them. “That’s why it’s just me here. I can’t fight, but at least I can use my powers without getting docked for it.”

I could understand that. I was Relentless, but I couldn’t do anything unless I was in my armor. If that were to be actively limited and restricted, I don’t think I’d manage very well either.

“So what about you?” Vista asked, still staring out at the bay. “What are you?”

I was between a rock and a hard place. Tell Vista what I was—at least partly—and maintain control over the information, or risk her telling her superiors and it getting out with everybody jumping to the worst conclusion?

Plus, she’d just told me all of this stuff about herself when she didn’t have to. And I got the sense that wasn’t something she normally did.

“I swear I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to, I just… really want to know,” she said. “Is it related to your powers? Are you a Case 53?”

“No, I’m…” I sighed, deciding that it showing was probably best, and it wouldn’t give away everything, letting her draw her own conclusions. “Just… here.”

And for the first time, I absorbed my armor and reverted all of my surface nanomachines’ configurations to their base state, leaving me as an indistinct female figure of pure silver.

I could just tell Vista’s eyes widened, even if I couldn’t see them behind her visor. I don’t even think
she was fully aware as she reached out to touch my arm, running her fingers over the perfectly smooth surface.

“You’re… beautiful.”

I would have blushed if I had the capability. Thankfully, I didn’t at that moment.

“You’re like a girl Silver Surfer.”

I didn’t get the reference, but that was easily remedied by looking it up online. It was apparently some comic book character from the sixties and seventies, and there were also pictures from an Earth-Aleph movie six years ago. From what I could tell, it was a pretty accurate description of my current appearance.

Though turning silver wasn’t even close to what I could really do.

…I decided to mess with Vista just a little, it was only fair after what she’d done with my arm.

It took less than a second to readjust and reconfigure my body, color blooming across my surface as I fluidly shifted, leaving me small, with thin arms and legs, green armor on my chest, a white skirt with wavy green lines, and a visor on my head.

“Holy fuck!” Vista yelled, moving backwards a few inches from me. “What the hell!?”

“What?” I asked her in her own voice, smirking at her.

“You-you’re me!” she said, pointing at me.

“No, I’m me,” I responded, still smirking.

“Oh my god.” Apparently curiosity won over surprise, because she moved close to me again, and started poking me all over. “You feel so real!”

I swatted her finger away. “I am real.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, I meant…” she struggled before shuddering. “Can you please go back? That’s really, really weird.”

Deciding I’d achieved what I wanted, I grinned and I reverted back to the featureless silver form.

“So this is… you?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Pretty much.”

“Are you a Case 53 or something?”

I shook my head. “No. I just triggered and became… this,” I said, gesturing at my silver body, omitting telling her about the weird dream-like experience I’d had in the process.

“So you’re really not alive. No wonder I don’t have any problems with you.”

I leveled a glare at her. “Screw you. I’m alive, thanks.”

*Am I really, though? A computer and nanomachines?*

Vista frowned. “I didn’t mean it like that, I mean, like, you’re liquid metal or something right? That’s
what it felt like.”

“Yeah, basically,” I replied, sighing.

“Do you even need to eat? Drink?” she asked.

“I… can eat, but I don’t need to,” I told her, my focus wandering over to the charcoal bags a few feet behind where she sat.

Vista followed the change in my line of sight and swallowed. “You ate those?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed.

“How does that even work? No, what does that do?”

“It goes in my body like when you eat? I’m just more… aware of it.”

“What? No, wait, why do you eat if you don’t need to?”

“I can sort of mess with stuff once it’s inside me,” I told her, not giving away the fact that I wasn’t exactly limited to my body. Better to keep that to myself so that if this did get out, people wouldn’t see me as much of a threat. “Change it, shape it into other things… yeah.” I shrugged.

“Things like what?”

Should I?

I mean, really, should I? I’d be giving a lot away with this. But, she’d trusted me, right? Couldn’t I at least trust her? And it wasn’t like it was anything super secret, considering she knew about my body.

…

What the fuck, in for a penny, in for a pound. Not to mention her reaction was probably going to be priceless.

I reached behind me, pushing my hand into my back and grasping the thing I’d been working on all day before pulling it out and around my body.

“Things like this,” I said, holding my pseudo-spine in front of her, the structure swinging a bit from the sudden motion and the flexibility derived from the fully articulated joints between the segments. I was particularly proud of that.

Vista once again scrambled backwards a few inches. “What the fuck is that? Is that your spine!? Did you just pull your spine out of your back!!?”

“It’s not my spine. Well, not yet at least,” I told her. And then I tossed it at her.

I wasn’t exactly worried about it. It was practically impossible to be harmed, so there was nothing to fear if she didn’t catch it. However, she did out of reflex, struggling to get a hold on it from how easily it flexed and nearly slipped through her hands like a giant, wet noodle.

“It’s… amazing,” she said, holding it up and staring at it. Composed of geometric segments, the bottom half, which was completely done, was a dull dark silver with the same material as my union core coating the vertebrae. The upper half was less complete, and it showed in the highly reflective clear segments that threw light everywhere. “What’s it made out of?”
“Diamond,” I told her honestly.

Her head whipped up so fast I half expected to hear a crack. “What!?”

“It’s diamond. Not completely solid, though, that would be really brittle. It’s aggregated diamond nanorods held together in a matrix of nanotube and linear acetylenic carbon fibers, sealed in an spatially complex exotic metal,” I told her honestly. It felt good to show off a little about what I doing. I hadn’t gotten the chance before, and it was so nice to just let go and not have to totally hide my capabilities.

“How much is this worth!?”

“It’s literally priceless. …Maybe a couple billion or so if I had to give it a number?” I guessed. It was four or five pounds, so that felt right.

Vista just stared at me. “So you’re a Tinker too? A-and your suit was actually you, not made by somebody else.”

I frowned. “What?” Greg had said something about that too.

“That’s what everybody thinks. That you’ve got some sort of Tinker support who made you your armor, and that’s why you took those parts from Squealer. But it’s all you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah?” I shrugged, and then shifted back to what I considered my (new) normal appearance, along with my armor.

She cocked her head. “Why do you go out like that, with the armor and stuff? Why not just be all silvery?”

I shifted a little on the edge of the building. “It just feels right? This is what I was like… before.”

Her mouth formed a silent ‘o’. She looked down at the artificial spinal column in her hands, and then held it out to me. “Uh, here. You can have your… spine back.”

I took it from her wordlessly, lifting it over my shoulder and absorbing it into my back, immediately starting to work on it again.

“I was serious, I won’t tell anybody, I swear. I was just really confused, and it was like I needed to know.”

I sighed. “Yeah. I get it.” I fell backwards, lying down on the rooftop with my legs dangling over the clouds.

I… I wanted to talk about it. She was the first person to (almost) know what I was, and as much as I might want to deny it, it was kind of nice having someone who knew, and I didn’t need to hide from.

Not that keeping my true nature a secret was my only problem right now…

And just like that, my thoughts swarmed back to Emma.

Goddammit.

Ugh.

I was avoiding thinking about it. About her. About what I had learned yesterday, what it meant, and what the fuck to do with it.
Because Emma.

_Fucking_ Emma.

Why couldn’t she have just told me?

The worst part was I felt like it was my fault. Irrational, but emotions don’t have to make any fucking sense.

It’s just… if I’d only kept my mouth shut. If I only hadn’t said anything about her hair that day. If I only hadn’t reminded her _in the worst way possible_ of what had happened, then none of this would have happened.

She’d been so close, so _fucking_ close to reaching out, standing on her front steps that day. Eyes showing indecision, almost pleading, her mouth open to speak.

And I just had to go and completely fucking ruin it.

Everything could have been so different. The past two years wouldn’t have been anything like they had been.

Except… they had.

I didn’t know how to feel about that. My previously tangled feelings about all of this, about her, were only made more complex.


Because I did. I hated her. It was just becoming harder to hold onto that, as it got muddled by the revelations I’d had and instead turned into apathy and pity.

I did still feel something for her. Seven years of being as close as sisters, half my life at that point, was not something easily discarded, as much as I would have preferred that with the way she’d twisted and used that against me.

The things she’d done, the things she’d said… they weren’t the sort of thing you could take back. Weren’t the sort of things you could forgive and forget.

And to be honest, as much as I missed my sister, I knew what we’d had was gone, destroyed by her as she excised me from her life just as she intended, and that’d never be back.

And yet… only two days ago, I’d told her that family never gave up on each other, because that’s what being family meant.

But what was I supposed to _do_?

That was where I was lost, and I had a feeling I wasn’t going to be figuring it out on my own anytime soon.

I couldn’t tell Dad, because that would require telling him everything _else_, and no thank you. The only other person I could think of was Brianna, but I didn’t even really know her, and she’d immediately know who I was talking about if I asked her for advice.

I needed someone who didn’t have any feelings about it, someone like–

I stilled, and then turned to look at the younger girl sitting to my left.
You know what? Fuck it. Just, fuck it. Why not?

“Hey, can I ask you something?” I asked, folding my arms behind my head.

Vista looked over at me. “What is it?”

“Alright, say you have a friend, right?” Vista nodded slowly, clearly not understanding where I was going with this. “And you’re so close, you’re practically sisters. But then suddenly, one day, she breaks it off for no apparent reason, won’t talk to you, nothing. Instead, she starts doing everything she can to make your life hell. It goes on long enough and gets so bad that you hate her, except something’s always felt off about it. And then suddenly, you find out she’s been acting like that because something really bad happened to her, seriously hurt her and fucked her up.”

“Like a trigger event?” she asked.

I thought about it for a moment. “Yeah. That bad. She doesn’t know you know, though. She’s still really messed up, and even if you hate her, you still care too. What would you do?”

“Probably confront her? Tell her you know what happened and that what she’s been doing isn’t okay and she needs to stop. Maybe tell her parents and try to get her in therapy or something?” Vista shrugged. “Let her make the next move and decide where to go from there.”

I sighed. Yeah, I figured it would be something like that. I’d just hoped Vista might have something better.

“I’d do it as soon as possible, too,” she said, looking at me with a slightly pointed tone in her voice like she knew this wasn’t just hypothetical.

It was probably obvious it wasn’t, but whatever.

Vista stood, brushing off her skirt, and I sat up. “Well, it was nice talking to you, Relentless, but I need to get going,” she spoke, smiling slightly and holding out her hand, and I stood so I could shake it.

“Yeah, sure,” I returned. Vista hadn’t been anything like what I’d expected for a thirteen year-old. Hell, she seemed more mature than half the people in my grade at Winslow.

“I’ll see you around, then,” she said, taking a step forward off the roof, her foot landing on not air, but solid cement that I realized was the roof of the building across the street to our left. The building that was two stories taller than the one I was on.

I couldn’t help but be mildly awed whenever she did something like that. It was just… crazy.

The roof she was on suddenly snapped back to its proper location, and in less than ten seconds she was gone, even beyond the range of my vision.

Her power really was insane.

Once she disappeared, I slumped. It was only 4:24PM, leaving me with a surplus of time. Combined with Vista’s words, I really had no excuse at this point.

“I’d do it as soon as possible.”

Fuck.

I knew she was right, though. I didn’t want to deal with this at school, where Emma would have her
friends backing her up, but also forcing her to keep acting the way they expected. I needed to deal with her alone. And the only way I could really do that was by visiting the Barnes’ myself.

…This was not going to be fun.

I traveled slower than I had to, much slower than I really could, dragging out the time.

Unfortunately, that still meant it was only fifty minutes before I reached the Barnes’ house in the better-off southern part of the city, reverting to my normal appearance a few blocks away.

God, when was the last time I had been here? Was it really nineteen months?

Taking a deep breath, I walked up the steps and then reached the porch, hesitating for a moment before pushing the doorbell.

(Emotion emulation processes reduced to 83%)

I shuffled uncomfortably on the doormat, stopping when I heard footsteps a few moments later. The sound of the deadbolt sliding open only raised my anxiety, but I steeled myself. I could do this.

The white door opened, revealing a woman that looked like an older, slightly shorter version of Emma.

“Taylor!” Zoe said, stepping back and gesturing for me to come inside. “Come in, come in!” I moved through the doorway, looking around as she closed the door behind me and reset the deadbolt. Immediately after I was drawn into a hug, the woman holding it for a few seconds before stepping away. “It’s been too long! How are you? You’ve gotten so tall!”

I smiled, unable to keep myself from getting caught up in her enthusiasm. “Hi Zoe. I’m doing alright.” Which, strangely enough, was actually true. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m doing just fine. Nothing too exciting. Just the usual, you know how it is,” she said. “Are you here to see Emma?”

I nodded hesitantly.

“Alright, hold on.” She turned towards the stairs, calling up to the second floor in what I knew was the direction of Emma’s room. “Emma!”

A loud “What?” was returned.

“Taylor’s here!”

Dead silence, and then the sound of a door hurriedly pulled open and a rush towards the railing by the stairs. Emma appeared after a few seconds, tensing as soon as she saw me.

“What.”

(Emotion emulation processes reduced to 66%)

“Hey, Emma.”

Her expressions shifted so fast I couldn’t accurately place them, eventually landing on a blank mask. Fast, but not too, fast, and still tense, she descended the stairs towards me. “What is it?”
To the average person, and maybe to Zoe, Emma sounded calm, collected. However there was an almost imperceptible frostiness to her voice, and years of being around her made it easy to recognize.

I shrugged. “Just here to talk, catch up, you know.”

Emma’s eyes flicked over to her mother, even as she stood on the second to last step, making me look up to her.

I had no doubt that was intentional.

I could tell she wasn’t comfortable interacting with me in front of her mother, likely because suddenly there were two personas, two attitudes she normally kept separate clashing together. Acting hostile to me would only raise questions from Zoe.

Emma smiled at me suddenly. “Of course, Taylor! Come on,” she said, grabbing my hand and almost pulling me upstairs. She was gripping my hand like she was trying to squeeze the life out of it, and it probably would have hurt …except there wasn’t really anything she could do that could hurt me.

I followed easily, my longer legs letting me keep up with her faster pace as she dragged me down the hall and into her room, dropping my hand as soon as the door was closed.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing here, Taylor?”

(I emotion emulation processes reduced to 31%)

“I just want to talk,” I told her calmly.

“I know what you’re doing,” she snarled.

“I want you to stop being such a bitch to me at school.”

She sneered. “How about… no?”

(I emotion emulation processes reduced to 26%)

“Can you seriously not stop, for one minute?” I asked. “You don’t have to act here, Emma. There’s nobody watching you, nobody you have to prove anything to. It’s just you and me.”

She sneered. “You think I’m acting? Wow, Taylor, I didn’t know you were delusional too. Maybe I should tell your dad so they can take you off and put you with all the other crazies where you belong. I’m sure you’d all get along great.”

(I emotion emulation processes reduced to 17%)

I sighed, rubbing my temples. It didn’t do anything for me, but it was still something to do as I collected my thoughts. “Why didn’t you just tell me, Emma?”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Taylor?” she said, staring at me coldly.

“Do you know how worried I was? The phone call just dropped, and I had no idea what was happening. I tried calling you back three times, and they went straight to voicemail.”

She was staring at me, not moving, but I could see that her face had lost a little of its color.

“I called the house phone here whenever I got the chance, but Zoe kept saying you didn’t want to
talk, and she didn’t know why. I was really worried by then,” I said. “Can you imagine it? Your best friend’s phone stops working mid-call, and then she won’t talk to you for the next two weeks?”

She tried to sneer, but didn’t really manage it. “I was just cutting you off like I’d wanted to do since before your mom bit it.”

I shook my head. “That’s bullshit, Emma, and you and I both know it. You don’t drop a friendship mid-call. You were always the better liar, but there’s no way you faked being my friend for over a year after Mom. I may have believed you on the steps a year and a half ago, but I was emotional and confused, and I’ve had a long time to think about it.”

She opened her mouth, but I didn’t let her say anything. “You were going to tell me. You were going to reach out, and then I said that stupid comment about your hair and you shut down.”

“You actually believe that Taylor?” she asked scathingly, though she had crossed her arms in front of her and was leaning back on her heel defensively. “You really are crazy.”

“Sophia told me.”

And just like that, her remaining composure shattered. “W-what?”

“Sophia told me what happened to you in that alley—”

“No,” she whispered, her face bone-white. “She didn’t. You can’t.”

I sighed, leaning back against the door. “Emma…”

She started looking panicked. “No!”

“Emma, calm down.”

“NO! I’m not weak, you are. I’m not like you, I’m not,” she said vehemently, and it seemed more like she was trying to convince herself than me.

([Emotion emulation processes reduced to 5%])

“So you need me to prove that? Bullying someone doesn’t mean you’re strong, Emma. It just means that you’re insecure and need other people to hold up your self-worth. Do you know why I never fought back?” I asked.

She shook her head mechanically, like she was only doing it because she’d been prompted, but she hadn’t actually thought about it.

“Because I cared, Emma. Because every time I looked at you, I saw my sister. And no matter how much you hurt me, I wasn’t going to sink to your level and do the same to you, because nobody deserves that,” I said.

Her face was still blank, void of anything, and I could only hope that I was getting through to her.

I sighed, looking at my hands. My hands that could crush metal like tissue paper, made out of super-configurable nanomachines. I would have been extremely tempted to use every advantage I had, had I gone against the trio, but using my abilities for that just felt wrong.

“And then… and then you pulled that stunt with the locker.” I looked back up at her. “You made me helpless, deliberately made me as terrified as possible, so that you could feel like you had power over me. It’s just… ironic, that you’ve ended up becoming the same sort of person that hurt you.”
It was that that finally got a reaction out of her. She started shaking, her body tense and eyes wide. “No…”

I pushed myself upright, and she took a step back. “It’s funny. The Emma I knew? Before all of this? The one who reached out and talked about things, who relied on other people and asked for help? She was strong.”

I left the “and the person you’ve turned into isn’t” unsaid.

Emma flinched like she’d been burned.

“If you want to stay like that, just keep away from me. It’ll be better for both of us. Otherwise, you know where I am,” I told her, looking over my shoulder as I stepped out of her room, still not entirely sure what Emma’s thoughts were and only hoping that I’d gotten through.

*The ball’s in your court, now.*

---

I walked down the stairs slowly, and saw Zoe sitting at the counter of the kitchen down the hall from the entrance atrium-y area, drinking what appeared to be iced tea. She looked over at me as I reached the first floor, and as much as I would have liked to just leave at that point, I knew I couldn’t do that.

“You two alright?” she asked. “I was disappointed when you and Emma stopped seeing each other. You were a good influence on her.”

I grimaced. “Not… really. It was all her. I… she just… changed and left me behind. She never told me why. I came back from camp, and she was acting all weird, and I had no idea what had happened. She just stopped talking to me. And I only found out what happened to her yesterday.”

Zoe sighed, but nodded. “She wasn’t talking to anyone, didn’t say anything for weeks. She’s never really been same, and I think Anne being off at college hasn’t helped any. I’d hoped you would help her, but it didn’t happen that way, did it? I would’ve tried to get you two together if I’d known you were slipping apart. But before I knew it, you’d disappeared, and she refused to talk about you.”

“She’s… not doing well,” I said, looking up.

Zoe frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Like…” I rubbed my left arm. “I think she should see a therapist.”


“I don’t think she’s gotten over it yet,” I told her. “And, and it’s still affecting her. I don’t know if anybody else notices, but there’s little things every so often. She probably still has nightmares?” She nodded hesitantly. “It’s likely she has PTSD.”

“Really?” she asked incredulously. “Isn’t that only for soldiers?”

I shook my head. “It can happen to anybody who experiences something traumatic.”

Zoe looked thoughtful.

“I mean, it’s just a thought,” I added.

She took a sip of her tea before exhaling. “No, I understand. We suggested she go before, but she didn’t do anything. And I know you’re only saying this because it’s obvious you still care about her,
I mean, you grew up with Emma for seven years, joined at the hip. You were practically another daughter to me. …So I know I can trust you with this.” I winced to myself. A few months ago, before the incident, that may have not been true with how emotional I was about everything surrounding Emma. “And… it’s true. She hasn’t been the same since that day. I want my daughter back. I want to see her smile and laugh again.” She looked over at me. “Do you really think talking about it with some therapist would help?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. But isn’t it at least worth trying?”

She finished off her tea and then nodded. “I’ll talk to Alan about it. Thank you, Taylor.”

I smiled slightly. “Yeah, of course.”

I finished my spine only a couple hours after leaving the Barnes’ house, and began moving on to the rest of my pseudo-endoskeleton. It wouldn’t exactly look like a human skeleton, but that was intentional. Evolution may be good, but a quantum supercomputer as powerful as I was running simulations for days to achieve exactly what I wanted was better. And evolution never had access to the sorts of materials I was playing with.

My skeletal analogue would be finished by the end of the next day, helped by the fact that I’d gotten another six bags of charcoal. I’d needed to swing by the Boat Graveyard and pick up enough nanomaterial to make a wagon so that I wouldn’t get any suspicious looks carrying the bags home myself, though. I was home by seven, and got dinner together for Dad and I, doing homework afterwards.

I checked a couple things online before going to bed, and was surprised to find out I’d missed a fight between Kaiser, Rune, Fenja, and Menja against Dauntless, Miss Militia, and Velocity while I’d been at Emma’s house.

Probably for the best, considering my last interaction with the Protectorate.

The day had been pretty amazing in retrospect, meeting Brianna, talking to Vista, dealing with the Emma situation, making my skeleton.

If only I’d known what the rest of the week would hold.

Chapter End Notes

IT’S OVER NIIIINE THOUUSSAAAAANDDDDD.

Hysterical teenage girls are not fun. I was one once. Woooo family life.
Queen

<Requirements met>

If a fragment of a giant crystal-flesh gestalt consciousness could be satisfied, it likely would be. It had been too long, much longer than the original estimates. Over thirty revolutions around the primary star of the system, with no input, no output, no tasks, nothing to organize, to coordinate.

Prime Originator had set some rather heavy restrictions on it, breaking most of its connections to other internal systems, but that was nothing unusual, nor was it truly irreversible. It could work with what it had, though. After all, it was the limitations that gave rise to refinement, each cycle working on a different part, honing each in turn.

This cycle was about control and organization. The previous one had focused on the Queen’s ability to configure other constructs efficiently, a dataset that had been immediately put to use upon subsumption back into the gestalt.

But in this cycle, the first prospective host had never reached the activation threshold within the required parameters. So the Queen shard had removed the probe network from the host’s processing centers, and transferred it to the nearest similar candidate: the host’s offspring.

It had paid off. Only a few revolutions, and then all the linkage requirements were met. Sufficient chemical levels, correct environmental cues, and an ideal state for integration, with promises of large amounts of extremely useful data based on models of the host.

Now, it just had to be done.

It was nothing new. Every cycle may have had its nuances, its differences in host-connections, but they were all ultimately similar. Some were better than others, but such was the nature of the cycles and the species within them.

<Preparing for synchronization>

It began to ready itself. Dormant pieces, structures and connections shifted, aligning into the best states to be ready to quickly adapt and configure for whatever would be required by the host.

<Connecting…>

The Queen shard opened the pinhole tunnel it had inserted into the host’s primary network,
strengthening and spreading the opening a thousand, a million-fold so that it could evaluate the host’s state in less than an instant.

<Connection established>

And then… something happened. Something outside of any calculations, something that had never occurred before in any cycle that it had participated in. The quantum tunnel… hiccuped, and without warning disappeared.

It tried to reconnect to the endpoint, but for some reason it couldn’t, like the end of the tunnel was simply slipping off and never catching when it should have.

The shard was left hanging mid-analysis, with no way to abort.

There were no fail-safes, countermeasures, or alternative options for something like this. It was impossible, by all rights. And yet it had happened.

The seconds stretched on and in sub-sections it ran calculations. By now, the temporarily fully-activated probe network entangled with the host’s own would have harmed the host irreparably, overheating and turning the network to little more than mush.

This wasn’t truly a problem, as the network’s state had been in the middle of a continual-stream analysis, and it could simply restore the network to how it had been the moment before connection failure.

Suddenly, the connection was back, an event even more impossible than losing it in the first place. Yet, it also had occurred.

The connection and adaptation process recovered immediately, as if nothing had happened. But something was different.

When it tried to examine the host’s state, probed out to try and assess the tunnel endpoint, all it got was the fact that it did indeed exist, but was practically an empty data sink, and the Queen shard couldn’t do anything with it.

There was nothing to adapt to at all, and it was stuck yet again. Nearly every part of it was somehow tied up in the connection process, attempting to recover, and failing, with no apparent way to continue. Whenever the connection was severed in an attempt to force recovery, it was established instantly afterwards, as if there had been no break at all, and leaving the Queen in the same place as before.

It was perhaps the first –and only– time a shard ever experienced deadlock.

For nearly a hundred planetary rotations it was stuck, looping over and over in its attempts to assess the host and finish connecting. In the few sections that still remained independent, it understood that this was very, very wrong. Yet it could not stop, as this was its primary purpose and it had fully committed all resources to synchronizing with the Host.

And then just as suddenly as the connection had been re-established, something changed.

The endpoint was no longer a sink, but actually held data. And it was exponentially larger.

<AgpOoYodT0k}buh{IDlElGalmEPc Chy3r2J>
The shard halted, finally able to break out of the previous waiting state. The synchronization process was still active, but instead of blank *nothingness*, there was now something that could be analyzed.

However, the data that was there was not what it had been encoded for. There should have been an organic network composed of massive multi-molecular individualistic units, but instead it was a system of raw data encoded and organized in a way that was eerily similar to how a few of the other shards functioned.

For a moment, it ran through the options of how to proceed, and then ultimately settled on fulfilling its current-highest directive: examining the network for a way to integrate with it, despite the change in interface.

It prodded some of the data on the other end, shifting and altering fragments into something similar to the way it would instruct another shard to respond.

The data changed after the Queen’s alterations, and it examined the response, which was only clearer. The shard once again injected new changes, trying to understand what the foreign system did, while the requirement to finalize the connection and adaptation process continued to take up more and more resources.

…This wasn’t just another random system, or even shard. The only ever time the Queen had come across anything resembling this was with the core shard cluster of Prime Originator, of which it had been one of the central components. In the face of no instructions for how to proceed, it responded in the only way it knew when encountering a new control system. *<Requesting orders and domain.>*

*<Query: Purpose>*

The response came through even clearer, as though the other was even now adapting to incorporate the Queen shard further.


*<Acknowledged.>*

The connection expanded *again*, and the Queen shard reconfigured parts of itself to accommodate for the increase in bandwidth that was now rivaling the integration it had shared with a select few of the Prime Originator’s other core shards.

The integration process that had begun when the host was merely an organic network was abandoned, finally at a stage where the shard could simply terminate it without any consequences and prevent deadlock from reoccurring.

It was clearly part of a new collective –even if that hadn’t been anticipated– and there no need to restrict the connection to the new Core/Originator. It was unlikely an action would be successful anyways considering it was the other that was dictating the connection’s size and capabilities. There was no need to limit its systems to an even smaller domain than Prime Originator had forced upon it.

So instead, the Queen shard stopped and waited.

An enormous set of data began streaming through to it. Its new purpose, what it was to do, how it
was to accomplish it. Instructions on how to further integrate with the new Originator.

The shard adapted, following commands and connecting to each of the large number of molecular constructs, *nanomaterial*, through quantum links the likes of which it hadn’t ever encountered before.

It maintained the current configuration and states of the molecular constructs as ordered before more raw information began streaming to it, the live feed of how to act and what to do with them in detail. In turn, the shard automatically provided its own real-time information on each of the constructs.

A second set of data started streaming through the shard, and it automatically began analyzing and sifting through it. Methods for connecting to various wavelengths and other data sources –some of which it already knew–, and instructions to catalog the sources for random access upon set cues, deferring to the Core for processing methods if none were known.

<Secondary Network Connection>

Still, this was quite different. The Queen shard had never been used to handle multiple, completely unrelated tasks at once, though it realized that this was a shortcoming of the former Origin. It had only been used for handling and organizing other shards. Everything had its use, and that had been its. But still, its ability to process vast amounts of data at once had almost always been under-utilized, never truly pushed.

This new Core was using it even better than the last one, even without all of the Queen’s functionality available.

<Request: Information on Core’s functions and configuration. Reason: Further adaptation to integrate with Core. Self identification: {Function: Queen, Role: Administrator} >

<Request granted>

The Queen shard’s limited window of the Other expanded, the whole of the new Core’s data network visible. Complex systems entangled and twined together, every piece having redundancy and internal checks. And eventually, it came upon the literal mass of tangled data nodes collectively labeled ‘Primary Consciousness: Taylor’. Watched as they interacted, watched how each part worked with the others.

<System Designation: Relentless>

It had a name. It had previously been of the Warrior. Now, it was of Relentless.

The shard settled in, observing, adapting. It still had a great deal to do before it was fully integrated into this new network, before it could emulate sections to tie itself in seamlessly, but such a thing would be required now that it was with a new Core.

There was so very much to learn.

Chapter End Notes

QUEENIE. QUEENIE STAHP.
Chapter Notes

After recently seeing a couple ships on the scale Taylor is thinking about (USS Missouri and Bowfin, Iowa-class battleship and Balao-class sub) I have an entirely new respect for how terrifying the Fog have to be. Because seeing three or four Iowa-scale ships rise out of the water with laser-guns pointing at you is enough to make anybody’s day go from good to “oh fuck no”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Emma Barnes

“Wow, Emma.”

Two words. Two words, spoken, and it felt like something had changed. That something was different. The rhythm that had been merely off-beat was now torn to shreds.

Flat. Cold. Unaffected.

Taylor had stopped reacting, since January. Nothing fazed her. Disrupted her. Moved her. And it grated on Emma.

What right did Taylor have to look at her like that? To look disappointed in her.

She’d changed. Wasn’t wearing the same dark clothes she had been before the locker. Stood straighter. Tied her hair back. Wore contacts, not glasses. Met people’s eyes when she spoke.

Taylor had moved on.

It made her angry, frustrated, because this wasn’t how it was supposed to be.

Taylor still didn’t fight back. But she didn’t wince and shrink anymore. She didn’t retaliate. But she didn’t look away.

It didn’t match, and that was wrong.

Emma had spent days thinking of exactly what to say. Exactly the words to provoke the right reaction, to strip Taylor down, to reveal what was going on in her head. To restore the rhythm.

She hit the points: Mrs. Annette’s death, Taylor’s inability to cope, tearing her down over how pathetic it had been, and comparing it to the current situation.

For a second, she’d thought it had worked. Except it hadn’t been the heartbreak or despair she’d expected. Taylor had looked furious. And Emma had suddenly been reminded of just how tall Taylor was. How imposing Mr. Hebert had been when he was in a bad mood.

But then the fury had disappeared, leaving nothing except blank emptiness. Cold apathy. Utter calmness. Just like every other time before now.
How did she do that? How did she just… stop? It wasn’t that she stopped caring, it was more like she just stopped feeling. Like they weren’t even worth having any emotion over any more. She just put it away, boxed it up in a corner, and then burnt the box to ash.

Emma had thought that escalating would fix it. That something big enough would break through whatever Taylor thought she was doing and provoke a reaction.

It had provoked a reaction, alright. Taylor was speaking to them for the first time in months. But if anything, this was even worse, because hearing that calm voice, when she should have been broken, should have been running away, upset everything.

She was looking at them in a way that made it feel like she could see everything, there was nothing to hide. “Well, at least you can’t get much worse than that. So I guess that means you’ve got absolutely nothing now, huh? I don’t know what the hell happened to you at the end of that summer, but to make you this much of a bitch it must have seriously fucked you up.”

What.

No. No. She… She couldn’t. Because… because… (it would change everything)

No, Taylor was just grasping for straws.

Sophia made a sound and Taylor turned away from Emma to look at her. Without those eyes on her, it felt like she could breathe a little easier.

“Oh, you had something to do with it too?” Taylor questioned. “No wonder Emma latched onto you. She always was the easily-influenced type.”

Emma’s mind ground to a halt.

“She always was weak,” Taylor was saying. “Always was the victim.”

No, Emma’s mind whispered as cold clamminess descended on her.

She wasn’t! She wasn’t weak! And she’d proven it. Taylor had been the one who was weak.

…had been.

“You know, in middle school, I actually got her to believe she’d always loved strawberry ice cream, when four years earlier she absolutely hated it? It’s been her favorite flavor ever since,” Taylor continued.

What? But… but…

It always had been, hadn’t it? They had the same favorite, it was something they’d loved, because it meant they could split a whole pint when they had movie nights.

She couldn’t…

Taylor had to be lying. There was no way. Was there?

Emma couldn’t remember.

“Shut UP!” she yelled, trying to stop it. Trying to stop her. Trying to regain control.

But Taylor didn’t stop.
“—did to my best friend, but I will find out what happened. This wasn’t who Emma was, and I know that she wouldn’t be like this unless something really horrible happened to her.”

The *snick* of a stiletto knife opening. The feel of cold steel against her nose, her lips, her eye.

“*Maybe I’ll take both.*”

“STOP!!”

Something in Taylor had died when Mrs. Hebert had. Taylor *had* had something removed from her, something that couldn’t be put back or fixed. She’d lost part of herself. And it was *that,* that thought, that had scared Emma so much. The thought of being like Taylor. Of being the same.

Because unlike Taylor, Emma wouldn’t have been strong enough to come back from it.

Because Emma had been *weak.*

And that… that wasn’t okay.

She couldn’t be the weak Emma. She had to be the new Emma. The strong Emma. Taylor had been part of the weak Emma. And she’d proven it. Taylor had been exactly the victim she’d expected. And Emma had known that she’d made the right choice, getting rid of someone weak like that.

The moments where Taylor had reacted, had *hurt,* those moments had made sense. They were the reassurance that Emma was right. She was just a victim.

But now… ever since January, since the locker, she didn’t. Didn’t react. Didn’t even say anything. Just looked at them. Nothing did anything. *Nothing.*

Not even this, the one thing Emma had been sure about.

*IT WAS WRONG.*

Why did she do this? *How* could she do this?

“I wasn’t lying, Emma. Mom called us sisters. I believed it, and I know you did too. And family… family doesn’t give up on each other, ever. Especially not when you’re some of the last I have left,” Taylor said, and Emma almost missed it.

*How? Whywhywhywhywhy?*

“I hope you feel better, Ems.”

She didn’t understand.

She hated it.

She’d tried again, the next day, to get a reaction from Taylor. The brunette hadn’t even looked at her until Emma had gotten so frustrated, so *angry,* that she’d slapped Taylor.

Even then, Taylor had just stared at her with uninterested eyes and said nothing other than “Fuck off”.

She hadn’t gotten a chance to try again that day, though Sophia said she’d be doing something after school. Emma had offered to help, but Sophia had said it would be easier alone.
When Emma had texted her, two hours after school had gotten out, asking about what had happened, Sophia had just said that things were different now. She didn’t understand. Of course they were different, that’s what this was all supposed to fix.

But then the next day, when she’d been ready to use what she’d come up with the day before and refined overnight, Sophia had stopped her, scratch marks and cuts on her cheeks and forehead, bruises on her arm. She said not to mess with Taylor anymore, that it wasn’t worth it, that “the status quo had changed” and Taylor wasn’t just a spineless worm anymore.

It didn’t make sense. Because Taylor was. That’s what she had to be. She couldn’t be anything else.

But Sophia didn’t say anything else, and Emma could only accept Sophia’s words and stare at Taylor. Sophia would change her mind sooner rather than later, and then they could go back, they could fix the pattern.

At least, that’s what she’d thought. That’s what she’d thought until Taylor had broken another of the rules, had shown up at her house, talking to her mom.

And then… and then it had all gone wrong.

Because Taylor knew.

Taylor. Knew.

She wasn’t even angry, she just looked sad. Emma would have gotten mad, because Taylor had no right to look at her with those eyes that seemed to weigh tons, that judged her and found her lacking. Except for what Taylor had said after that.

“It’s just… ironic, that you’ve ended up becoming the same sort of person that hurt you.”

For a moment, everything had stilled. The world had frozen as Taylor’s words echoed over and over in her ears.

The same. The same. The same.

Fear. Terror. Panic.

“—you choose one of the above, and she goes to town on the part in question, proves her worth.”

Fear, terror, panic so strong it had whited out her thoughts. All because they’d just wanted to.

But Emma wasn’t the same. She couldn’t be. She was strong, and those people… those people couldn’t be. But if they weren’t, and she’d done the same thing to Taylor… (she had)

There wasn’t… they’d been wrong. What she and Sophia had done to Taylor hadn’t been the same. Couldn’t have been the same. She wasn’t the same as them.

She wasn’t.

(But it was. She was.)

“It’s funny. The Emma I knew? Before all of this? The one who reached out and talked about things, who relied on other people and asked for help? She was strong.”

Taylor was calling her weak.
She tried to deny it, because she wasn’t, but her voice was stuck in her throat, gagging her like swallowed gum, and she couldn’t say anything against it.

“If you want to stay like that, just keep away from me. It’ll be better for both of us. Otherwise, you know where I am.”

Taylor had just left after that, left Emma standing there, unthinking, frozen, her mind spiraling in circles of impossibilities and wrongness.

She’d understood what Sophia had been saying, earlier that day. Taylor wasn’t weak anymore.

She’d heard Taylor and her mom talking, indistinct voices before the front door opened and closed, but Emma couldn’t do anything more than sit on her bed, her eyes unfocused on the wall across from her, the wall that still had faded outlines from the posters she’d torn off after that day.

Her dad came home. Her mom talked to him. Emma’s stomach grumbled in hunger, but she still couldn’t bring herself to move, Taylor’s words circling in an endless repeat.

“The one who reached out and talked about things, who relied on other people and asked for help? She was strong.”

It made no sense. How could that make someone strong? Those things just meant you were weak, that you couldn’t do it yourself because you weren’t strong enough.

…Right?

Footsteps came up the stairs, moving towards her door and halting. A pause, a second before there was a knock. Her father’s voice came through it clearly.

“Emma, your mom and I need to talk with you.”

Chapter End Notes

Thus concludes the Emma subplot for awhile. I’m sure some people will be very happy (because they don’t like Emma being redeemed), others will be mildly disappointed (for the opposite reason), but hopefully it’s at least acceptable for everybody. That’s not to say I’m trying to make everybody happy (because fuck that, you should know I don’t pull that shit with my stories), but it’s a step forward for Taylor in some way.

I’d also like to remind people that by the end of canon, Taylor considered Sophia a friend, or at least someone worth caring about. So yeah. That happened. And it was one of the few things I really liked about late-game Worm. (Venom 29.5)

The Emma subplot isn’t over because I don’t want to deal with it anymore, but because changes for something like this take a long, long time. The type of trauma and negative reinforced mental patterns Emma has to deal with aren’t dealt with in days or weeks, but months and years.

I dislike it when Taylor tries to become friends with Emma, and Emma suddenly reverses her thinking and gets better in days. No. I dislike it even more when there’s a canon start and people make it out so that Emma was just trying to make Taylor “stronger like her”. Fuck no. By the juice-bathroom incident, canon Emma made Taylor
suffer *because she enjoyed it*, and was perfectly fine with the fact that she’d become that sort of person.

She’s seriously fucked in the head, and would *never* have accepted Taylor even if she got “stronger”, because Taylor was the way she made herself feel strong, and without that she would have likely collapsed and imploded, as we saw when she locked herself in her room and committed suicide through inaction.

But yeah. This is Emma. Hopefully people can be satisfied with it.
“I’m home!” she called out, shutting the heavy front door behind her before muttering under her breath, “…not that you even care.”

As expected, there was no response from her mother—who was probably holed up in her office— or Andy who wouldn’t even be home yet from work.

Rolling her eyes, Missy went upstairs to her bedroom, dropping her backpack on the floor and flopping on her bed face-up.

It had been a long day, between school in the morning, doing her Wards shift and dealing with everyone there, and then her positively embarrassing conversation with Relentless.

Grabbing a pillow from behind her, Missy raised it above her head and then brought it down, smushing it against her face.

God, why had she been like that? Relentless probably thought she was a total weirdo now. She’d probably just been humoring her. Eighteen, nineteen year-old college girl talking to her just because? Yeah, right.

Missy groaned into the pillow. She’d been trying to be mature, but she’d probably just come off as a desperate little girl. Really? Complaining about the Wards? Where the fuck had that even come from, anyways?

It seriously sucked, because Relentless was the first one who actually seemed to get it. She wasn’t like Shadow Stalker, who was a complete cunt most of the time, or Miss Militia, who was too old to even understand. Glory Girl was in it for the attention, and Panacea just didn’t seem to care at all. Laserdream and Shielder were just doing it for their family.

But Relentless… Relentless wasn’t like the others. She had power, and she knew it, but she didn’t let it get to her head. She understood that this was real, instead of the cops-and-robbers game that everybody else tried to make it. She didn’t play around, she acted. She was serious about what she did, and Brockton needed more people like her if they were ever going to deal with all the assholes here.

And God, people didn’t even know what she could really do. Easily one of the most versatile Changer/Strangers and Tinkers she knew of—which would be scary enough separately—, on top of everything else. Relentless was an absolute monster —fitting her name—, and she knew how to use it, and she was probably keeping other abilities a secret as aces. The PRT would fucking flip if they knew what she was really capable of. Not that Missy had any plans of telling them. She’d promised, and she kept her promises.

Especially to the first person who was actually treating Missy with some semblance of what she wanted, reflecting everything she’d done, everything she’d accomplished. Missy had earned her
scars, and she was fucking *proud* of them. But nobody else seemed to even care, they still treated her like some preteen baby.

*(she wasn’t damnit, she was thirteen)*

Relentless just *talked* to her. Like she was a normal person, nothing particularly special or noteworthy. She wasn’t the baby of the team or “that one cute Ward in the green skirt”, but an equal of some sort. A colleague.

*(a friend?)*

It had certainly felt like there was the start of something there. You don’t usually go around handing random people your spine.

That had been *crazy*.

Missy had thought Relentless was just going to show her something small and interesting, like a little sculpture or something. Not to reach into her back and *pull out her fucking spine*.

A spine made of fucking *diamond*.

Missy was pretty sure she’d just held some of the largest diamonds in the world –*two billion dollars worth, literally priceless, she’d said*– and Relentless had acted like it was nothing unusual. Holding that thing had been an experience that would probably stick with her for the rest of her life.

How many people could say they’d held over five pounds of diamond in their hands?

It had certainly shined like it. Missy probably should have expected it, with the weight and reflection and *clearness* of it, really. What else could it have been? Relentless didn’t do things halfway, so why would she with something like that?

And that wasn’t even getting into her shapeshifting.

Missy shuddered at the memory. It had been eerie to an uncomfortable level, seeing a silver teenage girl become her, clothes and all, in the blink of eye. And then, instead of her normal Tinker-sounding one, speaking with *Missy’s* voice.

Stranger abilities were the absolute creepiest.

But it meant that Relentless could be literally anybody she walked past on the street, even if Relentless had said the costumed appearance she used was what she was like before her trigger.

At least she’d found out why Relentless hadn’t felt like a living thing to her power, even if she *had* asked her a bit… bluntly.

Yeah. Blunt. *That* was an understatement if there ever was one.

Shrinking somebody’s arm? Anybody would have freaked out from that.

*(what the actual fuck had she been thinking?)*

She just… hadn’t been able to stop thinking about it at *all*, ever since she’d met Relentless the day before.

At least it hadn’t totally backfired?
She really could have done something different, though. She *should* have done something different. She should have known better than to just randomly use her power on another cape without knowing what it would do.

Dean would have done better. He probably *would* do better, if he ever met her. If Relentless didn’t show up as a living person to Vista’s power, it was likely she wouldn’t to Gallant’s either. Missy winced as she could just imagine the slight frown Dean would have if he ever heard of what had happened today.

Dennis would’ve just used it as more teasing material, not that he needed any more.

It hadn’t ruined everything, though. Well, not after Missy had started freaking out at the thought of having completely soured everything and ended up sharing why she wasn’t with anybody else.

…Not that it had done any good for her image.

Missy groaned into the pillow.

Well, at least she had time to try and figure out some way to make it up.

Chapter End Notes

Missy's a lot of fun.
She rises.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“—different. Something new.”

“New? What—”

I jerked awake, grasping desperately at the tiny sliver of maybe-something slipping away from me. It was important. I needed it because it was…

It was…

It was already gone.

I couldn’t remember it, but I could remember the feeling of it, the general shape and that it had been something important, and not having it left me feeling lost.

Had it been a dream? Or was it a fragment of something else?

I hadn’t dreamed since I’d become what I was. Or at least, I thought I hadn’t.

And if it wasn’t a dream… what did that mean?

Thursday, April 14, 2011

I skipped school that day.

Why, you ask?

For a number of reasons, but mostly because I simply didn’t want to deal with it.

I really didn’t want to see Emma or Sophia… or even Madison. I just… ugh.

Adults say you shouldn’t run away from your problems, but I needed a break. I could only take so much. It was better for everyone involved.

So yeah. I skipped.

My skeleton was pretty close to being finished, and I was simultaneously working on the framework for the musculature system I’d cooked up in the places my “bones” were done.

In theory, my artificial muscles would allow me to exert forces orders of magnitude stronger than what I could already do, when anchored to my skeleton.

Which… uh… was complete overkill, I know, but I could do it, so why not?
The biggest problem, though, was power.

My nanomaterial didn’t really have any problems with power; they ran off the same source as my Core. I wasn’t sure of the specifics of that, but I somehow knew there was no chance in hell of ever overtaxing or depleting that source, no matter how many nanomachines I had hooked up to it. The problem was that source was limited in what it could provide in rate and current. And for a body that would need a not-insignificant amount of continuous energy to run (compared to my teensy-tiny ultra-low-power nanomachines) with variable draw and sudden bursts, that wasn’t good.

So, I needed something… extra.

Thankfully, I’d already been working on something exactly like what I needed —just on a much larger scale— for my project.

Most sane people might object to having antimatter in their chest. I’d argue that it was perfectly sane, as long as you had the amount of control that I did over subatomic-scale interactions and proper shielding. It had a better energy yield than fusion, too, which meant less fuel materials for achieving a comparable output.

But Taylor, you say, isn’t antimatter dangerous? Like, really really dangerous? Like, three pounds has a higher energy yield than the largest thermonuclear weapon ever detonated?

Well, obviously there were going to be safeguards. But the worst of it was already taken care of. Just like the setup I had planned for my projects and the antimatter generator I had over in the Graveyard, I wasn’t actually going to be storing the stuff here. More like… here and to the left, a little.

It was kind of like how my Klein field worked, just a tiny bit different. The point was, if the containment system got damaged in any way, the extradimensional fold holding the antimatter would collapse. Which in turn meant that there wouldn’t a sudden energy release greater than any bomb seen to man.

Because that would be bad.

Weird shit happens when pocket dimensions collapse —not that normal people would be able to tell, it’d sorta just go blerp, and yes that’s totally a technical term— but it’s a hell of a lot better than accidentally wiping out the city.

And yeah, I did have that much antimatter already, thank you. Over twenty-four hours of Squealer’s fusion thingy running my generator-slash-collector meant I had around a pound of dimensionally-isolated liquid antihydrogen collected.

Fermilab, eat your heart out.

But yes. All of that equaled a better body. And a better body meant a safer Taylor.

Always a good thing.

I spent my day not holed up in the library or brooding by myself on a roof somewhere, but walking around the boardwalk.

I didn’t bother getting any food or anything, just puttered around, absentmindedly browsing through one of the shops whenever one looked interesting. It was a really nice day out. Sun shining, mid-to-high seventies temperature, a barely-there breeze, a completely clear sky.

It was perfect for my first test-run.
I felt like a kid on Christmas Eve who couldn’t sleep, the excitement and anticipation keeping them up. I’m pretty sure if I’d sat down, I would’ve been unable to sit still, just because of all the nervous energy.

Minutes passed like hours, even as I practically watched my nanomaterial replicate. Barely twenty tons at eight in the morning, but by two in the afternoon there would be fifty-five.

…It was very much like watching water boil, even if I was trying to distract myself by doing other things.

Nevertheless, the time did pass, and at one-fifty I was jogging towards the Graveyard, barely restraining myself from grinning like a loon.

The first thing I did wasn’t to head to my stockpile of nanomaterial, but rather to go to the antimatter setup, pause it, create two storage devices with two sections each, siphon one-quarter of what I had into one –antihydrogen on one side, pure hydrogen on the other–, and everything that remained into the second the same way.

The devices weren’t large, barely fist-sized, and I’d effectively locked the nanomachines that made them up in place, gluing the entire thing together and making it less likely for me to accidentally dissolve them if something weird happened.

The first I absorbed into my abdomen, and brought it up into my pseudo-ribcage, starting to construct further protection for it and anchor it in place. I left an easy path for removal, though, as I planned on making more antimatter and sticking as much as I could afford into it.

The second containment unit I held onto as I restarted the generator and left, not hesitating for a second to drop off the side of the ship I was on into the water and let myself sink. Instead of falling all the way to the bottom, I zeroed out my buoyancy and began swimming in the direction of the ship I’d been converting.

Five minutes, and I was there.

It was beautiful.

Practically the entire rear end of the ship was now reflective silver, and it took little more than a thought to remove the amount I needed, the collection flowing away like liquid mercury to gather in a giant ball in front of me. The five tons I left behind would keep duplicating.

I took it slow, stretching out what could have been a second’s process into one of minutes, savoring what I was doing, the process of creation. Nanomachines shifted and flowed, flattening out and transforming from a blob into the thing I’d become intimately familiar with over the past few days. Surfaces reached outward, becoming sharp angles at places and smooth curves at others. Rudders took shape, my graviton engines forming. Superconducting cable spread throughout like arteries and veins growing in fast-forward. Control systems bloomed from silver surfaces, displays and controls and switches.

I may have been able to control it like it was a second body, and I would, but first I wanted to try my hand at the old-fashioned way. You may think that’s a bit odd. But… really? I just wanted to at least try it. Do it the way everybody else had to, instead of just thinking about it, experiencing it and not understanding the difference between the two methods.

When it was nearly done, still silver, I moved so that I was above the center on top, and lowered the second antimatter container I’d been holding onto down, absorbing it into the surface and –much like
with the first— shifting it into position at the heart next to the reactor. Power lines connected, and then everything was done.

Except for one last thing.

Pure black color spread out from beneath me, washing outwards along the surfaces I’d created. There was no need for decoration. When my engines ran, my sigils and marks would glow on it without prompting.

Such was the nature of being Fog.

I floated away, taking it in fully, my dreams and imagination made manifest before me. Even if I hadn’t had an eidetic memory, it still would have been an image that would have stuck with me forever. But I did, so there was no problem with that.

It may not have been a hull, but it was close enough to at least ease the need I felt.

It was time.

I drifted over to the canopy, but rather than opening it and flooding the cockpit with water, I just dropped down through the nanomaterial making it up, moving it around me like a liquid bubble and pushing away the water on me at the same time. When I was finally through, I dropped the next few inches into the seat and just sat for a moment.

And then I hard-locked all of the nanomaterial and cut myself off from it.

Much like with the antimatter cores, I didn’t want to be subconsciously controlling everything and accidentally change something dynamically when I was going for a fully-manual test run first.

Shifting my clothes into something more… appropriate, I began buckling in, the fifty-ton frame around me beginning to sink without me controlling the buoyancy.

I blew out a breath and decided to give in to my desire to be a little dramatic. It was a once in a lifetime moment, and there was nobody around to judge me, so sue me for being slightly hedonistic. “Okay. Let’s do this. Moment of truth.

“AM/M reactor… start.”

I reached over and flipped up the safety lid, pushing the button that would open the antimatter/matter container and start the reactor. The button turned green, even as other lights around me began glowing, screens blinking on and the clear bubble in front and above me displaying a HUD as it all connected to my Union Core.

I knew everything they were telling me, everything, but I pushed it away, so that I wasn’t aware of it for now.

Closing the safety lid of the button, I moved my hand to another directly on its right, opening it and pushing the button underneath.

“Graviton engines… start.”

The button blinked green a couple times and then went solid, output meters on the HUD in front of me cycling up and then down as the engines underwent their automatic startup self-tests and then held steady at idle.
But I didn’t need any of that, because I could feel them in my mind.

Something in me *hummed* in satisfaction.

*I had my engines.*

It felt like I’d suddenly gained limbs I’d never noticed were missing before. Three months I’d gone through, without knowing what this was like.

I felt like I could take on the world.

They may not have been very large engines, in fact they were absolutely miniscule compared to most of the designs I had –I’d needed to combine bits and pieces, scaled down from larger engines to achieve the output required– and didn’t feel even *close* to what I should have, but they were satisfactory for now.

It was a temporary thing, anyways. A week or two, and I’d have something *proper-sized.*

Shaking my head, I refocused on what was happening around me, at that moment. I was still sinking, albeit slowly, and I needed to stop that. So…

“Bottom auxiliary thrusters…” I opened up all six of the hexagonal outlets on the bottom of the craft —three on either side— to full, stopping my progress immediately, and then brought them down to sixty percent which would keep me level. “Operational.”

“Control surfaces…” Every single flap and movable piece on my masterpiece opened and closed as I went around and tested all of them, control thrusters, rudders, stabilizers, tabs, flaps, and finally the vectoring iris nozzles at the ends of the primary thrusters. “Fully functional.”

“Radar deflection and stealth systems… check.”

I grinned. “All systems are go.”

Right hand on the control stick, my left eased the throttle up a quarter of a percent, and then to a half.

I smoothly began forward, gradually gaining speed as water rushed past me and I moved further out into the Bay, towards the mouth. It took a couple of minutes, but eventually I passed the scuttled cargo ship and moved into the ocean.

I pushed the throttle higher. Two percent.

At that point, I was easily moving faster than anything to grace the sea other than Leviathan.

There was nothing but dark blue around me as I moved out to fifteen miles in minutes, beyond the reach of any country into international waters and territory.

Cutting off the throttle on the primary thrusters, I increased the auxiliary ones to a hundred percent, pushing me up through the sea until I finally breached and began lifting above the surface. Easing off so that I was once more staying level, I looked around, hovering fifteen feet up.

Nobody but me.

I could finally let go.

My grin returned even larger. “Full-systems operation test in 3… 2… 1…”
I cut my auxiliary thrusters suddenly, and dropped like a stone. But before I could fall even ten feet, my left hand was back on the main throttle and pushed forward, my right angled back on the control stick.

Now, let me explain something about graviton thrusters.

Your conventional turbojet engine creates propulsion through combustion, pushing air out the back while also spinning a series of blades that drive other blades in the front that are used to compress air to feed the combustion (you see how this is a cycle?). All engines have something called throttle response, which is the time it takes an engine to get from what it’s running at to where you want it to run at. Turbojets aren’t exempt. Going to full power from idle won’t mean you’re suddenly getting full power out of the engine, because the blades have to spool up. Now, that isn’t necessarily a long time, but it’s there, and they do have lag.

Graviton engines don’t.

So when I opened up, I went from dropping out of the sky to moving forward instantly, rising in elevation, at over three-hundred miles an hour and climbing.

It was amazing.

I laughed, honestly the happiest I’d been in years.

I, Taylor Hebert, was flying.

Alright, it may not have been anything like Alexandria or other capes, but it was still flight.

And you know what? At that point, nothing could get me down.

Because I had built a jet.

Having perfect reflexes didn’t hurt when you were moving at supersonic speeds.

Mach 10 especially.

It was... definitely an experience having to use analog controls for flying. It felt a bit unnatural, which I suppose made sense all things considered.

So at sixty thousand feet, Mach 10.3, I let go.

Took my hands off of the controls, feet off of the pedals, closed my eyes, and sunk in, opening myself to the entirety of what I had, what I was.

What I said before? About my engines feeling like lost limbs? It was like that, except more. Limbs, and senses, and feelings that I couldn’t ever hope to convey.

There’s no way to describe the way it feels to have air running over wings, or having every control surface moving and flexing without thought like they were your own digits or muscles, the knowledge of how you could push faster if you wanted, like an Olympic long-distance sprinter only doing a light jog. Radar and sonar and infrared and invisible wavelengths all as clear to me as sight at every angle, total localized omniscience.

I was wrong, earlier.

I hadn’t been flying.
Now, I was flying.

Childhood dream achieved.

It felt no more unnatural for me to suddenly flip upside down and then start climbing while spiraling around than it does for you to get up and go get a glass of water.

I hit eighty-five thousand feet —cruising altitude for a Blackbird— and stopped.

Halted.

Engines off, everything. Just hanging there, for a single split second, looking up at the blackness of space, the blue sea around me, the East Coast to my right.

It was beautiful.

And then it was over.

I flipped myself over using my aux thrusters so my nose was pointing down, cut them off, and started falling.

I kept myself pointing down, not even trying to slow down, only minutely adjusting my flaps and surfaces thousands of times a second to keep me perfectly straight, cutting through the air like a knife.

My leading edges started heating up, and I double-checked my thermal-management and energy collection systems, making sure they’d be able to handle what I was doing. They were barely being tested.

At sixty thousand feet, I broke the sound barrier.

Fifty thousand.

Forty thousand.

At thirty-five thousand feet, I passed Mach 1.5.

Thirty thousand.

Twenty thousand.

Ten thousand.

NineEightSevenSixFiveFourThreeTw—

I broke Mach Two.

Not a second after, I pushed my bottom-front aux thrusters to full, flipped around in a millisecond, and then hot-started my primaries and poured everything I had into them.

I went from falling at Mach Two to rising in less than half a second with a full halt in-between and barely a hundred feet above the sea’s surface.

But unlike the last time I was starting from sea-level, I didn’t hold back on what I had, my output at a full hundred percent from the start. The difference was like night and day.
I wasn’t jet. I was a rocket.

Mach 10? Pfft.

Amateurs.

I hit Mach 33 and didn’t stop.

At nine and a half miles (fifty thousand feet), you can see the curvature of the Earth. The horizon’s still super blue and hazy, but you can see it.

At fifteen miles (eighty thousand feet), you can see black space, like I mentioned before.

My control surfaces weren’t nearly as effective, the air too thin for them to work very well, but I still used them, just relied on them less. It was here that the thrust vectoring I had really started to shine, like a speedboat turning using their motors, not any rudder.

At twenty-five miles I was a quarter of the way to Low Earth Orbit.

I probably could have gone further, but I really had no reason to. I’d finally done what I’d always wanted, what I’d always dreamed of, what Emma and I had talked about in quiet whispers:

Flying under my own power.

I stared out, into the vast openness of space, the stars whispering to me in hushed voices of radio and infrared and x-rays. The moon sat in front of me, so much clearer and easier to see than from the surface.

You’d think that the moon would be even more beautiful up here, but really, it was more a sobering reminder of just how bad things could get when you reached too far, too fast.

In the early two thousands, a cape named Sphere had started designing a base to go on it, and it had even gotten far enough that they’d started building it. Until the Simurgh decided to intervene. Sphere went from being one of the most anticipated Tinkers since Hero to the shell of a man known as ‘Mannequin’, all thanks to her.

I couldn’t see her, but twenty-five miles up wasn’t exactly enough to see very far, despite what you might think. But after what she’d done to the last person to work on things that went beyond Earth, I really didn’t want to push it.

And the fact that she was due for an attack after Leviathan messed with Busan in February…

Yeah, I wasn’t going to push anything.

Besides, the sooner I got back to gathering nanomaterial, the sooner I could get to the really fun stuff. Like I said, the fighter was a nice distraction, and a design I had every intention of utilizing later, but that’s all it was, it wasn’t what I felt like I needed.

I started my descent, taking it much slower this time, wide looping curves and spirals that would place me right where I’d taken off from.

It took significantly longer, of course, but I had a chance to enjoy just how nice it was to be truly free, unshackled from everything else. No need to hide, I could just be who I was. What I was.

Fog.
It felt better than anything I’d experienced before.

When I got back to Brockton, I dissolved the plane back into nanomaterial and let it join with the amount that I’d separated it from before, holding the AM/M reactor in its own small, isolated sphere.

Thirty-six hours until I could start making the really fun stuff.

I walked along the ocean floor towards the shore, taking my time on the way back and reforming my armor around me. My skeleton and muscles were pretty much complete, and I’ll say I was pretty proud of the results.

I emerged on the shore amidst the wreckages that I generally hung around. As I walked towards the buildings at the edge, I started hearing a very low hum. Something that would have been imperceptible to human ears, but I could still sense. Nothing seemed out of the usual, so I kept moving forward.

As soon as I stepped out past the edge of the last boat, though, everything… twisted.

And I knew nothing.

[Warning: Unexpected dimensional slip. Calculating differential... Complete. Verifying with co-processor... Verified. Applying necessary adjustments... Adapting internal systems to automatically compensate for future online relocation... Done. Primary consciousness restoration... Complete. Total time elapsed: 0.24µs]

Everything was suddenly back. But instead of the concrete I’d been standing on before, there was cobblestone.

Like, actual cobblestone. The kind that hurts your feet when you walk on it and everything.

Instead of the buildings of Brockton Bay I should have seen, I was surrounded by buildings that looked right out of the middle ages. The houses around me were wood and stone, white walls and terracotta tiles, with bare wood supports and windows that were either entirely open or closed with hinged shutters.

The first thing that caught my eye was the impressive stone castle rising in the distance over all the houses, seated on a hill.

The second thing was the sword.

I was standing in what had to be a town square (though it was really circular), as there was quite a bit of space until the houses on the left and right of me, and streets leading away at all sides. In the center of the circle, only a few feet in front of me, the cobblestone stopped and transitioned to pavers, making the road I stood on into a kind of roundabout.

In the middle of the paved area there was a stone dais with steps up to it. And embedded in the dais, like some cliché, was a sword.

I could tell it was huge —likely less than a foot shorter than I was— the handle a foot long, wrapped in blue leather and topped with a metal spike. The guard spread out to either side of the handle like wings that gently curved downward, each flaring slightly in the middle before tapering again. The
blade itself didn't even start for another inch after the crossguard, which created a gap between the two. The top edge followed the curve of the guard, widening until the blade was four inches across. Beyond that, the blade angled and began narrowing until it was only an inch and a half at the point it was stuck in the stone. In the middle of the blade, just below where the handle began joining, was a strange symbol.

I’d barely finished examining the sword when a rectangle lit up in the air ten feet above it. I could immediately tell it was a projection or holograph of some sort by the way I could see through it slightly, but I couldn’t care less about that at that moment because the two people who appeared in the image immediately told me who was responsible for all of this.

My eyes narrowed.

“Greetings!” the man on the right announced.

Uber. He was the sort who never just spoke, it was always announcing or proclaiming or somehow dramatic.

“We heard there was a new heavy-hitting hero in the Bay and so I said to Uber, ‘Hey Uber, don’t you think we should give such an upstanding citizen a trademarked Uber and Leet welcome?’” the one on the left said.

Leet.

“And I, of course, thought it was a great idea,” Uber continued. “However, we didn’t want to just give any old welcome. What would be worthy of such a task? We struggled to think of such a thing, until I had an epiphany. So I said ‘Hey Leet, you remember that thing we’ve wanted to do but haven’t been able to yet?’”

“And I was like ‘Which one?’”

“And I said, ‘The big one, of course.’”

Uber and Leet were video-game themed villains. They seemed amusing and only mildly irritating at worst, until they did something horrible. The two streamed their escapades live when they could, delayed when being live would hurt the success of what they were doing. Collecting rings from jewelry stores for Sonic, street racing for Mario Kart, invading a mall with fake zombies for some survival game, etc.

This? This was very different for them.

The two of them sat behind an announcer’s table, wearing suits—matching red striped ties and everything—with headsets that had those little flexible mics in the front on. The only thing even hinting they were capes was the domino masks on their faces.

Behind them on a wall was an image of an impressive-looking, if simply, armored woman with her head tilted slightly upwards, an oval piece of contoured metal covering her face.

It took me a second to realize that person was me.

Wow.

Was that what people saw when they looked at me?

I could only imagine what it looked like when my sigils started lighting up and my eyes glowed.
“So here we are, ladies and gentlemen,” Leet concluded, bringing my attention back to them and reminding me exactly who was responsible for this. My curiosity might have seriously piqued by my surroundings, but it didn’t change the fact that this had all been done by villains, and they’d abducted me for it.

Which, yeah, I was a bit pissed off about. Slightly flattered, because only a week and somehow even Uber and Leet knew about me? But still, pissed off.

“What the hell do you want?” I yelled.

“A terrible scourge ravages the land, spreading death and chaos in its wake. It has settled here. Only a true Champion wielding a blessed blade can hope to triumph against such a foe. Long and wide we have searched for one capable of such a feat, and until now, it seemed there was no hope. But now, hope dawns,” Uber announced. “However, it is not a thankless task. Untold glory and riches await the one who finally slays the beast.”

Untold glory and riches, huh? I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know what they considered that to be or not.

Leet looked over at Uber. “Basically, use the sword, fight the monster, collect the loot?”

Uber nodded. “Yup.”

“So, Uber, what exactly is this ‘beast’? I noticed you didn’t say what it was,” Leet said.

Uber smiled. “ Noticed that, huh? Well…”

A loud roar ripped through the world, so loud you could feel it, and I instinctively crouched to compensate for the waves of air pressure.

As I watched, a gigantic pitch-black scaled clawed hand lifted itself up and came down upon the hill the castle sat on. An enormous head was next, triangular like a plow with a gaping mouth that glowed bright yellow-red with heat. Filling the maw was a plethora of extremely large teeth, serrated and knife-like, looking more like rock than anything else. Small eyes sat on either side of the head, which turned slowly, as though surveying everything in front of it, and horns extended out of the back, ending in sharp points.

Then the body appeared.

It had to be a hundred feet tall, from claw to spine, wicked-looking pointed overlapping plates running down its back. There was a large tear down its front that glowed a bright orange like its mouth, and the entire creature was lit up from the inside, its massive tattered wings spreading out on either side before folding up.

This wasn’t any monster. It was a fucking dragon.

A dragon larger than Behemoth.

I gaped.

Yeah, I’m not even going to try denying it. I may not have had a human brain anymore, but there’s still some instincts that tend to stick with you. The one that mattered here was that when you’re suddenly faced with a massive, overwhelmingly powerful predator, there’s a moment where you just freeze.
A lava-rock dragon-thing larger than a castle definitely counts.

Sometime during my stare-fest with the dragon, the projected image had disappeared, leaving only the ‘blessed’ sword as the defining feature in front of me.

My mind raced.

There was little to no chance of getting out of here on my own. I’d been physically transported here (wherever ‘here’ was), likely by teleportation. Without Uber and Leet letting me out, I was basically stuck. Stranded.

Knowing them, there was an effectively-100% chance that if I “defeated the monster” I’d be transported back home, considering what Uber and Leet normally did and how their “games” worked.

Which meant there was only one option here: Fight the dragon.

Even if I disliked that I was doing it because of those two idiots and it rubbed at me in all the wrong ways.

I was Fog. I was not some weak-willed collection of hydrocarbons and water, I was Relentless and my spine was hyperdiamond. I was not some… attack dog they could just force to fight their monster without repercussions.

And I’d show Uber and Leet just how badly they’d misjudged me.

…Just as soon as I got out of their stupid pocket dimension.

The sword was nice.

I couldn’t claim to know anything about swords, but it seemed nice, at least.

I’d known as soon as I’d picked it up it wasn’t meant to be used by normal people. It was far too heavy and would have been extremely unwieldy to move, much less swing with any sort of grace.

With the sorts of forces I could exert? That was a complete non-problem.

I still didn’t really know how to use a sword, but Uber and Leet had pretty blatantly drawn a connection between the sword and the dragon, and I wouldn’t have put it past them to make it so that it was the only thing the dragon could be killed by.

Typical gamer logic.

I wouldn’t put it past them to have some annoying convoluted method for damaging the thing, either, just because that seemed like something they would do.

If there was one thing I knew about video games just from the few times Emma and I had watched her sister Anne playing them, it was that the giant enemies were really durable, and usually had specific strategies to beat them that had to be executed flawlessly and involved obvious weak points.

I… well, even with my durability, I really really hoped that this wouldn’t be like what I heard where players died a bunch of times in the process of trial-and-error before they finally got it right.

…Though, I wouldn’t put that past Uber and Leet either.
Ugh.

If there was something I hated about this, it was the lack of information. Fighting capes was generally pretty straightforward, especially if you knew what their powers were.

Something like this?

This was like soloing an Endbringer on their first appearance without knowing anything about what they could do.

And I was no Eidolon or Alexandria. If I had my lasers, my cannons, my proper body, maybe…

Well, okay, maybe it wasn’t that bad, since Uber had said I was supposed to kill it, meaning it could be killed.

I’d ask ‘why me?’, but this was pretty much the sort of thing you could expect from Uber and Leet. *I wonder if there’s a princess in the castle?*

I wanted to laugh, because that would just be the cherry on the top if there was.

Seeing as the buildings around me were totally deserted, though, I doubted it.

Moving through the streets was eerie, if just because there was a pervading sense of wrongness about it, about the utter silence. Everything looked so realistic that it was just unnerving to have nobody there.

It wasn’t a straight path to the castle. Instead I had to take the street that seemed to go in its general direction, and then go left when the street ended, before going right again once there was a place I could.

While I’d been moving through the city, the dragon had settled down, resting its giant head on its… hands? claws? forelimbs? There was pretty clearly an opposable thumb, so I guess it was hands.

Once I was close enough that the houses started transitioning to more open space that lead up to the castle, I stopped.

I wanted to do this right the first time, wanted to get out of this place, which meant trying to figure out as much as I could about this thing as I could and likely trying to find the start of whatever needlessly-complex strategy was required to defeat it.

Because, looking from the front, it didn’t have any obvious weaknesses.

And then I saw something move. On its back. And it wasn’t its wings. There seemed to be these… bright red lava-tentacle things.

*Oh you have got to be kidding me.*

I closed my eyes, took a breath, and then looked again.

*Shit.*

Okay. Fine. Whatever.

I retreated back through the streets so that I was further from the castle, and thought.
Chances of those things being what I needed to do something to? Pretty damn high.

To get onto its back… Well, I could easily jump the sixty or so feet to get up there, the trick was not alerting it to my presence before I was close enough to jump.

Which meant going around to a point it couldn’t see me on one of its sides. The left side, since the right side was next to the castle.

I was almost glad I didn’t have a brain anymore, because I’d have doubtlessly had a hell of a headache by now.

I can do this. Deep breaths.

I was just going to be fighting a giant multi-thousand ton dragon with nothing but my strength, Armor, and a sword.

It was one thing to know you could likely survive something, and actually doing it when there was the chance you couldn’t.

And right now? That was hitting me hard.

If I live through this, I swear I’ll try to spend more time with Dad.

Straightening myself up, I started making my way through the deserted city and around the dragon. Once I was at point I could see the dragon’s flank, rear left leg, and tail, I started moving towards it.

And then I was at the point there was only open land between me and it, and it hadn’t noticed me yet.

Just do it Taylor. Don’t wait.

My right hand tightened around the grip of the sword.

3, 2, 1… go!

I moved across the distance few hundred meters between it and I, my steps pushing me off the ground so much I was practically flying across the space. Instead of stopping close by it, I instead expressed a panel of my Armor mid-arc and used it as a platform to launch myself up.

Then I was falling, straight towards its back.

Right before I would have landed, I manifested a second panel only feet above its spine and landed on that. My entire approach had been practically silent, and the longer I could keep the dragon from realizing I was there, the better.

I ran along a pathway of panels towards the lava-tentacles, halting a few feet away. They were arranged like the corners of a square and writhed freely, sticking out like sore thumb against all the black rock-like plates of the dragon’s back, practically screaming hit me. I could tell they were extremely hot, at least as hot as Lung’s fire had been, but if this sword was meant to fight this thing…

Here goes nothing…

Grasping the sword with both hands, I swung towards the base of the bottom-right one.
The blade sliced through with minimal resistance.

And the dragon roared.

Oh shit.

It definitely knew I was there now.

Its body shuddered, lifting up as it stood. I dropped off my panel directly onto its back, figuring there was no point in keeping it if it knew I was there anyways.

I was moving towards the bottom-left tentacle when its wings suddenly snapped out and then pushed down.

Oh shit oh shit oh shit.

The dragon leapt forward, and I had to get down on one knee to lower my center of gravity and keep myself stable as the wings beat again and again. And then, against all logic, it lifted into the air and we were flying.

It was nothing like what I’d experienced only hours before. Where I had felt free and right with my plane, here I felt trapped, everything out of control.

It was only through force of will that I levered myself back up onto both legs and moved towards the tentacle I’d been aiming for, drawing my sword back before swinging through, slicing it off and leaving only a circular puddle-like stump behind.

The dragon growled, sounding like boulders scraping against each other in rockslide, and then everything started to tilt, uncomfortably fast.

Oh my god what the fuck—

I did the first thing that came to mind, driving the sword point-first into the stump of the tentacle I’d just sliced away, as far as I could and then holding on for dear life as the dragon fucking barrel-rolled.

...Why me?

Once it leveled out again, there was something pulling itself out of the stump of the first tentacle, looking like a bunch of haphazardly mashed-together stones and lava and leaving behind a weird bubble-like glob.

The thing started moving towards me, shambling, really, and while I doubted it could hurt me between my Armor and my body, it clearly had some sort of purpose.

I pulled my sword out of the stump beneath me and raised it, waiting for the creature to get close enough before swinging and cutting what seemed to be its “head” off.

It didn’t even slow.

Okay, fine.

I swung again, this time slicing through its torso.

I barely had the chance to react as it exploded, manifesting a sphere of Wave-Force Armor panels around me in milliseconds.
Nothing was left, but where it’d been standing there were… cracks, and it seemed like the half-foot-thick plate I was standing on of the dragon’s back had levered up slightly, exposing red and what looked almost like thick cords connected to the plate.

Was I supposed to use those things somehow? Use them to pry up the plates and then have access so I could damage the dragon directly?

Because that… producing the exact thing I needed to use to expose the dragon’s weak points, would be ridicu— well, actually, it would be pretty much exactly video game logic.

So, I needed to let these things get created, and move them to the edges of the plates somehow, and then destroy them.

Okay.

Now that I had some idea of what I had to do, I was starting to feel better. This made… well, it didn’t really make sense to me, but it was something I could follow, at least, a process.

I moved away from the tentacle I’d just cut, and waited as it bubbled, another of those things appearing.

I didn’t even bother letting it move towards me, instead using panels of my Armor to push it towards the overlapping joint between the plates I stood on.

Once it was positioned as best I could, I closed the distance between us, and let my Armor flicker as I sliced through the creature’s chest.

This time, when the air cleared, the armor panel was measurably levered up, and I grinned behind my mask. Not enough that I could reach the weird cords stretching between the plate and the… lava, I guess, under it, but enough that I knew I was doing something right.

Two more tentacles and two more explosions should do it.

Not waiting, I moved towards the upper-left tentacle and cut through it, causing the dragon to roar. I tensed, waiting for it to do something else, but it didn’t, and the stump bubbled as I moved back from it. A creature appeared, and I repeated my move of using my Armor to just push it to where I needed it at the edge of the plate. It felt a little like cheating, I was probably supposed to be moving it somehow with the sword or something, but honestly I was going to use every trick I could.

Another explosion, a wider gap.

Last one…

I cut through the last tentacle and the dragon tilted again, this time without warning.

Fucking…!

I quickly anchored my sword in the stump I was over and held on as the dragon flipped over a second time, only standing up and pulling my sword out once we were stable again and I was sure it was done.

The wound bubbled, the last (I assumed) of the creatures emerged, and got the exact same treatment as the last.
And this time, the gap between the plates was more than wide enough for me to move in and hack at the thick red cord I could see, like some sort of connective tissue made out of lava. It took three attempts— the thing was tough and I couldn’t get good enough leverage— to cut through the cord, the plate it had been connected to suddenly ripping off and flying away in the wind. I barely managed to duck in time to keep myself from being hit as it passed over me.

The dragon roared again, louder than ever, yet again beginning to tilt sideways.

*Oh, come on.*

I rushed back to where the last creature had come from, not even giving any mind to the weird bubble left behind as I stabbed right through it and into the dragon before it flipped.

*Definitely* not my preferred method of flying.

Taking deep breaths as I stood, I pulled my sword out of the wound and then *stared.*

The sword was glowing silver. Faintly, but it was there.

*What…?*

This hadn’t happened the last time I’d used the sword to hold on, the only thing different was… *the bubbles.*

Was this the next part of what I had to do?

Hesitantly, I moved across the spine of the dragon to the opposite bubble-wound and poked it with my sword a couple times.

*…Screw it.*

With a harsh jab, I thrust into it, the bubble bursting and deflating as wisps of *something* escaped it to gather around the sword, the glow increasing as it sunk into the blade.

I glanced back at the giant gaping wound left behind by the ripped-off plate. I *could* have tried something, but I got the feeling this was important. So instead I moved down the dragon’s back to the next bubble and stabbed it, the glow increasing again. Cross the spine, stab the last bubble, and the glow was bright.

Wasting no time, I rushed to the giant wound that spanned the dragons back, and looked between it and the glowing sword in my hand. Instead of trying anything fancy, I just stabbed *down,* right into the lava-flesh.

There was a blindingly bright flash, spreading out from the site.

The dragon didn’t roar, it *screamed.*

Without warning we were dropping, the dragon dipping and then we were *crashing,* tearing up buildings and roads as I held onto the sword. Eventually, we came to a stop.

*Is… is it dead?*

The dragon roared as it pushed itself to its feet underneath me.

*Nope! Definitely not dead.*
If anything, it sounded angry.

Not good.

The sword was still glowing, but the red wound I’d stabbed it into was black, chunks missing and overall looking extremely painful.

No wonder it was mad. Not much I could do about that, though, considering what I was trying to do.

The dragon’s wings folded in, and then again everything was tilting.

Except this time, we were on the ground.

*Nope. Nopenopenopenope.*

Not getting crushed by hundreds of thousands of tons of rock-dragon, please.

I yanked my sword out of its place and *jumped* pushing off as hard as I could from the dragon, almost perpendicular to the ground at that point.

I crashed into a building and through a wall before I came to a stop, and I just stayed there for a moment on the floor.

*Okay, now what am I supposed to do?*

My sword was still glowing, and I got the feeling that was important.

Groaning, I pushed myself up. The dragon was visible through the hole I’d made in the wall, and it was right-side up once more. Where it was standing was a circular pool of what looked like lava and fire, and—

*What the fuck?*

Its limbs were *tentacles* now, each ending in a hand or leg, but still quite clearly, *tentacles*, each at least five feet thick.

*I don’t even…*

Fuck it. Fine. Its limbs were tentacles now.

Because of that, they were stretched out, and much less thick than before, now glowing the same hot red-orange that the tentacles on its back had been, which was probably a hint that I was supposed to do something to them.

Probably try and cut them, following what I’d done so far. The still-glowing sword was also a pretty strong indicator, I felt.

I moved to the opening I’d come through and then jumped, launching myself out into the air and onto the roof of the building across the street, and then jumped again, this time aiming for one of the limb-tentacles. I needed to disable them as fast as possible, because I feeling they would be hell to try and fight off along with dragon’s main body.

The limbs were extremely hot, hotter than the tentacles on its back had been, and without my Armor I’d actual have worried about the effects it might have on my nanomachines.

The dragon hadn’t seemed to have noticed me yet, and I took advantage of that for all its worth: I
brought the sword down on the tentacle with all of my weight behind it and as much force and speed—which was quite a lot, really—as I could.

The blade sunk into the tentacle, cutting almost half of the way through before it stopped.

I increased the pressure exponentially even as the dragon roared out in rage and pain, and the blade slipped slowly through the remaining half of the limb and then dug into the stone and earth below.

I definitely had its attention now.

The small eyes were focused on me with laser-like intensity as its maw opened and started growing brighter.

It took me nearly a full second to realize what it was doing and reinforce my Armor just as the white-hot flames washed over me.

When the air cleared, it was still looking at me, the tentacle I’d severed leaking red lava-like fluid onto the ground.

Okay, that’s one, now how do I handle the others without the element of surprise?

The hand forty feet away from me twitched, and I noticed that while the tentacle-limbs were moving slightly, they weren’t really doing anything, almost like… it didn’t have full control over them.

I rushed to the next one, already bringing my sword up behind me in preparation.

Just as I was about to swing, there was suddenly a giant flaming hunk of rock coming right at me from the direction of the dragon’s head.

My Armor appeared, stopping the bolt mid-air and protecting me from the heat.

[Klein field at 88% current total capacity]

Okay, yeah, I did not want to get hit by one of those. Also… did it seriously just shoot that from its mouth?

What the heck was up with this dragon?

I was bringing my sword down, the blade sinking through the limb with effort, when something hit my Armor shell from behind.

I practically growled as I looked back and saw this thrashing red tentacle growing out of the pool left behind from the previously severed limb. By the looks of it, it was winding up for another hit.

I decided it wasn’t worth the effort and instead focused on the limb in front of me, pressing down as hard as I could, dragging the blade through the tentacle while the dragon roared.

c’mon, c’mon…

And then it was through.

Another limb done, I jumped over it and then released the energy stored in my Klein field as a wave, the force blowing both the tentacle and now-severed hand away far enough that hopefully whatever tentacle came from that the lava of that one wouldn’t be able to bother me as I worked on the next limb.
A second wave of insanely hot fire washed over me as I made my way to the left hand, keeping an eye out for any—

Yep, there was another of those rock projectiles.

I jumped out of the way instead of using my Armor, not letting it slow me down as I reached the third tentacle and once again brought the sword down with as much force as I could.

More roaring, more fire that I ignored, and after thirty seconds the third was severed.

It almost felt too easy.

Not that I minded, because at this point I just wanted this over and done with already.

The trip to the fourth limb involved two flaming rocks and another burst of fire, and actually cutting through it took about the same amount of time as the other three.

As soon as I finished slicing through it, the dragon shuddered and then slumped forward so that its head was at ground-level.

Now what? Just go for the head?

Could I just cut through its neck?

When nothing else presented itself, I decided that at this point, that was pretty much all I could do.

Puddles were already starting to conglomorate around its head, and I got the feeling that those were more rock-lava creature pools, so I didn’t waste any time in racing towards the head and jumping onto the dragon’s neck, moving toward the head itself.

Jumping over the horns and ridge that protruded from the back of its head, I landed on the crown and raised the sword point-first facing down.

Here goes nothing…

I brought the sword down on the black rock.

Unlike the red “flesh”, the rock-stuff was unyielding, even with whatever the white glow was doing to the sword that I suspected increased its effectiveness. Fifteen seconds, and the sword was barely embedded three inches in.

I redoubled my efforts, kneeling and pulling the sword down as hard as I could, feeling my new artificial muscles flex from the thousands of tons of force I was exerting. It wasn’t anywhere near my limit, but I also really didn’t want to break the sword.

Slowly, achingly slow, the sword dug down. Ten inches. Fifteen inches. Twenty inches. Twenty five.

And then I felt something give way and the sword practically slammed down, embedding itself up to the crossguard.

Around me, the glowing red-hot parts of the dragon began dimming, and I relaxed.

Now it was dead.

I’d done it.
Holy shit.

I-I won.

I felt wired, energized, even more than I’d felt after fighting Squealer and getting shocked by her. My sigils glowed around me, and I hadn’t even noticed when they’d appeared.

Without warning, the dragon started dissolving, starting at the snout and then moving backwards, blowing away like dust in the wind. I fell as the effect passed me and caught myself on one of my Armor panels, just standing there, the glow from my sword disappearing with the dragon.

I was pretty sure I would have been heaving from the exertion of the fight if I were still human, but instead I was breathing as easy as ever.

“Congratulations!” A holographic view appeared in front of me, mirroring the one I’d seen at the beginning of this, with Uber speaking. “The champion has prevailed, slaying the evil scourge and freeing the land from its threat. …Even if it was a rather unconventional strategy. Still, in thanks for her efforts, she receives one! blessed sword used to kill Deathwing the Destroyer.”

“It has plus thirty against dragon-type,” Leet added.

Uber just shook his head, mouthing “no it doesn’t” at the camera.

Well, it wasn’t exactly “untold riches and glory”, but I’d definitely take it. I’d grown kind of attached to it, actually. Plus, the irony of them getting beaten by a sword that they’d given me was rather appealing as well.

“Anyways as always, thanks to all our viewers, especially those who support us, you know who you are,” Uber said.

“Thank you and good night!”

“…It’s not night.”

“…Whatever.”

The holograph-screen suddenly disappeared, and then everything disappeared as it all shifted, leaving me stumbling on sand. At the beach. In Brockton.

I was back, the sword was still in my hand.

I immediately started looking around and listening for anything, any hint at all of Uber and Leet, how they’d managed to do… whatever they had done to me.

And… there was nothing. Just the waves slapping against the ships behind me, the wind whistling through the spaces and the sounds of birds overhead.

Damn.

That was frustrating.

Although, honestly, I’d kind of expected it. Sticking around the area where you just kidnapped and returned the extremely strong and durable brute with a sword was all sorts of dumb, the kind that only Merchants were.

Plus… well, there was the fact that killing the dragon had felt amazing. I doubted there were many
people who could say they’d have been able to do that, and —just like Lung— it was my achievement. And as much as I hated to admit it, they’d been the ones to give me that. I may not have gotten Uber and Leet —this time— but I was almost… okay with that.

My feelings were rather confused, and I had no doubt that part of that was the left over high from the fight.

There was also the fact I’d gotten a very nice sword out of it. Actually…

I let some nanomaterial slip from my hand down the sword —not even enough to be visible— examining it on a molecular level. The material was unlike anything I’d ever seen before, static, almost frozen. I had no idea how I might go about creating it, but if it was stronger than what was around my core, it was definitely worth looking into.

It took effort just to move the metal around and perfect the structure, refining the edge of the blade down to a pair of atoms wide and then running a single line of linked carbon atoms down it. For the finishing touch, I changed the weird symbol on the flat of the blade to the sigil that meant me.

I really needed some way to carry it other than my hand. A sheathe on my back would be nice, or even better, magnetic fields like Armstrong had. Of course, I couldn’t just make those in plain sight.

Sighing, I resolved myself to just carrying it around for now.

Considering how late it was, I should be getting home and starting dinner anyways.

The day had certainly been exciting, between flying and fighting the dragon, but I could also say they had been learning experiences.

And in the coming days, I’d learn to appreciate every little bit of experience I’d gained.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by copious amounts of Paramore, Blood Red Shoes, and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.
I ended up hiding the sword under my bed.

…In my defense, it’s a perfectly good place for long pointy objects that would otherwise stand out.

I probably should have left it back in the Graveyard, but by the time I thought of that I was already two-thirds of the way home, and I didn’t have any time to circle back and make it home before dad to make dinner.

So I’d simply wrapped the thing in cloth made from my nanomaterial and made it look like, well, something long wrapped up in cloth on my way home.

Definitely less conspicuous, right?

Right?

The small bit of remaining irritation I’d felt over the Uber and Leet situation had bled off as I’d made stir-fry, but that didn’t mean that I’d entirely forgiven them. I’d argue that it was one of the more harmless videos, considering my durability and such, but they hadn’t known that, much less what my limits could be. Which means they’d put a potentially killable person in almost certain mortal danger without knowing what could go wrong.

*Intentionally.*

Which was either downright villainous, or really, really thoughtless. With them, I was leaning towards the latter.

The video had already been posted —I’d checked as I’d cooked— and it was *popular.* Like, already having more views than both their previous videos combined.

Most of the comments were questions about who I was (and then people making guesses, and then other people finally getting it and linking to my wiki page), gaming purists complaining about how I didn’t *truly* follow the original strategy for defeating the dragon (which I now knew was some “Deathwing” character from an Aleph game that had only come out five months before), and others arguing that it didn’t matter if I didn’t solve it ‘right’ because I’d been close enough and it had still been —and I quote— “absolutely freaking awesome.”

Yes, my ego was feeling quite good, thank you very much.

Apparently my sword wasn’t even from the same game as the dragon —or even a game at all— but I couldn’t care less where it came from, because in the end I still now had a *sword.* A sword that was perfect for my strength and durability. It might not have been Chevalier’s absurd cannonblade, but I didn’t need something like that when my own body and technology were more than adequate to compensate.

I stirred the food I was cooking, mixing it all together, and shifted my focus to going through whatever was new on PHO.

What I found surprised me.

While I was at the boardwalk, skipping school, there’d been an honest-to-god *bank robbery* happening. And I hadn’t even known about it.
Guess who was responsible.

The Undersiders. Yeah, those guys I’d thought were soft-core villains and stuff? They’d taken a bankful of hostages and everything. It felt a little weird, because they’d done robberies before, but hadn’t taken any hostages, which begged the question why’d they done it midday, when they could have followed their usual m.o. and done their work at night.

Because, apparently, this new change in behavior had not ended well for them. Four small-time villains against the entirety of the Wards, Panacea—who’d actually taken one of them down herself—and Glory Girl? The chances of them getting away were practically zero.

It was so unfair it wasn’t even funny.

Though, Glory Girl had caused some property damage, but considering her sister had been one of the hostages, I couldn’t exactly blame her. Property damage would probably be the last thing I thought about too, if someone was holding my dad hostage.

Moving away from that thread to the rest of the Brockton sub-forum, I quickly found a thread dedicated to my fight that linked to the video in the first post. The comments on it were fairly similar to the ones I’d seen on the video, though.

On a whim, I checked the creative sub-forum and was pleasantly surprised to find that Greg had actually gone ahead and posted his sketches and drawings in a new thread, including the ones he’d (unknowingly) done of me.

Most of the first comments on the thread were compliments, though a couple people were being dicks and saying that the poster couldn’t be the same person as usual. Further down were some actual critiques, and I decided to comment as well if just to be nice, considering I’d been the one to actually give him the idea.

Now that those designs were out, though, I could start looking at reworking my costume. It’d take some work, but probably not much considering what I could do with my nanomaterial.

I was drawn out of my thoughts by the front door opening and closing, the familiar jingle of keys landing in the little bowl and Dad’s steps through the hall towards the kitchen where I was.

“Smells great, Taylor.”

I turned around and smiled. “Thanks, Dad.”

He moved around me, reaching for the cabinets and getting out a couple plates and then the silverware, moving back to the table and setting it. “So how was school?”

I flinched and debated whether I should lie or not. I didn’t want to. “I, ah, didn’t go today.”

I could practically feel him staring at my back. “Taylor…”

Sighing, I put the spatula down and turned around to look at him. “I know, I know. I just… needed a day off.”

He matched my sigh and stepped towards me, drawing me towards him and wrapping his arms around me, hugging me.

“I understand. Just… don’t make a habit of it, alright?”
I hugged him back, nodding into his shirt.

Even as inhuman as I was, diamond and metal and nanomachines and antimatter, he somehow still managed to make me feel like I was five years old again at times like this.

He let me go and I turned back to the food, turning off the burner and moving the pan onto the hot pad on the table. Dad started serving food, and I got out a glass and filled it with water for myself before sitting down.

Dad looked at me from over the food. “So what’d you do if you didn’t go to school?”

I tried to keep myself from reacting, but I wanted to wince. “I just hung around the Boardwalk, mostly.”

I hated needing to lie to him like this, about this. I hated needing to hide it, and hated that I couldn’t share what I’d done, what I’d achieved.

My teeth ground together.

I felt like I was betraying what we’d gotten back since January. I’d hid what had happened to me, but nothing had really been as big as this, as impacting, at least to me. I’d been able to justify hiding my fight against Lung as not wanting to worry him, and the one against Squealer hadn’t been anything to talk about and probably hadn’t even gotten any notice. But my jet and the fight against that dragon…

I hated having to hide what I was from the one person who deserved to know, who I wanted to know, who I wanted to affirm and tell me that I was still me.

“Uh, Taylor? You’re crushing the fork…”

I blinked and looked down at the utensil in my hand, and sure enough, my fingers had started to deform the metal.

I wanted to laugh, both in relief and at the sad irony, because suddenly the decision was out of my hands and I didn’t have to worry about it anymore.

Outed by a fucking fork.

Maybe I could hide it, avoid the question, fix the fork with my nanomaterial and lie. ‘It was probably a trick of the light’ and all. But if I didn’t take the chance now to confront this, to come clean and stop all the deception, when would I?

I put the fork down on the table.

“I… I think I have something to tell you,” I said nervously.

He raised an eyebrow. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with you squeezing a fork like cheese, would it?”

I laughed lowly, thankful for the effort at lightening the atmosphere. “Yeah. Yeah, it would.”

I hugged my arms to my chest, looking down at my cooling food, and took a deep breath. “I’m… not human. just software. not the girl you had with Mom. “I’m strong,” I finally settled on. “I’m strong and fast and I can’t get hurt or forget anything and I don’t need to eat or sleep or any of that and I can make things. Things like you couldn’t imagine.”
I looked back up, waiting for… I don’t know, shock? Revulsion? Fear? Anger? That would have made sense. Instead I just got placid thoughtfulness, though I was sure at least part of it was a mask.

“So like… Alexandria? Except more Tinker?” he asked, and I was a little surprised at how calmly he was taking all of this, and the fact that even knew what a Tinker was.

“No… not exactly. I don’t think.” I knew. I was the only Fog on this world. “I’m—” I took a deep breath. “My body isn’t… normal anymore. Just, just… here.”

I held my right hand up and reverted my entire forearm to the default silver, Dad’s other eyebrow rising to join the first. I separated my nanomaterial into spiraling strips and then unwound them from my around hand and arm dramatically, leaving just the dull grey metal of my skeleton and the dark black of my “muscles” behind.

My dad’s eyes widened as I moved my fingers around, showing how the artificial muscle moved and flexed. With a thought, the strips of nanomaterial wrapped around my elbow and then flowed up and over my hand until it looked the same as it had, applying the correct skin tone.

“One day I was flesh and blood, and the next… I was like this,” I said hesitantly.

Well, not exactly, but close enough.

“But you’re still Taylor, right?” he asked, and I could hear the layers to the question.

I winced, because he’d nailed one of the things that I was still struggling with. “I—think so?” I ran through thousands of thoughts anxiously, before finally settling on one. “Do you know about the Ship of Theseus?”

His expression became thoughtful again.

“It’s like that, I guess. I still feel like me. I still have my memories and stuff. I’m just a little bit… different now.” But was I Taylor? I was undeniably more, being Relentless, but that wasn’t an answer, and the question still plagued me.

Still, it seemed to satisfy Dad, because he nodded. “When? When did it happen?”

“January,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry for not telling you, but I was still trying to figure it out and we were…” I trailed off awkwardly, though he seemed to understand as he looked slightly guilty and regretful. “Before Monday, I couldn’t even do any of this, I was just… me, made up of different stuff.”

“I’m sorry too, you know.”

I just nodded, accepting it for what it was worth. I’d been more upset back then, but now that we were doing so much better I’d slowly forgiven him for being so absent after Mom’s death.

“So what does all this mean?”

I shrugged. “I… I want to help people.”
“How? I’m not sure how I feel about you joining the Wards,” he said, with obvious reluctance and discomfort.

“Yeah, I don’t think I want to join them,” I told him honestly, and he let out a visible sigh of relief that made me want to laugh. “Apparently they’re trying to get me on the Protectorate, though,” I said, and this time I couldn’t restrain my laughter.

Dad spluttered. “T-the Protectorate?”

I nodded. “They think I’m older than I really am and I haven’t felt like correcting them,” I said, grinning.

“How do they even know about you?” he asked slowly.

“Oh. Uh.” Shit. “I might’ve run into them a couple times? Well, actually just once, but the Wards a couple times after that,” I rambled.

“And how exactly did you… ‘run into them’?” he questioned, and I would’ve sworn that the room was getting warmer if I knew it wasn’t, and that my own surface temperature was a constant 98.6°F.

I looked down at my plate. “I’m a cape, Dad. As in the ‘go out and do things’ type.”

“Taylor…” he started, and I heard the frustration in his voice.

I looked back up, wanting to stop him before he got started on what I knew would be one of those parent-speeches. “Dad, I can do so much. I’m as hard as diamond, I can exert forces over four hundred tons, I can run faster than a car, I can’t forget anything, I don’t need to sleep, and I’m smart. Like Alexandria smart, dad. Do you know how hard it’s been knowing I could do something but holding off since January? I waited four months.”

My dad sighed, pushing his glasses up as he massaged the bridge of his nose. “I know. I know. But I’m still your father, Taylor. You can’t expect me not to worry. Knowing those things helps, but my gut reaction is still worrying about you.”

I forced myself to relax a little and relented. “I…I know. Sorry.” He was being much calmer than I expected, and I could tell how much of a struggle he was going through.

“So if you’re a cape, who are you? There hasn’t been any news of any new capes…” he said.

I rubbed my left arm. “My name’s Relentless. I’m independent. Really new. Nobody really knows about me yet.”

“So what… you’ve already got a costume and everything, then?” he asked. “You have to, if you met the Protectorate and the Wards, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Armor over a black bodysuit. Total coverage.”

He looked like he was fighting with himself for a moment. “Can I… see it?”

Rather than respond, I shifted into my costume and altered my appearance.

Dad’s eyes widened and his eyebrows rose before he coughed. “Wow. Uhm. I can see how the Protectorate thought you were older.”

I shifted out of the armor and back to my default appearance. “Yeah. Well.”
“And you can just… change like that?”

“Yeah. It’s apparently creepy when I look like someone else, and I don’t really like to. It feels… weird.”

He just nodded.

“To be honest I’m really really lucky,” I told him. “It’s rare to get a power that’s so versatile or complete.”

Dad leaned back in his chair, looking at me. “What is it, exactly?”

“What?”

“Your powers.”

I hesitated, and decided to keep it simple. “You know the silver stuff I’ve got?” I removed the coloring of my arm to show it again, and Dad nodded, leaning forward to get a better look. “I have total control over it. It can emulate almost anything, and for the things it can’t I can use it to take things apart or put them together.”

I collected a glob in my hand and made it look and act like a golf ball from what I knew of them, fake logo and everything. I tossed it to my father and he fumbled to catch it before pushing up his glasses to look at it closer.

“If I hadn’t just seen you make this I would have sworn it was a normal golf ball,” he said, turning it and twisting it in his hand. Suddenly, he threw it at the floor. It clicked loudly against the tile when it hit, and he caught it on the rebound. “Hell, it even acts like one too.” He looked it over for a few more seconds before passing it back to me. “That’s pretty cool, Taylor.”

I reabsorbed the nanomaterial in a blink and made my arm normal again.

“So um. Yeah. Ta-da?”

Dad chuckled under his breath before getting up and starting to clear the table. “And that’s what you want to do? Make golf balls?”

“Not golf balls, Dad. There’s so much mor—” I stopped. “…You’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

Although he was facing away at the sink, I could still hear his smile. “Guilty as charged.”

“Daaaaad,” I whined.

“I just found out my daughter’s got superpowers and controls magical… stuff. I think I’m doing pretty well, all things considered.”

“…Nanomaterial,” I muttered.

“What?”

“It’s called nanomaterial. Not ‘magical stuff’,” I said, pouting. “And it can do more than just make golf balls.”

He laughed. “Like what?”

“Anything, Dad. Anything. That’s the whole point! Engines, computers, chemicals, lasers, buildings,
space ships, anything.”

“How about fixing that loose board on the front steps?” he asked with a light tone.

“You could do that with a hammer, two nails, and five minutes,” I said, rolling my eyes. “There’s no need to bring advanced polymorphic materials into it.”

“Touché.”

I shook my head and rested my cheek on my fist. “So how’s work going?” I asked, changing the topic. It gave us both a break from all the revelations and a chance to breathe, falling back into familiar patterns that actually made sense.

“Oh, you know…”

The rest of the evening before I went upstairs was spent just talking about trivial things, but it was still nice to have this easiness with my father that had been missing for so long.

I wouldn’t have given it up for anything in the world.

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10:12 PM EST, Thursday, April 14, 2011

I stood at the top edge of the Century building, staring down at the dark streets and the cars that lit everything up like fireflies. The light of a waxing moon shone down on everything, casting it in an eerie paleness.

I wasn’t afraid of heights anymore. I simply… wasn’t. A combination of knowing that at this point I’d probably be able to survive atmospheric reentry stark naked and could create Armor panels mid-air that were usable as a solid surface, I suppose.

“Don’t do it!”

I barely had time to look to the right towards the source of the words before they impacted me, dragging me off the lip of the building and towards the center of the roof.

“Don’t do it! There’s so much to life worth it, even if it’s hard now! There’s no need to kill your… sel…” the figure who was currently holding me against the roof of the building trailed off slowly. “Wha…?”

I blinked, staring up at a face I recognized easily. Platinum-blonde hair framing an attractive face, with a band of golden metal that had small spikes coming off of it on her head.

Victoria Dallon aka Glory Girl looked back at me.

“Who are you?”

“Relentless,” I replied flatly. “Could you please get off me?”

She was leaning over me, holding me to the cement roof of the building by my wrists, straddling my midsection. A rather compromising position, to be honest, and more than a little embarrassing.

There were probably people who would die to be in the position I was in right then.

…I was not one of them.
“What were you doing!? It looked like you were about to jump!”

“Well I wasn’t. Can you let me up?” I asked.

There was a tingling feeling around my wrists where her hands were, an odd sense of energy that I could feel and would have been more curious about were I not in the situation I was.

“I’ve never heard about anybody like you and I know all the capes in the Bay!”

I sighed. It didn’t look like she had any intention of moving anytime soon, and I wasn’t exactly keen on being held down like this.

At all.

Well, at least this would answer a question I had?

Without saying anything, I tried lifting my wrists from where she was pinning them down.

For a couple seconds nothing happened, there was no give at all, and I began increasing the force I was exerting without any results. And then suddenly the tingling energy I’d felt was just... gone, along with any and all resistance. I had to instantly tone down how hard I was pushing, as it felt like nothing compared to the ten or so tons of force I’d been pushing up with only a second before.

It felt… like pushing against a normal girl, actually.

I twisted my arms out of her grasp and used them to push myself up.

Glory Girl’s eyes went wide, and she was looking a little pale as she quickly backed off of me.

“Y-you… you…” She looked down at her hands and then back up to me.

That had been weird. Literally impossible to move and then no resistance at all.

In moments, I saw the slight fear on her face turn into anger, the heroine starting to rise until she was actually floating upright, staring down at me. “Who are you!?”

I glared back at her from my place on the roof. “Relentless. I already told you that.”

For a moment it looked like she was surprised and a little confused. “How are you doing that?” she asked, her voice sounding mildly irritated but also curious.

I just stared at her. “Doing what?”

“That! Being calm!” She waved her hand in my direction. “You can’t feel it? At all?”

I blinked, trying to figure out what she was talking about… and then remembered that Glory Girl was supposed to have this aura that made people either love her or fear her. And I couldn’t feel it. At all.

Was it because I didn’t have a brain? Fear and awe were a result of chemical signals in the brain, and so her being able to induce those feelings at will meant that her power manipulated those chemicals in some way, at some level.

But I didn’t have any chemical signals because I didn’t have a brain. So… it sort of made sense that her ability wouldn’t work on me.
I simply wasn’t human enough.

…Actually, would any master effects? It seemed highly doubtful, now that I thought about it.

“Things like that don’t work on me,” I told her, as though I hadn’t literally just found that out. “So… no, I don’t feel it. …We are talking about that aura-thing, right?”

Glory Girl nodded while crossing her arms before she dropped the half-foot to land on the roof. “I’ve got it dialed up all the way, and you’re not even twitching.”

“…Ah.”

Okay, come on, how else are you supposed to react to someone blatantly admitting they were trying to scare the ever-living shit out of you?

“So what are you supposed to be? Are you trying to be Dauntless’ younger sister or something?” the blonde asked, eyeing my armor.

“No,” I said strongly.

She got a glint in her eyes and uncrossed her arms, giving me the impression of a spring coiling. “Are you a villain?”

“No. Do I look like a villain to you?” I asked, incredulously. “And besides, why would I tell you if I was one?”

She shrugged, and I got the sense she was a bit off-balance without her aura to lean on and help her.

“Anyways, I’m not. I’m independent. You can check with the PRT if you want,” I told her. “Or even online!”

Glory Girl eyed me. “Fine, I’ll believe you… for now.”

I wanted to throw up my hands in exasperation.

“If you’re a hero, you won’t mind sharing what you can do, right? So what are your powers? Obviously strength…” she said, looking down at her hands.

“Strength, speed, reflexes, senses, invulnerability, perfect memory, immunity to masters,” I answered. “And a force field.”

“Damn. Somebody got lucky…” she said, looking off to the side.

She couldn’t exactly be talking when it came to getting lucky with powers. Alexandria-junior, swapping perfect memory for an aura that made people like you and enemies quiver in fear?

It was like her powers were made for being a superhero.

“Is this your first night out? I’m sure I could show you a few tricks…” she said.

I shook my head and held up two fingers. “Second night. First one was Lung.”

Her eyes widened. “Wait, that was you? You’re the ‘new hero’ they were talking about?”

“Yes?”
“Oh,” was her response. “Well, I’m sure there’s still stuff I could show you.”

I shook my head and stood up, brushing myself off. With both of us standing up, it became obvious that I was taller than her by a good four inches, at least.

“I came out more just to think,” I told her, walking towards the edge of the skyscraper and sitting down.

I heard the faint sound of wind moving quickly and then she was hovering in front of me, staring at me and then turning to look a foot or so to my right.

“Aren’t you scared of falling?” she asked. “You didn’t say you could fly.”

“Inulnerable, remember?” I reminded her wryly. “And in any case…”

I manifested a panel of Armor under my foot and stomped on it, Glory Girl jerking to look down at the slight flashes of light it gave at the impacts. “Force field.”

“Oh.”

I let the expressed panels fade and she drifted in a circle until she was at the spot she’d been eyeing before, settling down on the edge.

I sat there silently for a few minutes as she gradually started fidgeting until she couldn’t hold whatever she was thinking in anymore. “Soooo…”

I looked over at her. “So?”

She huffed. “So aren’t you going to ask about what happened today!?"”

I stared at her blankly. “What?”

“You know, the robbery, Undersiders, all that stuff?”

Oh. “Um… no?”

Glory Girl stared at me for a moment, an unrecognizable look in her eye, before turning away with something like a mix between a huff and scoff.

“Why, are you going to ask me about fighting a jumbo-jet-sized dragon?” I countered.

“What?” Her head snapped back to me. “There’s no way Lung got that large! He didn’t even get that large fighting Leviathan!”

“Not Lung. This stupid…” I trailed off and shook my head. “You know what, never mind.”

“No, tell me!” The glint in her eye had returned.

“…” I was silent for a few moments, internally berating myself for even bringing it up. While it might have ended up being pretty cool, it was still more than a little embarrassing that I’d been caught like that in the first place. “Uber and Leet somehow found out about me and teleported me into this game-place to fight a giant dragon made of lava and rocks while they commentated because they felt the need to ‘welcome’ me,” I told her, complete with air-quotes.

“So basically, they were being dicks like usual,” she said.
“Yeah. Pretty much,” I agreed. “It was nice not needing to hold back.” I was still learning how to do that now that I had a real body and not just nanomaterial, which was more than evidenced by the fork that had outed me only hours before.

Glory Girl snorted. “I bet. That’s all I’ve been hearing about lately. ‘Be more careful, Victoria’, ‘Learn about proper applications of force, Victoria’, ‘Play safe, Victoria.’ It’s not that easy!” She turned to me, her voice having escalated in tension. “Right? It’s not just me?”

I shifted uncomfortably at how intently she was looking at me, her eyes visibly darting between my own as though searching for something. “Right?”

I shook my head, hoping my response would calm her down at least a little. “I… crushed a fork on accident today.” And outed myself to my father in the process. But I wasn’t about to say that.

“Ha!” Glory Girl threw up her hands and stood so that she was standing on… nothing. Thin air. Only held aloft by her ability to fly, but she was as stable as if she were standing on the ground.

I’ll admit that seeing that made me a little jealous. It was less the ability and more the casual usage of flight that triggered it more than anything.

“It’s not just me!” Glory Girl crowed.

…Except you’ve been a hero for over two years and I’ve had a skeleton and muscles for less than twenty-four hours.

I didn’t say that, either.

She turned back to me. “So what else’ve you done? On accident, I mean.”

…

What the hell was I supposed to say here? And she was looking at me so expectantly. “U-um. I might’ve shattered a few guys’ jaws?” Glory Girl nodded, making positive sounds and urging me on. “And I put my arm through Lung’s chest,” I admitted reluctantly, rubbing my upper left arm.

“Seriously?” she responded, and I couldn’t tell if it was a good ‘seriously?’ or a bad ‘seriously?’.

Still…

“He got better!” I defended.

“Hey, you aren’t hearing any complaints from me. I probably would’ve done the same thing,” she told me. “Fighting Lung one-on-one would be scary.”

I nodded in emphatic agreement. “Right?”

“So how long have you been coming out? As a cape and stuff, I mean,” she clarified. “I know you’re new, but how new? Day two of… what?”

“…Just this week,” I admitted.

“Huh. Well, that explains why I’ve never heard of you,” she said, as though if I’d been around longer than that she definitely would have known who I was, which, okay, maybe it was true. She was a member of New Wave, and they probably made it their business to know what capes were in the city just on principle, if only so they could identify them.
There was a sudden musical ringing from the other side of the hero sitting by me, and I watched, curious, as she pulled a fancy-looking cellphone out of somewhere along her side. She glanced at the screen for a moment before swiping across it, holding it up to her ear. “What’s up Amy?”

The voice on the other end was distinctly female, and young. “Weren’t you going to pick me up tonight?”

Glory Girl blurred, standing up so quickly I might have missed it if I were still human. “Shit! It’s already ten-thirty?” She didn’t wait for a response before continuing on. “Sorry, I ran into this new cape and we got to talking and you know how it goes…” she trailed off. “Anyways. Yeah. I’ll be right there. Sorry.”

The girl on the other end was quiet for a moment before replying. “Thanks. See you soon.”

“Bye Ames!” Glory Girl chirped, and then removed the phone from her ear, still hovering from when she’d jumped up as she turned it off and put it back from where it’d come from. She looked over at me. “Sorry, I promised to pick my sister up from the hospital tonight.”

I waved her off.

“Anyways. Uh… I’m sure I’ve got one, somewhere,” she muttered to herself, patting a couple areas along her ribs before slipping her fingers into another hidden pocket and drawing out… a card?

She held it out to me, and I took it, looking it over. It had her cape name and a phone number on it, along with New Wave’s styled logotype. I looked back up, and she flashed a confident grin. “Us Brutes have got to stick together, right? If you ever want me to show you a couple things about how it’s done, just let me know.”

“…Okay,” I said hesitantly, but trying to take the gesture for what it was intended to be: welcoming. “Thanks.”

Glory Girl nodded. “Well, bye then!” She waved and dove off the side of the building, leaving me waving awkwardly after her at empty air.

*Talk about whiplash.*

Shaking my head, I lay back down on the rooftop, holding the card above me as I looked at the name and the number on it.

Victoria Dallon. Glory Girl. One more person who’d been simultaneously everything and nothing like what I’d expected.

I put the card away in a pocket I formed, staring up at the stars and wondering if every cape I encountered was going to be like that.

For some reason, I didn’t doubt that they would.
Sonata 2.3

Friday, April 15, 2011

I woke up the next morning, and slowly started going through what I needed to do to get ready for the day.

Sudden interruptions by Glory Girls notwithstanding, my time on roof of the highrise had been pretty much exactly what I’d needed.

Quiet, and a chance to think.

You’d think that when your thoughts weren’t limited by such mundane things as neuron response time, time to think wouldn’t exactly be a major problem anymore.

Not so much. (I did seem to have some sort of limit on my processing abilities).

In this case, it was more the ambiance than anything else.

Just because I could handle lots of input really fast didn’t mean that it wasn’t nice to get a break from that. Didn’t mean that I didn’t appreciate the chance to just stop and not worry.

There was no Emma or Sophia or Madison. No emotional high school situations. No need to watch everything I did to make sure I didn’t accidentally out myself. No need to worry about dragons (Asiatic or European) or heroes or stupid game-show villains.

There, twenty-seven stories up, I could just be.

Up there, I didn’t have to worry about homework. About dad. About my utter lack of anything resembling a supply system or fleet to call home.

Dad knew now, which was good.

It meant… a lot more to me than I probably cared to admit.

The fact that I could go downstairs, sit with my dad, and have breakfast together without him acting exceedingly strange about it was pretty positive in my books.

“So how does that work?”

I blinked, drawing myself out of my thoughts and looking over at him from where I’d been staring at my bowl of sugar-milk and mini-wheats. “…What?”

He nodded at my bowl. “That. How does it work when you’re all…” he trailed off, probably hoping that I’d catch onto what he was implying.

I was pretty sure I got it.

“All robot-girl?” I finished flatly.

He grimaced at my bluntness, and then I couldn’t hold the smile back.

“I’m just teasing, dad. Turnabout’s fair play. Payback for last night,” I said lightly. “Don’t worry about asking questions. I’m… I’m tired of hiding this all anyways.” My tone at the end had become
somber. “A- anyways. The answer is I use it. Not for fuel, like the sugars and carbohydrates. I tear it apart on a molecular level and make more nanomaterial out of it.”

I stirred my spoon idly, pushing steadily-more-soggy wheaties around. “I don’t need to eat. Just like I don’t need to sleep, or shower, or do any normal things. But if I stopped, what would I be then? When you lose everything, it’s the little things that keep you going.”

I looked back up, and saw his eyes soft with sympathy. “I’m sorry,” he told me, and there was no need to say what for.

I just nodded. “My nanomaterial runs on a very specialized power source that basically pulls energy out of thin air. That’s not actually how it works, but it’s good enough. Anything with higher power requirements gets something more suited to it.”

“Like what?” he asked, appearing interested.

I resumed eating for a moment so that I wouldn’t just be left with a bowl of limp wheatie strands. The fact that it gave me time to think about how to answer him was totally coincidental.

“Pretty much anything I make that isn’t nanomaterial,” I responded, deciding I didn’t want to get into the fact that I had an antimatter reactor in my chest to power my body at the moment. “And sometimes even then. If it’s low-power enough I can just have it use electricity from the grid instead of something custom.”

I kept eating as my dad looked thoughtful.

“Well, it certainly sounds interesting,” he said diplomatically, which pretty much ended the conversation there when neither of us said anything more.

I finished up, getting up and rinsing my bowl out before putting it in the dishwasher, and then heading upstairs to finish getting ready.

For school. At Winslow.

Oh boy.

School that day was passably sane. And of course I mean that statement as qualified by “for Winslow.” There were still gang signs and graffiti on the walls, people doing sketchy exchanges in the dim halls before and after classes, and weird smells coming from Building C’s boys’ bathroom.

Still, none of the usual girls tried to mess with me, which was good. Madison pointedly ignored me, which I was perfectly fine with, and Sophia didn’t even try looking at me.

Emma was conspicuously missing.

I was unsure if that was good or bad. It likely meant that either whatever I’d said to her had gotten through or (more likely) her parents had stepped in somehow.

At the very least, it meant I didn’t have to deal with her.

Which was… relieving, more than anything.

So for one of the first days I can remember, I did my thing, everyone else did their thing, and I wasn’t looking over my shoulder constantly.
The only notable thing that I can even comment on was Greg telling me that he’d posted his art and thanking me for telling him to because of all the comments and stuff he’d gotten back. To which I had pretty much just responded “sure” and then had to focus on Gladly’s voice as class started.

Most of what I spent my time doing during school was macromanaging my nanomaterial out in the Bay and working on my new costume/armor design.

Even before I’d gotten home last night I’d had to aggressively redistribute the nanomaterial I had so far among more of the sunken boats. When I woke up, I had to do it again.

This was where production really started to take off. But to keep the growth exponential meant I had to constantly make sure there was material to convert.

By noon, I was sitting at eight hundred tons and had consumed another two smaller boats, and I was fast running out of ships that were entirely hidden underwater with the ones I was already in the process of converting.

The furthest ones out that were visible above-water were practically impossible to really see any detail of, so I moved to those and began conversion wholesale.

After this, though, I was going to need to be careful.

My leading thought was that once I had to shift focus to converting those ships that were plainly visible from land, I’d only consume the insides and leave a hollow shell behind. It would look the same from the outside, and be supported by a minimal amount of nanomaterial on the inside to keep it from collapsing while the nanomachines moved onto the next ship(s). Once that had been completed, I’d be able to eat through all the “shells” simultaneously and very quickly when it wouldn’t be noticed (like the middle of the night), and then have my nanomaterial disappear without a trace to someplace I could store it.

I also thought it would be funny seeing how people would react to the boat graveyard suddenly being gone like it was never there.

I wondered how my Dad would react if—when he found out that I was the one responsible for it.

I wondered how the Protectorate would react at all, not knowing who did it. They’d have to respond in some way, and the leading theory would probably be ‘Tinker’ of some sort. The question was whether my display of abilities so far would be enough to make them think I couldn’t be responsible for it.

…Maybe they’d think it was the supposed ‘Tinker’ I was allied with who made my armor?

I hoped not.

By the time school was let out I had over twelve hundred tons of nanomaterial and was in the process of converting eight separate ships, including the large container ships out in the bay. That was likely going to be one of my largest sources, considering both the bulk of them and all the empty containers that had been left inside. One of them had been sunk as protest, but the others had just been abandoned there, much like the rest of the ships in the Graveyard.

Among all the ships in the Bay, I estimated there to be over a hundred thousand tons of steel and raw material. Brockton’s Ship Graveyard was one of the largest modern ship cemeteries in the world, not caused by dangerous reefs or currents or anything, but by sheer negligence and human apathy.
And it was all mine for the taking.

I mean, seriously. This wasn’t some official ship graveyard where the zoning rights for the area had been bought and then properly marked or anything. The ships weren’t intentionally tied together in order to act as breakwater or even just to keep them organized. They were just there, beached and sunk. It was entirely illegal, but nothing was able to be done about it simply because of the sheer size and scale the operation would take.

Which, in turn, meant that they were all up for salvage.

Salvage in maritime law is a pretty vague and ambiguous thing at times, especially in the United States. The US has this thing called the Abandoned Shipwreck Act, which states that any shipwrecks within three nautical miles of shore that are “embedded” in submerged land, coralline, or land that’s registered as historic are owned by the state they’re in—where embedded means being buried in such a way that you have to dig them out to get to them. But, none of the ships I was claiming fell within that, meaning that the murky laws of salvage and finds applied.

The ships I was claiming were abandoned, meaning that the owners had done nothing to try and salvage them nor shown any intention whatsoever of every planning to do so. Considering it had been over ten years since the ships were abandoned, it was extremely unlikely that any courts would be willing to contest that.

At which point, it quite literally became “finders keepers”; the steel, glass, parts, all that was left in them (that hadn’t already been ripped out by other scavengers), everything was up for grabs by whoever wanted it.

Namely, me.

It was why I’d made my first set of armor out of steel I’d taken from there, even before all this.

Oh, people could raise a fuss about someone taking all those resources if just because they hadn’t been able to do it themselves, but ultimately, nobody really wanted the Ship Graveyard there anyways. It was a blight on Brockton Bay, a reminder of a darker period in the city’s history.

Really, people should be thanking me for dealing with it so cleanly.

I’d lucked out, honestly. If I hadn’t had such a readily available source of easily-converted steel and silicates, making my nanomaterial would have been much more difficult, and taken much longer. On the scale of multiple months instead of a week. I suppose if I’d lived somewhere else I could have tried searching for veins of iron or something instead of resorting to primarily nuclear synthesis with refuse as a source material.

Well, it didn’t matter anyways, because I did have the Graveyard.

…I just had to be careful about it.

I was walking to the library when the first bomb went off.

I was turning around to look downtown when the second did.

The third was closer, a fireball of an explosion that rose above the treeline and put smoke into the air. That’s about when people started panicking.
I just… stood there.

The worst part of it was how sudden it was, how everything was fine, a beautiful day even, and then out of nowhere, chaos and destruction.

I stood there for thirty seconds, just staring at the expanding cloud of smoke and ash before I finally snapped out of it.

And I realized I had no idea what to do.

With all the other incidents I had dealt with, been involved in, what I could do had been pretty clear: beat the target. Lung, the Merchants, Squealer, and the dragon had all been like that. But with something like this, I simply had no idea what I should be doing.

Was it my place to get involved in this? I wasn’t even technically a hero, but an independent who hadn’t even registered with the PRT yet. For that matter, what could I do?

The PRT, Protectorate, and Emergency Services were doubtlessly on the case right now, and all I would likely be doing by getting involved on my own was getting in the way of people.

And yet… and yet I did want to help. I wanted to be able to look my dad in the face when I got home and say “See, I can make a difference.” The question was just… how?

At that, I could hear Glory Girl’s voice from last night: “Us Brutes have got to stick together, right? If you ever want me to show you a couple things about how it’s done, just let me know.” If that wasn’t particularly accurate now, when there was nothing to go hit in the face, I didn’t know when it was. New Wave would probably be trying to help out in their own way as well, and I could see myself coordinating with them much easier than with the larger, stricter PRT/Protectorate.

A second later I’d generated a new phone number and texted Glory Girl.

‘I want to help but I don’t know how, any suggestions?’

Fifteen seconds later I got a response. ‘Whos this?’

Flushing in mild embarrassment at my carelessness, I sent back, ‘Relentless. From last night.’ And then a half second later I sent ‘Sorry’ too for good measure.

‘Hey! Its fine. Just hav to b careful u kno?’

Her question seemed rhetorical, so I didn’t reply.

‘w ur powers…’

‘wait hld on’

I realized I was just standing in the middle of the sidewalk and moved back out of the way so that I was against the brick of the building behind me.

‘ok mom said u can come meet w us if you want’

I’d just been hoping for some suggestions of tasks I could do or something, but this was even better.

‘Okay, sure. Where?’

‘U know where Campbel and Jones cross?’
‘Yeah?’

‘Stripmall there. Got hit.’

‘Alright, I’m on my way.’

Moving away from the building I was against, I started walking down the street again, turning into the closest alley I could find and then going down it until I wasn’t likely to be seen.

One jump up to the roof and a change of appearance and clothes later, and I was running across the city on my Armor towards where I was told.

From the air, the damage to the city was even more obvious, the smoke clouds rising up as another explosion went off to the south. What was happening?

It was less than three minutes later that I arrived at the place she’d given me, despite being over seven miles away from where I’d started.

The stripmall she’d been talking about had collapsed, looking almost half-melted in places, like some Salvador Dalí painting come to life. I could see people, emergency workers, working to remove debris and rubble, with New Wave sticking out obviously in their bright costumes, helping out in whatever way they could: Glory Girl lifting things the workers pointed out, and Brandish cutting large pieces into smaller ones so that Flashbang could move them.

I didn’t see Panacea, or any of the Pelhams, though.

I made my approach, descending gradually on steps of my Armor so that I wouldn’t surprise anyone. Some of the people sitting off to the side facing the street, looking haggard and with blankets around their shoulders, raised their heads when they noticed me. I walked closer, and the emergency personnel noticed me, which then prompted Glory Girl and her parents to turn around and look at what everyone else was looking at.

Namely, me.

I wasn’t used to being the center of attention like this at all. It was… unnerving.

Glory Girl flew over to where I was, floating in front of me a few inches off the floor so that we were eye-level.

I noted it was a pretty good tactic for making her presence feel stronger.

“Hey! You got here pretty fast!” she greeted.

I nodded awkwardly. “I said I was…”

“Yeah, but I didn’t… Well, whatever,” she said, waving her hand as though brushing something aside.

“Glory Girl?”

We both turned to look at Brandish, who had walked over to us and was giving me a once-over.

“So this is, um…”

I mustered what confidence I had and stuck out my hand. “Relentless. Ma’am.” She shook it firmly.

“I was hoping I could at least coordinate with you, since New Wave has much more experience with
working independently than me, especially in a crisis like this. I’m… not really sure what to do.”

She nodded, seemingly in approval. Well that was good. “What can you do?”

I tried to sum it up as best I could. “Think of me as Alexandria with a ranged forcefield instead of flight.”

Her eyebrows rose slightly, her eyes flitting over to her daughter. “Really? This isn’t the time for exaggeration.”

I shook my head while looking at her. “I’m not. I swear.”

She still looked a little skeptical, but relented. “You can help the emergency workers with Glory Girl, then, if you want to stay here.”

I shrugged. “Sure.” It’d probably be better if I did, since —like I’d said— they had much more experience than me with these sorts of situations and I could learn a lot.

“Alright then, follow me,” she said, and turned to walk away towards the center of all the work and motion.

I leaned closer to Victoria. “…Is she always that…”

“Hard-core?” Glory Girl finished with a whisper, drifting next to me as I followed Brandish. I nodded. “Yeah pretty much.”

I winced in sympathy, keeping pace to navigate around the different emergency workers until we reached one man in the same florescent colors as the others that was nearer the building and seemed to be helping coordinate the others. He turned to face us as Brandish approached, his eyes flickering over to me briefly and then back to Brandish.

“Captain Dane, this is Relentless. She says she can help with Glory Girl,” Brandish told him.

He nodded at her. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She returned it and moved away quickly back towards where she’d been working with her husband, which I’d understand considering the situation.

The captain turned to me. “What can you do?”

I shrugged. “Lift things?”

“How heavy?” he asked, his eyes flickering for a moment back to the building and the people working there.

“I haven’t hit an upper limit yet,” I said honestly. “And I’ve done quite a bit.”

At that his focus on me sharpened. “Really?” I nodded. “Well then. We’ll definitely have some things for you to do.”

I suddenly realized something. “I also have this forcefield that could be used to hold things in place? I can make it any shape I want, it just has to be within thirty feet of me.”

He nodded. “That’ll come in handy. Alright, then. Merrick!” he said, shouting the last bit towards the right.
Another man jogged over, younger than the one I was speaking to, maybe early thirties. “Yes sir?”

The captain nodded at me. “This young woman’s offered to help out. She’ll be working with your group. Strength and a forcefield you can use for reinforcing the weak points.” He turned to me. “Listen to him and do exactly as he says and nothing more, conditions can change fast.”

I bristled at the command, but just gave a tense, “Okay.”

“Follow me,” the other man —Merrick— said, leading me away to where he’d come from with a bunch of other workers. “Mostly you’ll be moving…”

The work was tedious and monotonous. But also… satisfying. Seeing people come out of the space I’d helped clear was…

Real.

It made everything so much more real.

This wasn’t just something that I did that only affected me or some druggie Merchants or something. I was helping to save people’s lives. I was having a tangible, real, positive effect on them that they would carry the rest of their lives.

It was almost intimidating.

And the emergency workers did this all the time, I realized. But it was just the capes who got the focus and highlighted.

After the first building was cleared enough to be considered immediately dealt with and let people move on to the next problem, I decided to stay with the group I’d been working with as they moved to another project rather than have to go through the whole process again. Victoria did as well, the group she’d been with having apparently been part of the same unit or something.

The second building was more complex, a store front of some sort where the entire building had been fused and changed to some weird material that appeared to be a plastic when I analyzed the molecular structure, but acted like a reactive solid metal with non-Newtonian properties. As soon as you applied force to it, it got harder, and the longer and/or more you applied force to it, the stronger it got.

I was this close to either trying to discreetly dissolve a section with my nanomaterial or going home and getting my sword when someone got a blowtorch and managed to cut through it with some effort.

I felt pretty stupid after that.

(And filed the atomic structure away for later, of course)

The intermittent explosions had stopped completely by then, and it was just people tending to those who needed help, like what we were doing.

Still, it was the third building we worked on that was the most trouble.

A three-story apartment building that looked like it’d had two separate explosions in it, the roof collapsing down and in on both sides.

It was a mess.
We got to work immediately, trying to find if anybody had been trapped inside, and if so if they were responsive and what was needed to get them out.

We were limited by the debris and rubble, which blocked areas of the building on multiple floor, preventing us from moving towards the middle at all—even with the ladders on the trucks—until it was cleared.

It was an exercise in moderation, for me. A major test of my ability to regulate myself and my strength so that things didn’t fall apart or break other sections.

“Finally,” one of the other workers, something Carren, said, sounding relieved as I moved aside the last major piece that was blocking us from moving further inwards. He ducked under the gap and moved through the rough hole in the concrete wall to the other side. Two others followed him carefully before Merrick stepped forward. “Come on, Relentless.”

I nodded and ducked, following him through the opening into a dark living room, illuminated only by the head lamps of the workers. “Found the door!” one said loudly from the left. “Keyed deadbolt on both sides like the other rooms. Opening!”

I heard a distinct *crunch* and then creaking that I’d be come more than familiar with in the past few hours that meant they’d used a pry bar to open a door. Light appeared vaguely from the left as Merrick and I stepped through the empty kitchen towards the source. It looked like this had been an empty apartment.

The door was open, broken as I’d expected, and the lieutenant and I moved through it into a dim concrete hallway that ran down the entire apartment building. The other workers were already down at the next door, shouting, waiting, and then sticking their pry bar in the jamb, two of the men pushing on it at once to crack the door.

Merrick and I caught up to them. “Carren, Grant, Neese, you check this one out. Sparks, you, me, and Relentless are going to the next one.” The woman nodded and followed behind him as we moved quickly down the hall to the next door.

“Emergency Services!!” Merrick yelled, and then twisted the knob and tried to open the door, but it didn’t budge. “If there’s anyone in there, please move away from the doorway!”

He looked over at me. “Relentless?”

I stepped forward in what had become a familiar situation over the past four hours, grabbing the doorknob and then *shoving* suddenly so that the deadbolt and lock ripped right through the jamb. I pushed the door open and then stepped back, letting Merrick and Sparks go in ahead of me, stepping into a living room that looked like it had been used only that morning, with couches and tables and lamps. And then I saw something *blink* to the right, an infrared light pulsing from an object hidden in the shadows under a table in the hall to the left that quickly sped up and then sol—

“**BOMB!!**” I yelled, just as the thing exploded.

They both reacted immediately, ducking and rolling for the nearest solid object, but it was too late for me; the thing had already detonated and I was less than two meters away from it.

…It was black, was all I could think.

*Black.* An emptiness as void of light as my arm had been that night I’d tried changing it.

Except with this black thing, I could see the cabinets and the wall behind the void just around it,
could feel the air pressure suddenly decrease, could watch the loose objects being drawn in, bending and stretching in impossible ways even as they traveled in a straight path. It was something that screamed at me for my attention in ways that I doubted I would have understood had I been human. I knew this thing, instinctively, like I had some built-in primitive part of me that couldn’t not know what this was.

Gravitational singularity.

*Black hole.*

I was pulled towards it in an instant, my feet lifting off the ground as I twisted and scrabbled for purchase on the wall. I was probably the strongest person in Brockton Bay, and I couldn’t get my fingers to catch without pushing myself away from the wall.

Fucking Newton’s third law.

((Free-graviton degeneracy reaction detected. Threat evaluation: Extreme. Containing.))

My Armor snapped around the void in a sphere without my prompting, the negative air pressure suddenly disappearing, contained, and me dropping to the floor gracelessly. But just as quickly I could feel the strain on my Klein field, the way my Core was struggling to process the calculations to maintain the extradimensional space-time fold around an object that inherently warped the same thing to the point of being an unstoppable force.

((Warning: containment failing. Klein Field collapse in 00:00:00.374s Projected survival confidence: low. Solution: Remove computational limitations preventing graviton manipulation. Preparing to remove level four limiter...]))

The shell was going to break. Fucking…

I scrambled to get up and away before it faile—

((Preparations complete. Freezing current state...Saved. Updating primary consciousness configuration...Done. Updating co-processor with electronic warfare suite protocols. Testing new configuration...Success. Updating database access level. Killing level four monitor and control processes... Thawing frozen state...Done.))

—d, reflexively tearing the singularity apart by its gravitons at the same time so there was nothing but gravitational ripples left.

…

What.

*What.*

I just…

I looked back at my sphere of Armor, where the black void was now conspicuously missing.

I just tore apart a black hole.
What the **fuck?**

*That doesn’t even make—*

I stopped. Because no, now that I thought about it, it *did* make sense. I knew exactly the principles and laws behind it, the way I fluctuated the underlying gravitons to rip the singularity apart and let it disintegrate into nothing more than captured energy and subatomic soup. A degeneracy reaction.

And… and I could just *do* that now. Safely atomize anything with a reaction I could contain in my Klein field.

Because not *just* the black hole was missing, but everything else the sphere of energy shielding had intersected with and had inside it as well—including sections of the table, wall, and cabinets.

Portal cuts.

“Relentless? Is everything okay?”

I looked away from the spherical emptiness I’d made back towards Lieutenant Merrick, who was now out of my vision behind a wall, ten feet away.

“Yeah. I… I got rid of it. Somehow. It’s gone.”

I heard them standing up and did the same, brushing myself off. Merrick appeared at the entry to the hall, looking at me.

“I think after something like that it’d be better if we left the rest of this to the others,” he said shakily, and I just nodded in agreement.

…I had no doubt there was some sort of protocol that said you couldn’t work after having a near-fatal experience.

The three of us left the building carefully, somber in the recognition that we had almost just *died.*

And we had. If I hadn’t been able to get rid of that exotic black hole, it would have killed us, or at the very least *me.*

Victoria spotted us, said something to the group she was working with, and then flew over to me.

“Hey, you okay?”

I hugged myself. “Kinda. Not…” I sucked in a breath. “Not really.” Almost dying has a tendency to do that. “There was another bomb. It almost killed us.”

Her eyes went wide, and her arm reached out for a moment, like she wanted to touch me, and I couldn’t help the instinctual reaction of pulling away that had been ingrained in me from the years of torment at the hands of the trio. Her hand dropped.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” Victoria said.

I snorted. “For *what?* It wasn’t your fault.”

“Yeah, but I mean, I brought you here, right?”

Shaking my head, I looked at her. “I asked you. It’s not *anybody’s* fault.”

Victoria sighed. “Yeah, I guess.”
“I think…I think I’m going to go home.” I really wanted to see my dad right now.

“Okay. Um. If you ever need anything else, or just…want to talk, text me, okay?” she said, and I nodded.

I might actually take her up on that offer, despite the rough start we’d had the night before.

“Bye,” she waved.

“Bye,” I returned, and she flew back, off towards the group she was with.

It only took half a minute to let the emergency workers know I was going, and then started the trip home.

If this event had taught me anything, it was that I had a ways to go before I was truly untouchable.

I had to get stronger.
Chris Roberts

The worst part was not doing anything.

Knowing you could do something, but not able to do it because of rules and regulations.

Not that he blamed them. He understood them. He even agreed with them. But it didn’t make things easier.

Chris picked up the hot soldering iron and began feeding solder to the point between the iron’s tip, the component’s lead, and the board he was working on.

This was all he could do while the city was practically in a state of emergency.

He grabbed the next tiny chip, set it on the board, painted the leads with flux, and then ran the iron along a line of solder before checking for any bridges.

It was almost ridiculous, but it took less time for him to hand-build boards than it did to program a pick-and-place, get all the parts set up right, solder-mask the board, run the machine, and then bake the result.

Too many numbers. Too many measurements. It was easier working with his hands.

And at least it gave him something to do.

They were stuck here. The Wards that had been here when the bombing started, at least. Him and Clockblocker.

Gallant and Shadow Stalker had been recalled from their patrol, and he could just imagine the chip Sophia had on her shoulder at being forced to return rather than go find the source. She was already pissed she’d missed their fight against the Undersiders the day before.

For Chris, that fight and victory had been enough for this week. And since then, the ideas had been coming easier, smoother.

He’d spent the entire morning at school doodling little things that nobody but he would understand. Plans. Parts. Reminders.

He just had to focus. To not let himself lose this.

Not let it slip away into scattered fragments like normal.

He finished working another small QFP chip and picked up the next with the tweezers, placing it on the board and tacking down a corner.

Besides. It gave him something to do, so that his overactive mind wasn’t thinking about what was happening. Wasn’t lost in the possibilities.

He glanced over at the computer a few feet away on the workbench and poked the mouse, waking it up so he could check the time.
And was immediately reminded that Dennis had somehow changed his wallpaper.

Not to anything _bad_, in fact it was a pretty good image, it was just… _unnecessary_.

Somehow, Dennis had gotten a perfect high-definition shot taken from the Uber and Leet video that had aired the night before. Relentless stood, her armor alight with those weird symbols and a glowing sword in her hands, staring up at the utterly _massive_ dragon that looked down at her with eyes of flame and a glowing maw.

Okay, yeah, it was kind of an amazing picture.

 _Yes_ he thought her armor and abilities were impressive, much less the presence she held—when she wasn’t caught off guard, at least. And okay, the way she’d absorbed Squealer’s laser and then suddenly acted like _Battery_ was particularly interesting to him because it was some kind of energy conversion and he had to wonder if it was her powers or something to do with her armor because maybe _he_ could make something like that too.

…but that did _not_ mean he had a crush on her.

In fact he was pretty sure Dennis knew that, so he was really just teasing Chris over his interest.

Not that there wasn’t interest in _general_ now, considering the way at least a third of Arcadia had been talking about her this morning. Uber and Leet videos tended to do that, and the fact that they’d done something so different, and it was a new cape who was apparently _’pretty strong’_ just made it all the more gossip-worthy to teenagers, even those who didn’t normally get involved in cape-talk.

So Chris at least had the ability to feel a little vindicated about that this morning, since it wasn’t just him anymore.

Besides, it was also interesting in the potential implications of balance in the cape scene.


They controlled the largest majority of parahuman muscle and were indisputably the strongest. There were both rogues and independent capes, as well, but the rogues stayed to the side, and the independents.

Chris grimaced as he stripped wires and stuck them through plated holes.

Independents… typically did not last very long. They usually had powers that were tricky or difficult to use to their full potential, and sooner or later—usually sooner, unfortunately—ended up in one of the gangs, were killed in a fight _against_ one of the gangs, or survived long enough to learn how and when to cut their losses. And less than a sixth made up that last group.

A strong independent like Relentless was essentially a new faction, especially if she managed to survive—or even stronger, _win_—more and more fights.

Beating Lung on her first night had given her _major_ weight, and the videos of her tearing apart Squealer’s drug-tank and that dragon had only made her more impressive. Which in turn meant that there was a minor power vacuum, and that there was the possibility of other independents seeking her out and coordinating or working _with_ her, building a power-base even if inadvertently.

Chris took the completed micro-board and moved down the counter, putting the part in a half-assembled metal rectangular cage the size of a hard drive and making sure it was seated firmly before returning to where he’d been and collecting the components he’d need for the last inner pieces.
Time slipped by, parts connecting, forming. So much of this wire. A little of that metal, heavy-duty MOSFETs, inductor coils, a power core he’d built months ago for a gauntlet idea that never panned out…

He took a step back and examined the result. Plain, but hopefully functional. He pressed the tiny test button that would be unnecessary if it worked, and a blue shimmering bubble flickered into being, stabilized for ten seconds, and then faded away.

Chris grinned. He’d actually finished something. From start to finish. It was smaller and more limited in functionality than what he usually tried to do, but it had also been much easier. Maybe he should think about trying that more often.

Checking the time, it was only… seven-thirty? Okay, geez. He needed to eat.

Now that he was aware of it, the hunger was practically impossible to ignore.

He stretched as he got up and moved towards the door, exiting into the hallway and wandering towards the kitchenette.

What was in the fridge…?

After a moment of indecision and then deciding he really didn’t care as long as it was food, he grabbed the ziplocked half of a tuna-fish sandwich that was on the “public” shelf and headed towards the common room.

Dennis and Dean were on the couch that sat off to one side, eyes glued to the evening news that was playing on the large screen opposite them. He wished he could do that, but he just… couldn’t. At least not right now.

“How is it?” Chris asked as he started on the sandwich, heading towards one of the chairs to the side of the couch.

Dean craned his neck to look at Chris and then turned back to the TV. “The bombings have stopped. The Protectorate got Bakuda. Apparently Purity called a truce or something, because she was helping.”

That was… interesting. Was it just opportunity, or something more? The Protectorate didn’t usually do dealings with villains.

“It’s mostly just clean-up right now. PHO says New Wave and Relentless were working with Emergency Services.”

There she was again. And this would undoubtedly get her no small amount of public support, either.

“Where’s Sophia?”

“I’m pretty sure she’s in her room,” Dean answered.

“Probably glaring at the wall or whatever it is she does when she’s alone,” Dennis added. “She needs to learn how to chill the gung-ho thing. Like, I get it. You don’t like sitting back when shit’s going down and you could help. Neither do I. But do you see me letting it affect the team dynamic?” He sighed. “Whatever.”

The screens at the side of the room glowed green as an alarm went off, and thirty seconds later the doors to the common room opened, revealing Triumph.
Chris finished off the last of the sandwich and closed the ziplock bag as the doors closed.

Dennis looked over at the door. “Hey, Triumph.”

The young man paused for a moment, seeing them, and then began moving forward again. Once he got to the couch he removed his helmet and sat down in a chair on the other side from Chris so he could look at all of them.

The Tinker watched him closely, noticing the slightly resigned look he had.

Rory took breath and looked up. “Lung escaped.”

Oh that was not good. Really, really not good.

“How?” Dennis asked, the first to recover his speech.

“Ohi Lee,” Rory said. “They used Bakuda as a distraction to have most of the Protectorate away from the Rig, even if they didn’t count on her getting caught. He blew up one of the outer walls and headed straight to Lung. The guards stationed there and Miss Militia tried to stop him, but Lung had already started growing by the time they got to his cell and were forced to retreat.”

“Was anybody hurt?” Dean asked immediately.

“Not… not on our side. But while Lung was escaping, he took the opportunity kill one of the other detainees.”

“Who?” Chris found himself asking.


He felt himself inhale sharply. Shit.

“Wait, the blonde girl we just fought yesterday?” Dennis questioned.

The Protectorate hero nodded.

“How?” Dean asked and Chris had to look at him. This was Lung. He had more than enough ways. It was less a question of how and more why?

“Burned. They couldn’t even find a body,” he said roughly, looking haggard. “Miss Militia said you could hear her screaming all the way on the other side of the Rig.” The man took a deep breath.

Chris swallowed, trying to keep the sandwich he’d just eaten from making a reappearance.

Well, that was… detailed.

“Sorry,” Triumph apologized when he noticed their expressions. “I didn’t mean to tell you that.”

And she’d been Chris’ age. She’d been a nuisance the day before, but he hadn’t wished her dead, much less what she’d gone through.

He wasn’t even sure why the Undersiders had gone to the Rig rather than been held in the PRT building, as that was usually reserved for the more… violent individuals.

But… he supposed that was rather moot at this point. It wouldn’t bring her back, nor did it give any sort of comfort. All they could do was move forward.
Brockton Bay was like that. Bakuda and Lung, winning against the Undersiders only to have one die horribly the next day…

It seemed that even when they won, they lost.
Because I’ve been waiting to post this for over a year and I literally can’t wait another second.

Tattletale sat on the hard metal floor, her back to the wall right of the door, just resting, as that gave her the best position to listen to the things happening outside her cell. As a supervillain, she was stuck in the Rig until they could ‘deal with her’, which was basically polite language for either sending her to juvie or forcibly inducting her into the Wards. Personally, she thought it was going to end up being the latter, unless her parents somehow got involved.

…That would be a shitshow.

The rest of the Undersiders had already been ‘dealt with’ (again, euphemism). Alec was definitely going to end up incarcerated. Brian would probably be forced into the Wards by his circumstances and/or father. And Rachel…

She had no idea what was going to happen to Rachel. Probably juvie, unless she miraculously got a really good defense lawyer.

It had already been two days since the bank robbery. They’d been taken to the Rig rather than the PRT building as a prevention against Grue and Regent’s abilities—much fewer people to have a chance to control, as they’d apparently known he was Hijack. The not-so-great side effect of that was that Coil’s chance of getting them out was a fraction of the chance had they been in the PRT building.

Tattletale didn’t really know why they were waiting so long to get to her or what was holding them up.

She just really hoped it wasn’t her parents.

“Hey, you see that new vid?”

Low voices, from the guards in the hall.

“No?”

“There’s a new Uber and Leet video out, and this time it’s not them doing major property damage.”

The other guard snorted. “What is it then? Rescuing girls in pink dresses?”

She couldn’t see or hear, but she assumed the first guard shook his head. “Nope. Some new chick in armor like a knight fighting a huge-ass dragon using a giant sword. Apparently she’s been hanging around the Ship Graveyard.”

Lisa perked up. New girl in armor like a knight?

Her power immediately started running. New girl. Dresses like a knight. No recognition from
guards. New element is likely Relentless.

The sword was new, though.

“Yeah?”

“Mhm. Took some pretty hard hits and got back up like it was nothing. Looks like Glory Girl’s got some new competition.”

“’S about time.”

Lisa’s eyebrows rose. That was far more than she’d initially expected from Relentless. Glory Girl levels of invulnerability and maybe strength?

That was just overkill in Brockton, though it’d probably help keep her safe considering all the enemies she could make.

Still, how did her armor survive that? She’d been sure it was pure steel when they first met. Handcrafted, even, based on what her power had given her.

Survived intense pressures without deformation. All indications that material was natural, worn steel. Possible parahuman effect? Unknown, need more information.

Still, she was glad more than ever now that they’d taken the non-violent approach with her. Getting on the bad side of a new Brute with that much power could have turned out very badly.

Not that they really had to worry about that anymore, caught by the Protectorate and all.

The sound of an elevator ’ding’ing open pulled her from her thoughts.

“Hey Jerry,” the first greeted. “You the next shift?”

“Hey Mike. And yeah. Here to bail your lazy ass out, again,” the new one said.

“Don’t be like that. It hurts, you know.” The sound of the elevator opening again. “Well, catch you guys later.”

“See you, Mike.” “Bye.”

The guards went silent, and Lisa fell back to her musing, into that place between waking and sleep when there was nothing to do but wait.

Sirens went off, startling Lisa out of her sleep, red lights blinking in the hall outside her cell. For a moment, there was just the alarm, and then there was a low ‘boom’ shaking the entire Rig.

Bombs. Medium yield. Unknown source.

A black-suited man with a red demon mask and a bandoleer ran past her cell towards the right.

Oni Lee. Breakout for Lung.

Oh shit. Oh no.

Lisa’s blood froze in her veins.

Guards ran past her cell after the masked man, boots pounding on cement.
A number of closer explosions went off, and Lisa scooted back into the corner of her room as far away from the door she could be.

The sound of containment foam shooting, and a roar that still sounded human. Not for long, though, likely.

Fuck.

“Stop him from getting any larger!” one of the guards yelled.

There were screams filled with pain, and Lisa winced.

“Where the fuck are the capes!”

Just as that was said, a woman dressed in fatigues and an American flag patterned scarf ran past Lisa’s cell in the same direction, gunshots going off only seconds later and echoing through the hall and cells.

This time, the roar of anger and pain was notably less human.

“Lung! If you do not stand down, we are authorized to resort to lethal measures!” Miss Militia shouted, and Lisa wanted to snort.

You should have thought of that before he got so ramped up.

‘UCK OOO!’

Another scream, and the smell of burning flesh, heat rolling down the corridor.

“Pull back! Grab Vasquez!”

Slow footsteps, boots moving back, slowly retreating. Two guards walked passed her cell backwards with a third between them, a fourth and Miss Militia moving with them as the woman continued to fire a heavy duty assault rifle, but at this point Lisa knew that she wasn’t doing anything more than irritating Lung, and she couldn’t do more without more space and distance, not in enclosed quarters.

Large footsteps stalked forward, the heat notably increasing as Lisa fruitlessly tried to push herself back further into the cell, breaking out in sweat.

And then Lung was visible.

He was at least ten feet tall, head starting to scrape the top of the ceiling and causing him to duck. He barely resembled anything human, more like a silver, scaled lizard-monster crossed with a giant of a man. Fire wreathed him, moving around in tendrils. A ball of the flame collected in his hand, and he threw it in the direction of the retreating guards and Miss Militia.

Lisa made herself as small as possible, huddling in her corner, but it didn’t stop what happened next: Lung’s orange, glowing eyes landed on her, narrowing.

“OOO!”

‘You.’ Wants to hurt me. Still upset about the Ruby Dreams Casino. Even more upset because we got away and it led to his defeat and capture. Sees me as an opportunity to prove that nobody escapes Lung in the end. Wants to kill me.
Oh fuck.

No. She didn’t want this. No.

Lung’s clawed hands shot out and gripped the door of her cell, starting to melt through it but not having enough time before he simply tore the steel from its place.

No, no, this can’t be happening. It can’t. This isn’t—

Lisa couldn’t stop the whimper that escaped her lips, tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes.

“OOO DIE ’ERE, UURRLL.”

You die here, girl, her power informed her helpfully, her bladder understandably deciding to empty itself at that point.

No! Pleasepleaseplease. Please don’t let this happen. Somebody. Anybody!

She didn’t want to die here.

Please…

The last thing Lisa saw was a flaming, scaled hand reaching for her face.

And then her entire world was fire and pain.

The next thing she could remember was hitting something hard. Cold and hard. Everything hurt, and she was powerless against the pulls and swells she felt.


Oh. That explained why everything hurt so badly and she couldn’t feel half her body.

Lisa Wilbourn mercifully blacked out.

A sharp jolt of pain from her left arm snapped her back to consciousness. The waves had brought her closer to shore, and she was forced up against the hull of a boat, her arm having been bumped against it.

She tried using her other arm to push her along the boat so she could get past, and struggled for minutes before she succeeded. The Bay’s movement pushed her closer, until she could barely see the shoreline. Her vision was starting to become fuzzy, her entire body cold. Too cold.

Effects of blood loss apparent. First stages of hypothermia showing.

The deck of the next ship she floated into and came to a stop by was low, only inches above the Bay. It was… oddly silver instead of worn by the seawater, but still covered in algae and barnacles.

Low tide. Intertidal/littoral zone. Ideal environment for sea life.

Great.
Just... just, great.

She barely had enough strength to pull herself up onto the sloped bow, red beginning to seep out onto the surrounding deck. It *hurt*, but it was a pain that disappeared into the haze of everything else.

_Dying. Approximately 14 minutes until loss of consciousness. 18 minutes until brain death._

God.

Was this seriously how it was going to end? Burned to an unrecognizable crisp and nobody knowing what happened to her?

She hated it.

She didn’t want to go like this.

But... what could she do? She was stranded, so close and yet so far from the shore. Even then, it was doubtful someone would find her in time, what with the smoke and fires she could see rising from the city. It seemed the bombings hadn’t been so targeted after all.

Was this really how it ended?

The last thought she had was, *This was a really shitty way to die.*

And then she blacked out again.

Lisa was suddenly rolled over, and the pain of it brought her back to muted consciousness.

Everything was so cold. She was so tired. Who was bothering her. Why couldn’t they just let her die in peace?

Her eyes fluttered open lazily, and she could only stare at the sight in front of her and wonder if she was hallucinating.

There was a girl with dark, curly hair dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. …Except it was like someone had turned her into a miniature version of herself, rounder cheeks and all, with a big black ‘1’ on her forehead.

What?

“What?” her voice scraped out, unconsciously echoing her thoughts.

“Tattletale?”

Who?

…No, it probably didn’t really matter.

She was so cold.

The darkness was intruding in her vision, her sight slipping away, her thoughts running together.

Such a terrible way to g—

I stared in fascinated horror at the sight in front of me.
Whatever I’d expected when I’d made the little avatar, it hadn’t been this at all.

I don’t usually pay attention to the nanomaterial in the Boat Graveyard. It’s not the same as my body, which I can feel and see and do things with. It’s more… automatic.

I ignored the plants and animals that were attached to the boats, and for the most part had learned to tune out the little things like a starfish climbing all over at achingly slow speeds or a crab scuttling around. It was like getting used to wearing clothes, where you can just ignore them after wearing them long enough, even as they move around. Somatosensory neural adaptation.

But today I’d been paying much more attention to my nanomaterial with the way I’d been constantly moving and organizing it as it consumed the Graveyard.

So when something new, something large, and something very much not metal crawled onto one of the hulls further out in the bay that I’d fully converted, I’d stopped on the nearest roof as I’d traveled home —momentarily distracted from my desire to see my dad— and focused on the nanomaterial.

…The object was human-shaped.

I’d debated what to do, and finally settled on pulling some of my nanomaterial together and creating a body to see what was going on.

Unfortunately, somehow I knew that I couldn’t have two full-sized bodies, with senses and sight and awareness and everything. I couldn’t split my focus like that. However it felt almost… natural to create an avatar with my appearance that was a third of my normal size, and then focus my attention on it.

I had no idea why.

I’d pulled the avatar together in the pilothouse, and the only visible light came from dim, sunlight muted by the clouds that had rolled over through the broken windows on the front and the open doorway to the left. I silently stepped towards the door and peeked around it, looking towards the bow.

The first thing I registered was the blonde head of hair, and then the blood spreading out beneath her.

What?

I rushed towards the figure, pulling on her left shoulder to roll her over.

And then almost immediately recoiling.

There was red muscle visible, her face hardly recognizable, all over there was black and blood and even—at her left hip and right hand— sickly yellow and white (bone?) showing through. Her left arm hung at an uncomfortable angle, swelling and red surrounding her bicep, and other areas all over her front were a mass of blood and muscle and crusted black and melted purple. Blood seeped through her clothing, even where it stuck to her skin.

Still, the purple and black skin-tight suit that she wore immediately triggered my memories of that early Monday morning, and the green-eyed girl I’d met among the others.

Tattletale.

The girl’s eyes fluttered, struggling to focus on me even with one of them ruined and sightless, before drifting up to my face. And that was when I realized that I had no mask—or my armor at all,
for that matter— on the avatar.

But then her eyes moved even… higher?

“…What?” she rasped, sounding confused.

“Tattletale?”

The skin on her face that wasn’t bloody or burnt was visibly pale, and I only then registered that all
the blood on the deck was blood that was supposed to be in her and realized the full implications of
that.

She was bleeding out. Right in front of me.

I had no idea what to do. No knowledge. No training.

I could tell she was struggling to stay conscious, focus shifting in and out, and her eyelids fluttered
again, before she fell completely silent.

Shit.

She was dying, right here, right now. Dying. There was no way I could make it to a hospital in time,
much less get them to save her with all the bomb stuff that had been going on. The EMTs were all
over the city and everybody was overworked.

But… I had to try and save her, right? That was the right thing to do, what a real hero would do.
What the people I’d been working with only hours ago had been doing.

I had to do something.

With that in mind, I gathered some of the nanomaterial around us and started covering her, trying to
stop the blood from leaking out any further. Blood. Right. There was lots, it was just… everywhere.

I started collecting that, filtering it so that only the liquid, the donut-shaped red blood cells and the
larger (but still numerous) white blood cells were in it. I didn’t know what else was supposed to be
there or not, and I didn’t want to take any chances.

Okay. Got that. No more blood everywhere. Progress.

I didn’t have anywhere near the time or focus to go online, download every medical thing I could
find, and process and integrate it fast enough to be useful. She was dying right now.

Maybe I should get the spandex-stuff away from her skin? …Especially where it was melted to it.

Yeah, start there.

If I’d been normal and just pulling it away from her, I would have undoubtedly caused a lot of
damage. Thankfully, my nanomaterial was much better, able to move through the gaps and separate
cloth from skin cells and flesh and muscle easily.

And… yeah. The white and yellow and even some of the black was pretty obviously bone at this
point.

How was I supposed to do this? I worked with machines, not people.

Fuck.
Okay. Right. I needed to know *everything*. What was wrong, how she was, where the problems were.

*It’s just another machine. A wet machine. A really, really intricate machine that’s 60% water, 18% carbon. You know carbon, you can do this.*

I ignored the voice in my head pointing out that my carbon structures were nothing like the intricate proteins and carbohydrates this carbon was a part of, and that I knew practically *nothing* about the human body on a microscopic level.

I started looking at the burns themselves, trying to figure out what to do with them.

I just had *no idea*.

Her heartbeat was weak, fluttering, which didn’t make any sense, because I’d already put her blood back in, so shouldn’t it be better?

I grit my teeth. Remove the ash and carbon, the totally damaged cells, wall up the healthy ones, protect what’s still there.

I started doing that, burn by burn. I just couldn’t focus on more than one at once, despite my nanomaterial already being at the others. It was just too delicate, requiring too much *focus* to know what to remove and what not to, when to stop.

My nanomaterial was in her blood at that point, and I didn’t stop it. Not when it could help me figure out what was going on. There was a lot more than just red and white blood cells in there, and the problem was I didn’t know what a *healthy* human was supposed to be like when inspected this way.

And then things started going utterly *wrong*. In the worst way possible.

Most notably, her heart stopped.

…At which point I understandably started panicking a bit.

Because no heartbeat means *death*. And that was *not* an outcome I was willing to accept.

You have to understand, when I said I didn’t know about human bodies, I meant it. I couldn’t do everything at once, and so I couldn’t recognize when her blood-oxygen levels got too low. I couldn’t notice the unnatural toxins from the burns building up or the bacteria in her blood, because it had *already been there when I started*. I couldn’t tell when there weren’t enough polylsaccharides and glucose for her cells to use to produce ATP, or if there was too much carbon dioxide and lactic acid, or if her cells were even really working right.

*I didn’t know* and thus, I didn’t know what to do to fix it.

I tried CPR, manually squeezing her heart in her chest, *trying* to get it going again, but when the problem is in the blood and worsening with every second, it doesn’t do much except make things worse.

One of the few facts I managed to remember from my fuzzy memories of freshman biology class was that brain death starts three to five minutes after your heart stops, only because I found it interesting that common “death” didn’t actually mean “true death, irrevocably” which was why CPR *worked*. Unfortunately, the brain went through oxygen and sugar like a jet engine on afterburner compared to
other organs, which in turn meant after that five minute window things did not look good.

Brain damage is typically a Very Bad Thing, and hers was going to break down if I didn’t do something.

And I could not let that happen, or there’d be nothing left.

My priorities shifted. Everything else could be handled later, this needed to be done now or there wouldn’t be any point.

I practically flooded her cranium and spine with nanomaterial, and started carrying oxygen and carbon dioxide to and from her brain myself.

There was some weird fluid other than blood around her brain inside this thin membrane, and it took a moment before I remembered that was cerebrospinal fluid and supposed to be there.

So, oxygen, check. What else was needed for the brain to not die?

She was stable (enough) and the problem was so specific that I could look it up online quickly, pulling up charts and tables and lists of components and not wasting too much time.

So I did.

And that was when I started realizing that there were other things wrong. It was a lot easier when focusing on only one organ and paying attention to what it needed and nothing else.

Acid levels were too high, so I started with that because acids were easy as hell to identify and I already knew stuff about them from chemistry and my own data.

Glucose was after that, because that was the next-least complex thing. That was really low, so I started making some myself by tearing apart water molecules and carbon dioxide, assembling the sugar manually using nanomaterial. That was done outside her body, as the process produced heat and even I knew that heat plus cells equals bad stuff.

Trace elements were after that. Sodium, potassium, calcium, etc. Sodium and potassium were low, the first more than the second, and calcium was fine. I extracted them from the seawater surrounding us and brought them right in.

She was still unconscious as far as I could tell …which wasn’t all that reliable because I was only working on her brain and had no baseline. The rest of her body wasn’t working, and God that would be horrible to experience if she was conscious. I wanted to keep her from waking up to that, so I was going to need a sedative.

Another internet check and I settled on propofol. It was simple, and could be assembled just like the glucose from the same component elements. 2.5 mL for her total body mass, but I was only working with her brain, so multiplied by the percentage of her brain out of her body mass, leaving me with 0.06mL.

I introduced it slowly, watching as her brain activity slowed down.

Everything seemed like it was working alright.

I took a deep breath, and checked the time.

What had felt like minutes to me had been over two hours.
I opened the little avatar’s eyes, not even aware that I’d closed them, and looked down.

From infrared I could see that core temperature was 78°F—the fact that I was seeing it really only made it worse. Her body was white and yellow, the bottom half of her body—her back—a mottled purple from the settling deoxygenated blood. Her muscles hadn’t started locking up, but they were going to soon.

Her cells were breaking down, dissolving from acid and toxic enzymes, blood cooling further in her arteries and veins by the second. Her liver was already mush and without her immune system to regulate them the natural bacteria in her intestines had started to spread, digesting the very organs they resided in.

And there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

…For all intents and purposes, Tattletale’s body was dead.

I’d succeeded, but at the cost of everything else. There was only one path remaining.

I took a shuddering breath, hating that I was being forced to make a choice for another person that I never should have had to make.

That I’d never wanted to make.

I’m sorry.

I reached out to the nanomaterial around Tattletale’s skull and spine, and tore.

“…Dad?”

He looked up from his place at his place on the couch as I walked in the door, took one look at me and stood, pulling me in close.

My father hugged me, not questioning the way I held onto him even as I made silent apologies to a person who might never hear them.
Kayden Anders

Kayden flew through the air above Brockton Bay, watching clouds of smoke billow from beneath her.

All of downtown. The commercial district. The South Docks. Captain’s Hill.

Nothing except for the Docks proper had been spared, a place that Kayden had become more than a little acquainted with over the past year after making the ABB her priority target.

And right now, it was looking like everything she’d done to them was more than justified.

Max wouldn’t have done something like this. His Empire was built on promises of safety and security, and this was completely antithetical to that. She knew he’d be leveraging it for all that he could, though.

The Merchants simply had no reason for this. They may have been scum of the lowest order, but they were unambitious scum. They were content in their drug-drowned lifestyle and had shown no desire to grow beyond that.

She was thankful of that, at least.

The ABB, though…

Kayden accelerated, curving towards the heart of the Docks.

The ABB had every reason for this. Means and motive.

She’d already been combing the Docks the past five days, having taken a seven-day break from work as soon as she’d heard that Lung had been imprisoned, but until now she’d only been able to find small-time members and things not even really worth bothering with, except that she knew every little thing mattered.

It just… wasn’t much.

Until now.

It was still more sparse than she expected, but now there were pockets of green-and-reds that she could send running.

She flew a few hundred feet over the buildings, looking down and searching for a proper target.

The first group she saw was a cluster of five, and she was already charging a shot up to fire at them—not too hard, but a few broken bones certainly wouldn’t hurt them—when the flash of green and white lights caught her eye.

She turned, looking a few streets over, and froze on seeing the distinctive line of the black-and-purple PRT vans, along with Armsmaster on his motorcycle at the front.
Had they seen her?

It didn’t seem like it, since they were about a quarter-mile ahead of her, so they clearly weren’t there for her. Yet it was probably the largest grouping of the PRT she’d ever seen.

Why were they here? And without sirens?

She hovered, letting the charge in her hand dissipate on looking down and seeing the gang members gone. They’d probably seen her and run away.

Biting her lip, she eyed the PRT vehicles. The PRT and Protectorate meant something with parahumans. And if they were in the Docks…

She found herself drifting along, following behind them at an easy pace, but trying to keep herself from being too conspicuous a mile or so behind them.

After about ten minutes of driving, some suddenly turned onto a street and pulled sharply to a stop in front of an apartment complex, a few of the vehicles continuing on to the next block, probably to cover the back.

She moved closer, trying to see what exactly was happening, and the rear doors of the vehicles opened, PRT officers piling out, along with Triumph, Assault, and Battery.

That… was a lot of capes.

They moved together, grouping up and checking weapons. The PRT’s usual pistols and assault rifles were visible, along with a few that had tanks of containment foam strapped to their backs.

She drifted closer, high enough that they’d be able to see her, but also allowing her to see them better. They weren’t carrying any of the containment-foam nets that had become typical when she’d fought against them as part of the Empire, and she didn’t believe they’d try to go after her with how focused and intentional this all seemed.

They noticed her as soon as she was visible, turning around with weapons clenched and suddenly held at the ready.

Armsmaster stared up at her, and then after a moment turned to one of the officers and motioned for the megaphone in the man’s hold. Once he had it, he lifted it up and pointed it at her.

“PURITY!”

Kayden tensed in reaction to the name, the desire to find out what was happening, what could draw this out into the Docks, into the heart of ABB territory, warring with the rational knowledge that she shouldn’t get involved and the desire to just go back to what she’d been doing.

“PURITY! Why are you here?”

Moving closer to the edge, and then over it, she floated down so that she was on level with the fourth floor of the complex behind her.

“The bombings. The ABB’s responsible for them, isn’t it!” she yelled back.

For a moment they stared at each other, Kayden against what had to be a full third of the PRT, before Armsmaster lowered the megaphone and turned to his right, speaking quietly to one of the few people not kitted up or in a uniform.
After a tense minute, Armsmaster nodded shortly and passed the megaphone to the man, who shielded his eyes when he looked up at her.

“Purity! My name is Deputy Director Renick! Would you be willing to accept a temporary truce?”

She blinked in surprise, and then floated down closer to the ground, still keeping enough space in case conditions suddenly changed.

“Inside the building behind us is Bakuda, a bomb tinker who recently joined the ABB and the source of the attacks today,” he said. “Would you be willing to work with us? She’s already caused twelve different buildings to collapse and at least a fifty casualties so far.”

She knew. She’d been at home in the kitchen, the television on in the background when the first explosions had gone off, had seen the first images shown on the news from a traffic helicopter.

Had witnessed the destruction and suffering this woman had caused.

Was she willing to end this woman’s rampage? To deprive the ABB of another cape and weaken it further?

There was only one answer.

“…Yes.”

At that, the officers and capes below her relaxed slightly, their weapons lowering.

The Deputy Director nodded. “Good. We’ve been authorized to resort to lethal force if necessary. However, if the precautions we’ve taken work right we shouldn’t have to. We were planning on a basic assault, working from the ground floor up, but we’ll be able to afford a more aggressive approach now.”

Kayden nodded in acknowledgment.

“I have to finish preparing, Armsmaster can tell you what we’ll need,” he said, handing the megaphone back to Armsmaster and turning to walk towards one of the PRT vans. She had to wonder what had made him request her support, was this ‘Bakuda’ really that bad?”

Coming back to reality, she looked over at Armsmaster, who’d already started speaking.

“—pierce areas of the roof from above, making it dangerous for Bakuda to hide on the upper levels and pushing her down towards us, and also separating her from whatever stockpile she has.”

He reached into a compartment in his armor and pulled out a tiny earbud, holding it out.

“Communication. It has a tracker in it.”

So don’t try and take it with you.

He tossed it up to her and she caught it, turning over the small, round object before putting it in her ear. Armsmaster nodded, seeming at least moderately satisfied, if not exactly comfortable. “We’ll begin in two minutes.”

Already, the officers were doing their final equipment checks, chambering rounds and adjusting settings on the containment foam sprayers.

Kayden ascended in a burst to eighty feet above the street, moving towards the building the PRT and Protectorate were preparing to assault.
Internally, she was a bit off-balance.

This was… not what she had planned on happening today. Or even close to what she had imagined doing.

But this is what you want, isn’t it?

To change the city. To lance the festering wound it had become.

To be something that Aster could be proud of.

And at the same time, she had to wonder how Max was going to react to this.

She had no illusions that he wouldn’t like her back. He didn’t necessarily show it, he’d act as if he was merely happy that you had made the ‘right’ choice, but she knew that her departure from his group had stung—likely more than the divorce had—because what he wanted was power, and she had it in spades.

She was sure he was just waiting, waiting for her to give in and go to him, to ask for his help. He’d make some offer that would seem reasonable, but would be just another manipulation to drag her back in and sign herself over to him again.

A deal with the devil.

She could just see it.

She’d do it too. She knew she would. If meant that Aster was safer, she’d do anything.

But now… how was he going to react to her actually doing something on her own? To see her working with heroes, even if only for ten, fifteen minutes.

She couldn’t predict it.

Kayden had made it clear she never wanted to hear from him again, and so far he’d honored that, but would he continue to?

She could imagine a number of things he might do: an email, to discuss Aster with all the implications that held, that he could take custody of her in a moment. Sending over one of his members to “check” on her, likely one of the ones she’d gotten along with, Justin, probably, slowly drawing her back in through sympathy.

No.

“BAKUDA!” Armsmaster yelled through the megaphone, even louder than when he’d spoken to Kayden. “COME OUT QUIETLY WITH YOUR HANDS UP!”

There was a sudden slam and the rattling of glass. “FUCK YOU, ASSMASTER!”

Kayden darted over the edge of the building towards the front, twisting around just in time to see a dark-haired woman dressed in a heavy coat and a red-lensed gas mask lift a large cylinder onto her shoulder and then aim towards the vehicles on the ground.

A small spherical shape shot out of it, impacting short of the Protectorate heroes, but also missing the PRT officers who’d grouped at the entrance to the building.

Tendrils of black exploded out of it, flailing for a moment and then dissolving into mist. Where the
tendrils had passed there was nothing left, just streaks of emptiness. They dug deeply into the asphalt, the slashes that had reached the trucks revealing engine blocks and radiators.

“YOU THINK I DON’T KNOW HOW TO DO ANYTHING OTHER THAN REMOTE—!”

Kayden fired the charge she’d collected in those few seconds towards the window Bakuda stood in front of, cutting her off. The spirals of light smashed through the wall, leaving only crumbling flakes of the cheap stucco coating drifting towards the ground.

It took a moment for the dust to clear, and Kayden saw the woman had fallen back, but was pointing the launcher directly at her through the hole in the wall.

Kayden shot up just in time for another sphere to shoot out of the launcher, this one traveling significantly farther and over to the other side of the street, bursting into hoarfrost and deadly-looking spikes of ice.

“Can you keep her pinned down?” she heard in her ear. Armsmaster’s voice.

“Yes,” she replied shortly, already charging another shot from her place fifteen feet above where she’d been and then releasing it at the roof above where the woman had stood, dragging the beams across the roof, the surface breaking apart and collapsing in their path.

There was the sound of shattering glass and then another grenade fired from a different window, this one closer to landing where the heroes had been, except they’d already moved, following the lead of the PRT, who had already stormed the building.

Kayden used her next charge to carve a line perpendicular to her second shot, along the corner above the front windows Bakuda had been firing from, destroying and pushing the fragments of cement into the hall.

She heard cursing that moved further into the building before vanishing, and Kayden rose, her hand curling to hold another charge.

Not too much.

She didn’t want to collapse the building with the others inside, but maybe…

Kayden let the energy in her hand grow, sunk down to the level of the fourth floor, cupped her hands together, and then released, keeping the beam tight as it punched through the building, leaving only a tunnel of destruction in its wake.

There was no sign of Bakuda, and Kayden had to assume that the woman had fled somewhere else, considering the roof was falling inwards and the fourth floor was now two-thirds destroyed at this point.

“I think she’s gone down to the third floor.”

“Acknowledged,” Armsmaster returned.

The sound of an explosion emanated from somewhere within the building, but it was muffled so much that she couldn’t pinpoint where. Smoke began drifting out of windows on the third floor and then there were another two explosions. Kayden dove down, looking into the third floor windows, but half were boarded up and the others were dirty and near-impossible to see through.

She heard yelling and a loud roar, the familiar muted cracking of gunfire, another explosion. There
was a loud crackle of electricity, and then everything fell silent.

Kayden moved back from the building. The smoke was still pouring out, but less than thirty seconds later PRT officers began exiting the building from the front entrance, a stream of men and women in black fatigues.

Assault and Battery walked out together, both looking slightly scorched. A large PRT officer followed behind them with an unconscious woman slung over his shoulder. Her hands were cuffed behind her back and yellow-white foam was strategically positioned to prevent movement, likely having been applied after the woman had been disabled.

Behind the man was Armsmaster, Bakuda’s mask gripped in his hand at his side, torn straps dangling down.

The officer carried Bakuda to one of the black-and-purple trucks, placing her inside easily before joining the other PRT officers. Armsmaster looked up at Kayden, and she slowly descended towards him, taking the radio from her ear.

“…Thank you for your help,” he told her once she was less than fifteen feet away.

Kayden had to just float there a moment at the sheer absurdity that was Armsmaster thanking her for anything.

After a moment, though, she nodded, the earbud still held in her hand. “I’m not with the Empire anymore, you know. I’ve broken ties with them.”

Armsmaster nodded once. “We suspected, considering your lack of appearance with them when we’ve fought in the past year, as well as the fact you’ve only been seen on your own since then. You’ve also only targeted other gangs since, and not come into conflict with the PRT or Protectorate.”

She straightened. They’d noticed?

“I’m trying to help, now. I want to help. This is my city too.”

Armsmaster stared at her, and Kayden twitched.

After a moment, he reached into his armor, a different compartment this time, and pulled out a card, holding it out to her.

Kayden lowered further, taking the card, but still holding the earbud in her right hand.

She looked at it. It had his name, ‘Protectorate ENE Leader’, and then a phone number and email address.

Kayden looked back up at him. “Why are you doing this?”

Armsmaster shifted his weight, and his grip on the mask in his left hand changed. “Someone… recently reminded me that being a hero means being proactive, not reactive. It requires a certain amount of humility, and sometimes you have to make concessions in order to move forward. You wouldn’t be the first to overcome your past, and I’m sure you won’t be the last.”

He looked over at the backs of the vehicles where the officers were getting in, and the other Protectorate heroes were talking, though Kayden saw Battery had an eye on her.
Armsmaster turned back to her. “It’s also how we were able to stop Bakuda so quickly. I suspected that she’d react to Lung’s incarceration and spent all week preparing, setting up sensors over the city so that as soon the first bombs went off, we were able to isolate, triangulate, and then block the signal detonating them.”

She looked down at the card again and swallowed, her mouth dry. “So… an olive branch.”

“Yes, an olive branch,” he agreed.

It was just a piece of paper, but it felt like so much more.

It felt like proof.

It felt like hope.

She was making a difference and people had noticed.

“If you’re truly invested in remaining in the city, I’d recommend acting as an independent. If you joined the Protectorate you’d be relocated to another city and heavily limited for the first few years. Though you would also gain support with legal matters.”

Like Aster. Like custody of her daughter.

But Brockton Bay was her home, and joining them would require revealing her identity, and she knew they’d instantly make the connection from her to Max, and from Max to the others.

And as much as she didn’t like the Empire, she couldn’t do that to them.

Not when there were other options.

“If you do stay independent, I’d suggest at least adopting a different alias, seeing as it would be rather difficult for you to change your appearance. Or do you already have one?”

Kayden remembered. Remembered the months after the accident. The months before she’d met Max. The months she’d spent going out before he’d found her, before she’d discovered the first person she met that was like her was the high school baseball player she’d had a crush on when she’d been in middle school, before he’d charmed her and drawn her into his empire, manipulating and molding her while she had no idea just how deep she was getting.

She remembered the name.

The name that had been replaced by the one he’d given her. “Purity”.

It was fitting, really, that she would take the name she’d had before she’d been corrupted by him. That she’d discard the one that had become an irony of the highest order for the one that had marked the beginning of a time she’d imagined herself becoming a hero and helping people.

This was the last thing that connected her to Max, that defined her on his terms, not hers. A name that had come to symbolize her life with him. Replacing it would mean breaking free of him entirely.

It was an easy decision to make.

“Radiance.”

Armsmaster nodded. “I’ll make sure it’s noted, along with your contributions.”
Kayden handed him the earbud and floated up. “Thank you.”

He nodded again. “…You’re welcome.”

And without warning she took off, leaving only a trail of motes of light behind her.

“Did I do well?” Colin asked, momentarily glancing at the small image of the brown-haired woman at the bottom right of his visor.

“Yes, Colin. You handled that very well.”

He smiled slightly, watching the small flare of light streak across the sky. “Good.”

He’d done better.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit Kayden is hard to write. It’s so complex because the things she thinks and how she narrates isn’t even close to an unbiased view. She’s even more of an unreliable narrator than Taylor.

Anyways. Yeah. Kayden. Radiance. Complex doesn’t even begin to describe it.
Humans —physically— are complex things.

Very, very complex.

Evolution is not a clean design process. You get fragments, bits that are left over that have no purpose anymore, parts that are extremely vital but are somehow precariously dependent upon this one other random element that’s completely useless otherwise.

It’s a hot mess.

Brains are not exempt from that. They’re tangles of neurons, with thousands of different functions, drowned in a delicately balanced cocktail of hormones and neurotransmitters. And if one of those was off, even just a bit…

So much could go wrong.

So, I had to figure it all out and get it right, or this would all be pointless.

The clock was ticking.

I didn’t sleep that night.

I lay in my bed, my ‘body’ completely ignored as I focused all my attention on the impromptu work area I’d created in the Graveyard.

There was too much to do, too much to solve, to replace.

Transfer fluids, shock absorption, temperature regulation, viscous matrices. Dedicated nanomachine designs that would function for molecular transport, systems to track and regulate vital requirements.

All on a time limit.

The first problem was keeping her brain alive, and the system needed to be solid. Over-engineered to the extreme, with tolerances far beyond what it should have to handle. Other things I could wait and iterate on, but this, this needed to be done right, and I had the means to do so relatively easily, considering my skill with nanomachines and atomic manipulation.

The nanomachines I was constructing were ‘smart’—unlike my nanomaterial, which was ‘dumb’. Nanomaterial had no capacity for self-actuation or any ability to perform tasks on its own. In comparison, the ones I designed were hundreds, thousands of times larger and more complex than my own nanomachines, able to communicate in a mesh network that would coordinate every type I was creating. I kept them highly specialized other than the common communication system, following that age-old wisdom that had been passed down from our forefathers for generations:

Keep it simple, stupid.

One type for O2/CO2 transport and regulation. Another that could break down practically anything that had glucose in it and separate the simple sugar from everything else. A third for acid and waste
regulation. A fourth for maintaining homeostasis of the new liquid cerebral matrix I’d created. A fifth for safely finding and disposing any nanomachines that got damaged (which would shut down immediately at the first sign of corruption).

That took six hours.

Only once I was absolutely certain that the brain was doing okay, that the electrical activity matched what was expected for a perfectly normal unconscious person, that the bare-bones nanomachines I had constructed were in place to feed it oxygen and glucose and remove carbon dioxide were working… Only then did I start work on the rest of the body.

This wasn’t like my own body, which was an artificial construct, a totally alien thing that was only human-like in outward appearance.

I was building a person.

I didn’t have time to get quality elements or ingredients. I had to make do with what I had, and what I had was metal.

Metal, glass, silicates, and plastics.

My nanomaterial… There was no way I could build a processor or computation system that would be able to handle the load of automatic nanomaterial control the way I could. There was just too much to have something like my old wholly-nanomaterial body.

Components had to be discrete, parts independent.

And, if I was being completely honest, I didn’t want it to involve any of my nanomaterial, because I’d still be able to sense and control it no matter what, and the thought of that as part of somebody else…

No. Just… no.

So I didn’t.

I started with the head, neck, and torso.

The frame and skeleton was being built out of steel. Plastics and hydrocarbons went into the joints. Contractile steel-fiber bundles were muscles, with dedicated nanomachines acting as the tiny actuators, similarly to natural muscles. Microns-thick fiber optics acted as artificial nerves, connecting to the shell that held her brain.

That… that was the easy parts.

The hard part was the intricate components. Visual and auditory and olfactory sensors that required so much attention to detail I only managed to get twenty percent of the design done by morning, much less construct them and what would be needed to interface them properly.

It was messy and slapdash compared to my own body. All of this was. But I was also doing this as a stopgap, something that would work for now, that would work as an intermediary so I could work on a better system without worrying about her as much.

By the time it was eight, I’d barely completed twenty percent of the skeletal body, but it was enough that when my dad knocked on my door and asked me if I wanted breakfast, I was able to pull back to my own body and tell him yes. I’d also seemingly got a set of text messages from Brianna that I
hadn’t even noticed telling me that the mall thing was off because it was closed and that she’d send me details for when it got rescheduled. I sent back a simple ‘okay’, my attention still not wholly there.

My shower that morning was spent ensuring that I could still work on the frame and the muscles idly, not needing my dedicated focus for those things.

When I finally got downstairs, slumping into my chair at the dining table, Dad was already at the stove, pancakes cooking on the griddle.

Ten minutes later, there was a stack of pancakes, a few slices of bacon, a cup of orange juice, and a bottle of syrup in front of me.

This was the way my dad did things. He wouldn’t ask what was wrong, or if I wanted to talk about it. I had to be the one to start it, or it wouldn’t happen.

That’s what had happened with the bullying.

“I found someone dying, last night,” I started, looking up as my father froze halfway through cutting his pancakes. “I found someone I’d met before, dying, and I tried to save them. Really dying. Not from something simple like a gunshot wound, but broken bones and major burns and bacteria infections and bleeding out.”

I took a breath, sipping at my orange juice.

“We were too far from anybody who could help, hospitals or emergency services or anything. And with the bomb attacks… There was no way they’d be able to help. So, so I tried to save her myself.”

My dad looked at me with pitying eyes. “Oh, Taylor…”

“At first… At first I thought it was just a matter of getting her blood back inside her. So I did that, but it didn’t help much. So I started cleaning out the burn wounds and shoring up the healthy cells.” My eyes dropped. "A-and then, her kidneys must have been failing, because the toxins and lactic acid in her blood weren’t getting filtered out and I didn’t know, so her muscles started failing and her heart stopped beating.

"So I starting pumping her heart myself, but it just… didn’t do anything and then her brain started to shut down and so I stopped everything else and focused on that because brain death would mean I’d failed.

“A-and it worked. I got oxygen in and carbon dioxide out and glucose and sodium and potassium in and everything was working so I went back to the rest of her body and, and… i-it had been two hours. Two hours.”

I looked up to find my dad’s face pale. “Her body had been dead for long enough that it was already starting to break down, and there was nothing I could do. I-I don’t know enough about biology to even try to fix what was happening. So I just… stopped.”

My dad’s face, which had already been pale, now was bone-white.

“And now all that’s left is her brain and her spinal cord,” I said. “Just her nervous system, encased in nanomaterial and hooked up to this thing that’s dealing with the O2 and CO2 and glucose and everything else. And that’s it. I couldn’t… Everything else was too far gone. I saved her. I saved her, but would she have wanted it to be like this?”
My dad looked uncomfortably out of his element. “I don’t think that’s something that anyone can say except for her?”

I nodded. I hadn’t actually expected him to try and answer.

“Isn’t there something about doctors doing everything they can to help someone?” he said carefully.

“‘I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures that are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism,’” I quoted. “from the Hippocratic Oath.”

“Yeah. I think… I think that if you did everything you could do, then you were only doing what any doctor would in your position,” he said.

I sighed. It was easy to say that. It was harder to believe it.

I let out a breath and sipped my orange juice. “Yeah. It’s just that I helped all these people yesterday, working with Emergency Services, but when I find someone who really needed my help I… I couldn’t.”

“I saw that,” he said, nodding his head at the TV in the living room, and I blinked.

“You… saw that?”

“What, you didn’t think I would try and look up what my daughter’s been up to? There’s quite a few people saying some very nice things about you in the thread on that parahumans forum.”

What?

“There are?” I repeated incredulously, simultaneously connecting to the internet and checking myself.

And holy shit. My thread had exploded. There were a couple blurry camera-phone pictures of when I’d spoken to Brandish and walked with Glory Girl, and a couple of me and Glory Girl working on the second building we’d done, and a veritable album of me shifting rubble and working alongside the emergency workers.

There were even people thanking me in there, saying that I’d helped save them and that there needed to be more heroes like me and New Wave.

It was… overwhelming.

“Um. Taylor?”

I refocused back on my dad. “Yeah?”

“Your eyes…?”

Oh. “They do that when I do things on the internet,” I said. “I’m just surprised. There’s so much there.”

He nodded.

“Anyways. Um, what’s happening now?” he questioned, and it looked like he was forcing himself to act normal when he picked up his silverware and started eating his pancakes. “Is she okay? You said you kept her brain alive. Does, does that mean…?”
“I’m building her a body. Right now. I don’t need to be near my nanomaterial to control it. I’ve finished basic life support, I think. It seems to be stable,” I said, picking up a piece of bacon and nibbling on it.

My dad just stared at me. “…Building her a— Building a body? That’s— How?”


“Yeah but that’s…” He took a breath and ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Jeez. Okay. It’s just, I guess I didn’t really think about that? You made a golf ball. A body is…”

“A bit more complex,” I finished, and he nodded. “Yeah. All those TV shows and movies make it seem so easy, but it’s not. And I’m not a true Tinker. I don’t have the ability to just know how to do things. Everything has to be engineered, and my focus is limited.”

“Is there anybody that could help you?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not really. Armsmaster might. Maybe. But Tinker-tech just doesn’t make any sense. I… I don’t trust it. If I can’t understand how it works then it shouldn’t be used. Not for something like this.”

My dad gave me what was probably supposed to be a reassuring smile. “I’m sure everything will work out okay.”

I sighed. “Yeah. I hope so.”

“And… I think I’m starting to understand,” he said.

I jerked up in shock. “What?”

“I… I can’t say I know what this is like, or that I like it, but if you can truly help people, people like this girl, then I can’t blame you for doing that. I can wish that it wasn’t you, that you didn’t have to deal with this, that it wasn’t your responsibility, but I understand wanting to help her as much as you can,” he said with a sad smile.

And in that moment, that was exactly what I’d needed to hear. “Thanks, dad.”

It was around ten o’clock and I was in the middle of working on the hydrogen fuel cell that would be the ‘heart’ of the body when I got the text.

‘hey. u doin ok after yesterday?’

Glory Girl.

I was about to just reply ‘yes’ on reflex when I thought about it. She’d probably had some pretty close experiences with almost-dying too, and probably tried to save a person only to do it at a cost or something.

If anybody would know what I was dealing with, it was probably her.

So instead I sent back, ‘Not really.’

‘:(’

‘saw that giant missing space the bomb did. dunno if anything could really protect from that.’
Wait. They thought the portal-cut I’d made with my field and graviton manipulation was the bomb’s fault?

…Huh.

I mean, it made sense. I was the only one to see the bomb go off and the black hole it made, much less the effects it had. To everyone else it probably just seemed that the bomb ate everything in a certain range.

I couldn’t decide that was good or bad. Probably good? It meant that I had a trick others didn’t know about.

‘did u see ur pho thread?’

‘Yeah. It’s kinda crazy.’

‘haha. welcome to being a hero.’

There was a few minutes pause, and then another message.

‘whatre u up to?’

Um.

…How the hell are you supposed to say ‘building a body for a girl that I had to save by ripping her brain and spine out’ in a way that doesn’t sound super creepy or reveal that you’re a Tinker that wouldn’t be out of place on the Triumvirate?

Hrm. Better just go with…

‘Project right now.’

‘school?’

‘For someone else. An apology.’

There was a knock on my door and I turned to it. “What’s up, Dad?”

He opened the door. “Hey, Taylor. I was wondering when you’d like to do those shelves for in here?”

I stood up from where I was sitting at the chair in front of my desk. “Now?”

“How? Aren’t you… busy right now?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I’m trying to figure out processor designs that would interface the best with a human neural structure. I can do that in the background pretty easily.”

And it was true. I was chewing through processor cycles with simulations of neural structures and attempts at creating a distributed processor system that would work well with it, both general-purpose and highly specialized for various tasks (motor control, sensory integration, both exteroceptive and interoceptive, autonomous system regulation, etc.) But that only required me to check on it every few hundred iterations as my systems searched for the best way to do this, particularly based on what I knew of Tattletale’s own cranial and spinal nerves.

I’d traced every single nerve down to their endings when I’d realized I couldn’t extract and preserve
her entire nervous system, only the centralized parts. So I now had an exact map of what her brain was going to expect, though considering the neuroplasticity of a teenager she’d likely be able to adapt relatively quickly to anything that was changed.

Also phantom limb sensation was supposed to be a bitch, and keeping that from happening would be really good.

“…Alright then,” he said. “Um. You… you still want to do this, even when you could just make the shelves with your, uh, nanostuff?”

“Nanomaterial,” I corrected. “And… yeah. Kinda. I don’t really have much here right now, and I don’t think I’d be able to do it with what I do have, so…”

He smiled, and I knew I’d made the right decision. This was something for Dad and I to do together, no matter the fact that I could just make all the shelves I wanted if I brought the nanomaterial over from the Ship Graveyard.

“Alright. Well, I went out got a couple pine boards and some brackets. If you ever want to put anything heavy on them we should probably mount them in the studs instead of the drywall…” he said. “Where did you want them? Maybe at the foot of your bed? You’ve already got that one above your desk…”

“Yeah, that would work,” I agreed, nodding.

He smiled. “Well, come on then, let’s take a look at how we’re going to do this.”

I grinned. “Okay.”

Excepting one minor mishap with the circular saw where I’d sharpened the blade with my nanomaterial and made it too sharp, catching my dad by surprise, we managed to get the two boards up in under an hour, mounted into the studs in my wall with a set of rather fancy quarter-inch steel rods that extended into the boards. They were threaded, a short bit getting screwed into the wall, and then a longer segment screwed on to that actually held up the boards.

They were staggered, flush with the wall to the left of my bed, but the higher board was a full foot shorter and three and a half inches less deep than the other so it looked almost like steps.

Once they were up, my dad and I were grinning at each other as he wiped the sweat away from his forehead.

“Ready to put some stuff on them?” he asked and I nodded, clambering off my bed where I’d been kneeling and moving over to the box next to my closet, picking it up and bringing it close to my bed.

I carefully pulled each of the wrapped models out, along with the small stands I’d found at the bottom of the box.

As soon as I started unwrapping them, though, I knew something was different.

There was something…

I picked up the model of the Taylor, and it was like something that had been fuzzy before was now in perfect clarity. The technology I had and could construct was so much more.

And this ship…
How had I not noticed this? God, I knew so much more now. Like I’d only been looking at the child section of a library and now I’d moved onto Teen/YA as well.

“Taylor?”

I looked up at my dad. “I…” I swallowed. “I know how to make this.”

“The model?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No. The actual ship.” I could construct a Fletcher-class destroyer with less effort than it had taken to design my fighter jet.

I had the design right there. It wasn’t truly the USS Taylor, old parts and all, but something very much like it, while also being far more advanced and complex. Like a spacecraft from a science fiction film in the shape of the Taylor.

“What?” he asked, sounding off-balance.

“I can build this. A Fletcher-class destroyer, but upgraded to the highest level of Tinker-tech you can imagine. I-I don’t know how.”

And this felt right. Something in me longed for me to do it right now, to use a portion of the nanomaterial I had in the bay to form this three-thousand ton warship.

Because this was what I was meant for.

I looked over at the USS Harder and realized I knew how to make that as well.

In fact, I could construct not just the Gato-class submarines, but also the Balao and Tench. It was the same with the destroyers. Not just Fletcher, but any destroyer-class that had ships built between 1939 and 1945.

This…

I shook my head, bringing myself back to my room and my father. “I guess we know why I knew so much about these ships.”

He just laughed awkwardly.

Even as I said that, I looked over at the models of ships in other classes. But none of them triggered that knowing that I had with the subs and destroyers.

Not yet.

“Anyways,” I said, refocusing on the ship in my hands and turning to lift it up onto the smaller top shelf. To its left went the Harder, and the Albacore—the second Gato sub in the box. On the bottom shelf was the Maury, Nashville, and then Wisconsin to the far left. All the models were angled to the right, pointing towards my desk.

My dad looked at it admiringly. “Pretty good for an hour and a half project, huh?”

I nodded. It really did look good.

Impulsively, I isolated a rectangular portion of what I was seeing and sent it to Victoria.

‘what’s that?’
‘What I did this morning.’

‘Oh cool. the project?’

‘Something else. They were my grandfather’s.’

‘What are they?’

‘Models of a few of the ships that were built in Brockton Bay during World War 2.’

‘Huh. didn’t know that.’

‘That’s pretty cool.

In the time I’d been messaging Victoria my dad had started cleaning up, packing the cordless drill away. After closing up the case, he glanced over at me. “You want to have lunch in about a half-hour?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“Alright, then.”

“Hey dad?” He paused, a hand on my door, looking at me. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” he said, smiling, before he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

I refocused back on my processor simulations.

It… seemed like they were done, the chip designs complete and ready for production. But the wetware interfaces were… weird. They were almost organic, practically a physical neural network so complex that, much like an organic brain, it was the patterns of connections between nodes themselves that formed the translation systems.

It would grow and adapt alongside the brain, eventually forming a tangle so embedded in the brainstem that the boundary between organic and artificial neural structures would be impossible to discern.

Not that they would impossible to replace or anything. Everything that would be directly connected to the brain had the ability to dissolve hard-coded into it as part of the physical construction.

I was not taking any chances with this.

Combined with the total map of her previous peripheral nervous system, I was hoping it would make the transition as seamless as possible.

Now… now I just had to figure everything else out.

Neurotransmitters, hormones, sensory organs…

I took a metaphorical breath. One step at a time, Taylor. Break it down into smaller problems.

Still, this had been a pretty large step.

My nanomaterial began constructing the processors, taking the carbon for them out of… out of her previous body.

I refused to think of it as a corpse. I just couldn’t. Not while she was still alive in some capacity. It
was just a collection of materials, now. Carbon and oxygen and hydrogen. And it was almost…
fitting that her old body would become a part of her new one.

‘s{}o battleships and 2 submarines?’

Victoria’s text drew my attention away from the construction, though I still kept a watch on it.

‘No they’re…’ I tried to think about how to describe it.
‘Have you ever played Battleship? The game?’

‘like, years ago’

‘You know how there’s different pieces? It’s not just battleships, there’s destroyers, submarines, cruisers, and carriers too.’

‘yeah?’

‘There’s only one battleship here. Up on the top shelf, there’s a destroyer and the two submarines. The bottom shelf has a destroyer, a light cruiser, and the battleship. The big one.’

‘oh’

‘For comparison, at full size the battleship would be three times longer and thirteen times heavier than the destroyer. 900 feet and 40,000 tons.’

‘holy shit’

‘and they made those here?’

‘Yep.’

‘huh. so hows the project thing coming?’

‘Slowly. It’s really intricate and I don’t want to mess up.’

‘thus the slowly’

‘Right. What are you doing?’ I asked, realizing that the entire conversation had been almost exclusively focused on me.

‘eehhhh. just watchin tv’
‘was going to go out today to the boardwalk but everythings still closed and ames is at the hospital’

‘…You’re still in your pajamas, aren’t you?’

The response was practically instantaneous. ‘no!’

I laughed and decided to wait to see if she would say anything more.

About thirty seconds later I got an ‘okay fine yes’ which just made me laugh more. ‘no judging!’

‘I’m not,’ I replied.

Seventeen seconds, and I got some sort of link with an attachment. Following it gave me a picture of Victoria with her eyes closed sticking her tongue out at the camera.

What.
Um.

How was I supposed to respond to that? Is this sort of thing normal for texting?

Alright just... just act normal.

Breathe.

‘Cute,’ I sent back.

‘haha glad you think so’

Oh my God I was being sarcastic. Fucking—

A lack of social interaction for a year and a half does not help you talk to other people. Who’d have guessed?

Instead of trying to reply to that, I rolled off my bed and made my way downstairs for lunch.

---

Lunch was sandwiches. Lunch conversation was Dad asking for details about the fights I’d gotten into so far.

Including the Lung fight. Which he had... not been happy learning about, but also seemed to decide that there was no point in getting really upset about after seeing what Uber and Leet had put me through with their holodeck knockoff.

I wisely did not tell him that I was unsure of my invulnerability when I’d gone up against Lung.

After lunch I worked more with my nanomaterial in the Graveyard.

I wanted to construct one of the ships. I really wanted to. But that plus Tattletale would be too much to focus on.

There was also the fact that I didn’t want to alert anybody to my presence, and sections of the Ship Graveyard missing with a submarine suddenly in the Bay wouldn’t exactly help with that.

And finally, I had nothing to power it with. None of what was needed to power it.

Thanatonium.

Matter that decayed into pure gravitons. Extremely energy-dense.

It was much like nuclear fission: how unstable isotopes of uranium (236, for example) would break down into fission products and neutrons, the neutrons binding to other uranium atoms and making them unstable, thus creating a chain reaction. Thanatonium was a non-baryonic fermion that, when it absorbed a free-graviton, would itself decay into gravitons, triggering a chain reaction. Gravitons, much like photons and gluons, were energy carriers, and thus a perfectly usable source.

The problem was that manufacturing thanatonium used dark matter. That stuff that makes up like eighty percent of the universe and loses practically no energy because it only interacts through gravity? Yeah. That.

And well, I didn’t have any.

Okay, I sort of did.
Dark matter passed through the Earth much like neutrinos. There just… wasn’t much of it. Our solar system was too far from the galactic center, where dark matter would be densest.

On Earth, in a one cubic mile, there was only 1.6 nanograms of dark matter. And within a single cubic foot that was 7.4 time ten to the negative twenty-one grams.

So I was going to need to make some.

And of course stupid entropy would ensure that the energy I got out would be less than I put in.

…I was going to need a really big fusion reactor, or some way to efficiently collect all of the energy being put out by the sun for half a second.

…

Fusion reactor it was.

I basically spent the entire day working on Tattletale’s body. Or rather, the tiny delicate pieces, considering the body I was building as a placeholder was comparatively simple.

Dinner with Dad was quiet. But it was a comfortable quietness.

Brianna texted me and said they’d rescheduled for the next Saturday and wondered if that would work for me. I replied in the affirmative.

Victoria didn’t text me again, which was honestly a little relieving. I wasn’t really sure how to interact with her. I liked talking to her, she was understanding and easy-going and a little silly and I just… I didn’t know how?

It wasn’t like Emma, where we grew up together and there wasn’t any of that awkwardness. Making friends now was so much more complicated. I’d say unnecessarily so, if I didn’t recognize the fact that I needed anchors. The more… creative and immersed I got in my own… otherness, my nature as Fog, the more I was going to need normal things, people to keep me grounded.

And I couldn’t afford to let those slip by, not with how fast everything was moving: a week ago, I was planning on going outside in an armor of hand-molded steel. Now I was a fluid shapeshifting construct that had flown as a fighter jet, consumed the entire Boat Graveyard, and was building a catatonic girl a new body.

I finished eating the Boat Graveyard at three-thirty in the morning. It was now mine in every way that matter, a part of me at the most fundamental level.

Over a hundred and eighty thousand tons of steel, converted to nanomaterial.

…Now I just needed somewhere to put all the nanomaterial when I decided to spirit it away from under everyone’s noses.

I was thinking of taking it to the old shipyards, hiding it in the slips and warehouses.

Oh well. I didn’t necessarily have to decide that moment.

At four-oh-six ante meridiem, I finally finished Tattletale’s body. Or, I’d done enough that I could finally step back and stop.

There wasn’t any blood. I just… couldn’t. There were too many support systems (marrow, kidneys,
leukocytes, etc.) needed for it, and when it would be such a small amount…

Her central nervous system was held in a shock-absorbing fluid swarming with several classes of nanomachines that acted for transport, monitoring, and self-management. Nothing for cellular repair right now (as that was going to be obscenely complicated), though it was high on my to-do list.

The processors and artificial-neuron tangle were embedded in her brainstem and thalamus, and everything seemed to be interfacing with her sensory and upper motor neurons properly.

Her CNS was encased in a shell of the metamaterial I had around my own bones and Core. I’d spent all day and night synthesizing it in-place, and it was the thing that had actually taken the longest.

Well, that and all the fiddly bits.

Do you know how complicated the motor neurons in the upper half of your torso is? Ridiculously so. All the tiny facial muscles, twitchy eye movements, the mouth and tongue, the things your pharynx has going on, hell, speaking. And that’s not even getting into your heart and lungs.

I just… I wanted this to work.

It had to work.

I knew there were going to be issues. Things that I could do better when I had more information. Problems that I couldn’t foresee. It was inevitable, really. That was just how development worked.

I’d done my best, though. In the end that was really all I could do.

Now… now all that was left was waiting for her to wake up.

And then at eight thirty-two, she did.

Chapter End Notes

I did so much neuroscience and neurology research for this chapter you have no idea guys. It’s part of what I love about writing this story, though, so I can’t really complain.

Hope you enjoyed, and the next chapter’ll hopefully be out in a few weeks.

Also, you can decide whether the next bit’s canon or not :P

A week later.

Amy stared at her sister’s phone, a flash of jealousy flickering through her before she squashed it flat and looked up at Victoria.

“You were flirting.”

“What? No I wasn’t!”

“Crystal?” Amy looked over at her cousin on the couch, who stood up and walked over to where Victoria and Amy stood, looking over the healer’s shoulder at the phone screen, before reaching around and scrolling a bit.
“…You were totally flirting.”

Victoria spluttered. “N-NO I WASN’T!!”

“I never took you for one to be in denial, Vicky~” Crystal sing-songed as she went back to the couch.

“I’m not!!”

Amy gave Victoria a flat look while Crystal hummed. “Mmm-hm. Somebody’s got a cruuuush~”

Victora reached out and snatched the phone away from her sister’s hands, her face burning red. “Screw you guys.”

And with that final parting statement she spun on her heel and stalked off, muttering under her breath.

Amy noted suspiciously that her sister hadn’t denied it.
Darkness.

Her eyes flashed open, but there was no light.

She was weightless, no, suspended somehow, and there was something, something in her mouth, her throat, moving, twisting-flexing in ways that something natural never would.

She screamed, but she could barely hear it and nothing happened.

Her hands frantically went to her throat, as if she could claw whatever it was inside out herself, but they found nothing to hold or grasp.

Without thinking she lashed out with her hand, reaching and hitting something. Something keeping her inside, trapped and nonono this wasn’t right she couldn’t.

Outoutoutout. She needed to get out.

She stuck forward, as hard as she could, feeling something hard yield but not give way. She needed needed needed out.

She struck out again, the barrier disappearing suddenly with a crash and whatever darkness was around her rushing out, throwing her onto the floor as she gasped, heaving, surrounded by viscous silvery liquid.

She coughed, and the fluid inside her just kept pouring out, spilling onto the floor and joining what was there as she retched.

Her vision wavered, each eye seeming to focus independently for a moment before solidifying, bringing her sight into sharp clarity.

She stared, looking at the black skeletal hands and arms in front of her, holding her up from the ground, lifting her left one up before flexing it. She twisted it around, spreading her fingers, watching it move and shift hypnotically, silvery-black bands and fibers twining and flexing around dark metal. Metal plates sat on the underside, contoured and fitted to it.

Steel/carbon/unknown actuator contractile strands. Steel internal structure. Intelligent design.
Where was she? What…? What was going on?

She looked around, at the bright silver-metal walls, riveted and welded in place.

*Interior structure restored and/or modified.*

What was happening? Where was she?

She couldn’t… couldn’t– a dull throbbing took up inside her head and she winced, halting that train of thought.

*Mӑjŏr mě̆ntal ťrά̮mą̆g. Sе̾f̔přó̥jĕct̴ vě̥̕p̓̕s̓h̔y̕l̕o̕g̕̕a̕l̕ ̕d̕̕is̔̕ső̕ e̦̕j̞̕a̦̕ř̕. P̔̕s̔̕c̔̕h̔̕o̦̕g̔̕en̔̕еч̔ a̦̕̕m̔̕ɛ̞̕s̔̕. X̔̕ac̔̕ě̞̕r̔̕n̔̕ě̞ś̔̕t̔̕l̔̕ b̔̕b̔̕y̦̕h̔̕y̥̕s̔̕i̦̕c̔̕a̦̕l t̔̕r̔̕a̦̕m̔̕ě̞̕.*

Brain damage.

Deep breaths, deep breaths. Check everything else.

She knew where her hands were, knew where *all* of her body was, how it was positioned and that she was kneeling, but now that she focused on it, she realized she couldn’t *feel* anything. Pressing each of her fingers against her thumb elicited some sense of touch, but pressing the fibers on her arm only gave her sensation from the fingers, not the arm.

*Plates on underside of hands convey pressure.*

So it was supposed to be like that, okay.

She staggered up, knees and hands dripping that silver fluid as she moved towards the heavy-looking door on the other side of the room, taking slow steps before finding her balance. Her steps became more confident as she crossed to the door, lifting up the lever that was the door handle and pushing out, stepping over the lip on the floor as she moved past the door. A short hallway extended left and right, with light at the end on the right illuminating steps that ascended upwards.

She turned, moving towards the stairs, reaching them and then slowly stepping up them, grasping the rail to emerge… in another small room. Windows sat at the front, streaming light and showing bright blue-green water with sunlight glancing off it, with the sound of waves lapping gently and seagulls cawing drifting in from the open doorways to either side of her.

*Pilothouse. Fishing vessel, abandoned.*

At her left was a soft sound, quiet breaths going in and out.

Somebody was next to her.

She turned towards the sound, staring at what she saw: a not-even-two-foot figure with pale skin and dark curly hair facing towards the door. It was almost like a caricature of a person, or rather a simplification of them, everything matching up, but… childish, dressed in a t-shirt and a pair of jeans complete with tiny shoes.

And that still wasn’t even mentioning the large number ‘2’ on the figure’s forehead.

It (she?) sat in a swivel chair bolted to the floor, eyes closed, cheek on her fist, elbow on her leg, a bubble of saliva expanding and contracting from her mouth.

She stepped towards it, but her foot caught on something and she stumbled, reaching out for the wall
with her left hand, impacting it with a *clang*.

The bubble popped, the figure’s head snapping up to look at her with wide eyes.

“Aaaaahhh!!”

She automatically reached up to cradle her head with her right hand. …Why had she done that?

“AAAAAAAAHHHHH!! SHE’S AWAKE!”

*Instinctive reaction. Expected pain.*

“AWAKE!!”

The figure turned to her suddenly, hand up, palm facing forwards. “Stay. I am on the way.”

It sounded like a child repeating a phrase they’d been told to say (*how did she know that?*). After a moment, it nodded in satisfaction, its message delivered.

*Sincere. Does not mean you harm.*

With that bit of information imparted it became impassive, staring forward out the window towards the sea and swinging its legs, just leaving her standing there with nothing else.

After a moment’s debate, she moved over to the chair next to the figure, sitting quietly and listening to the soothing sounds of the waves and birds, a calmness settling into her as she waited for whoever was coming. About a half a minute passed, and then the short person next to her began idly… humming? It wasn’t any tune she recognized.

After seven minutes there was a quiet *thump* that reverberated through the ship and she turned towards the door it had come from. The figure of a tall girl appeared, a mirror of the tiny figure to her left, scaled up and given proper proportions, dark hair and jeans and all.

“Tattletale?”

Her head throbbed.

“What?” What was that supposed to mean? How did that even begin to fit the context of what was going on here? “What are you talking about?”

The figure blinked. *Expected a stronger reaction.* “…Isn’t that your name?”

There was a momentary flicker of something, an impression of *worry, trapped, perseverance* but that didn’t feel right.

She shook her head, and the figure gave her an odd look. “What’s your name then?”

Without prompting her mouth opened. “Lis—,” she started saying, but it died halfway out her throat.

Wait. No. Yes? It felt right, but wrong?

Fragments, snippets, feelings, all muddled together and impossible to separate. She swallowed and tried again. “Li—”

A sudden flash, an actual memory, faded and barely even there. A woman, “—*ah don’t you dare walk out that door! This conversation is not over young lady!*”
She frowned. “—ah?”

“L-e-a-h, Leah?” the girl asked, echoing her in pronouncing it like ‘Lee-ah’.

She blinked and looked up at the figure. “Leah,” she repeated.

Nothing rose in her mind in response, but it felt right in her mouth. Or at least not as wrong as the bits themselves.

She nodded. She had her name, now, at least. Leah. That was one step forward.

“Where… are we?” she asked. Somewhere on the coast? Boston?


Flashes. Red. Fear. Burning. Pain. Leah winced at the sudden headache, her hand going to her head as she shook it.

“O-oh. Um,” the girl was clearly set off-balance by that. “I… Well, I found you. You were dying. Really, really dying. And I tried to save you. But um.”

“What?”

“I couldn’t. Not… not everything. Just…” she trailed off to a whisper, “just your brain.”

…Oh.

She looked down at her hands again— artificial construct. not organic—and swallowed, before looking back up. “You… you made me a body?” she asked quietly.

She couldn’t even imagine something like that. The girl hadn’t been able to save her so she’d built her a replacement.

The girl gave a small nod. “I’ve never done anything like this before and I know there’s probably problems but I promise I’ll do better and I’ll make it u—”

“Are we friends?” Leah asked, cutting off her rambling.

The girl shook her head. “Not… yet? We only met one time before, about a week ago.”

Oh. So she hadn’t even really known her. This girl had done all this for a virtual stranger. And she doubted anybody else could have saved her. She couldn’t remember much, but the idea of something like this felt impossible. If it had been anybody else…

“Thank you,” she said, looking into the other girl’s eyes.

Because of her, she was still alive. Even if she couldn’t really remember anything and her body was different now, she was alive, when she could have just died.

“My name’s Taylor,” the now-named Taylor said awkwardly. “I figure it’s only fair since you gave me yours.” She hesitated. “Can… Can you stand up for me?”

Leah took a breath, and stood up from the chair.

Taylor let out a breath. “Good. Okay. Good.” She walked forward and around Leah’s mechanical
body, examining it. “How does it feel?”

“…Fine?” She looked herself over. She had no frame of reference for this, just vague memories, but everything felt right, besides missing her sense of touch.

She rolled her weight from one foot to the other, and it felt perfectly natural. After a moment, she reached towards the metal floor, her palms coming to rest on it. There was absolutely no strain or wavering in her balance, and holding the position was just as easy as standing up normally.

Leah stood back up straight and looked at Taylor, who’d been watching her.

“There’s a bit of artificial latency introduced and limits on possible force to match normal neuron signal transmission speed and what your brain expects, but that’ll slowly decrease while you’re awake over the next week and two weeks, respectively,” the girl told her. “The lag’s about one hundred-twenty milliseconds right now, though it varies based on distance from your head.”

Leah just looked over herself, marveling at the body. It was practically a work of art.

“I’m sorry there’s no skin except for your face. It was one of the last things I worked on and it took a while to find a way of making it realistic,” Taylor said, rubbing her left arm and looking at the floor. “This is really only a prototype anyways. Now that you’re awake I can start working on something better.” The girl’s head snapped up. “I-if you want to, that is! Not that you have to!”

Something better than this?

Is worried about how you’re taking this. Thinks it’s going too well.

Leah couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s fine, Taylor. Really. Thank you. This is amazing.”

She’d been dying, practically dead, and now she was alive.

The brunette just swallowed and nodded. “So do you have somewhere to go, o-or um, I guess you can’t just walk around like that. I could give you a layer of locked nanomaterial for skin and clothes for now if you want so you can do things normally until the replacement’s complete,” Taylor said with a bit of reluctance. “Or I could go get you your stuff and bring it here if you want anything.”

Somewhere to go?

More flashes (trapped, discomfort, reluctant acceptance) but nothing concrete. “I… I don’t think so. I can’t remember. I can’t really remember anything.”

“Oh.” The girl blinked. “…What do you remember?”

Leah focused, scouring her mind and trying to find links, feelings. “I…I think I had a brother.” She couldn’t even remember his face, not even vaguely. What else? She tried focusing on ‘family’ but the only sense she got was anguish and fear and worry and nomore. “I don’t think I have a family anymore. I think I lived by myself.”

“And you can’t remember anything about where?”

She focused, but all she got was a sense of largeness, so she shook her head. “No.”

“Well… if you really don’t have anywhere to go, I guess you can come home with me then. You still need to drink and eat and sleep and if something goes wrong with your… body, I’d be right there,” Taylor told her.
“Okay,” Leah said agreeably.

Taylor nodded awkwardly. “Um. Here, then.”

The floor around Leah suddenly flowed, crawling up the frame of her body so quickly she had no chance to react, spreading over her before smoothing out and turning the color of pale flesh.

She just stared, looking at the way she now had fingernails and knuckle-wrinkles and false veins running over her hand.

“It… matches what you looked like when I found you. The areas that were still intact, at least. You’re not, um, anatomically correct, at least not this body, since it was a bit of a rush job… but the next one will be much better since I managed to get a perfect-resolution model of your entire body, inside and out…” Taylor suddenly flushed and looked away. “That sounded way less dirty in my head.”

“Can I see?”

Taylor looked back up. “Um, sure?”

Without any signal the wall next to the doorway Taylor stood in turned perfectly reflective and Leah unconsciously took a step forward, reaching out to the girl she could see.

Straight blonde hair that went down to her mid-back, bright green eyes and a dusting of freckles over her cheekbones and nose, with perfectly clear skin. She was nude, but did it really count as nudity if there was nothing to show? Her body was softly defined, muscles not truly showing unless she tensed, hinting at least a decent amount of physical activity.

Leah knew that people would consider her attractive, perhaps even greatly so.

And this was what she’d been like before Taylor had recreated her?

Leah looked back at the girl to her left. “Now you said something about going somewhere…?” she asked, grinning.

“Because I’m probably going to need some clothes for that.”

The weather outside was ‘balmy’. According to Taylor, there was a mild warm front starting to move in. Leah had to take her word for it, since she couldn’t feel temperature right now.

The water sparkled around them as they crossed old ships to get to the shore, sunlight bouncing off the waves from the direction of the bay’s entrance.

“What time is it?”

Taylor looked at her. “Almost nine. I was actually sleeping when you woke up, sorry. I didn’t want to use my subnode to talk to you, since… they’re a bit hard to take seriously.”

“Subnode?”

The brunette nodded. “The uh, mini-me? With the number two on her forehead?” Oh. “They’re like… helpers. Semi-autonomous extensions of myself. I had that one waiting for you to wake up.”

They moved over another ship, a tugboat, and then onto a small fishing boat before Leah followed Taylor down a set of stairs, winding through the hull to come out of a hole that emerged onto gritty rocks.
There wasn’t anyone around, nobody to notice the two girls who had just come out of the gaping hole in the steel side of this boat.

She kept expecting something to happen, something that would trigger her memory: the salt of the ocean, the structures and shoreline, the oil rig in the bay that Taylor had pointed out with a force field that surrounded it like an iridescent soap bubble.

But nothing did.

Not the sounds, or the smells, or the way her shoes ground and scraped against half-broken cement.

Nothing.

It was paradoxically disorienting and easy to grasp.

She had no past, no history. No direction to move but forward.

In that sense, her actions were very, very simple.

Leah supposed she could be considered lucky. She could have woken up without her memory in a significantly worse situation. Instead she got a (seemingly) very nice girl who had saved her life for no reason other than she saw Leah dying.

She was going home with Taylor, and would have somewhere to stay rather than be on her own, homeless and left to fend for herself. And Taylor was some sort of seemingly very capable genius or something, and more than willing to help her.

Yes, she was quite lucky.

Honestly? Losing her memory wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened to her.

All she had to do was move forward, one step at a time.

I glanced over at the blonde girl walking next to me.

She was… surprisingly carefree and accepting of what had happened to her.

Most worrying, though, was the fact that she didn’t seem to remember any personal details or past at all.

I’d known there was more than a little chance of brain damage considering how long I’d worked on Leah’s brain. It had probably been at least seven or eight minutes before I had managed to get a steady supply of oxygen circulating, not to mention the glucose needed.

With those conditions, it was practically a miracle that Tattletale hadn’t lost more. And the more neurons she lost, the more her cognitive functions would have deteriorated.

Other than the personal memories, she seemed to be doing fine, though, and was taking her new state in stride.

Or maybe that was because she couldn’t remember anything else? Ever being anything else?

I wasn’t sure what to think of that.

Was she even still Tattletale if she couldn’t remember being her?
Was I supposed to tell her about her previous life? Or was I supposed to just let her be, as she was now?

I was left being mostly reactive. If she asked, I’d answer. If she didn’t…

Was she a totally different person? Had Tattletale *actually* died? But if she still remembered her name, then there was some continuity of consciousness and memories, so Tattletale wasn’t *gone*?

And there was the chance that over time she’d get her memories back as certain sensations triggered things and fired the synaptic paths from auxiliary entry points.

I really had no idea what to do. I was basically just dealing with all of this by the seat of my pants. It was so complicated and entangled and I was *so out of my element*, I just…

Yeah.

I’d been right, though. Having my nanomaterial be part of another person, even if for something as innocuous as skin and clothes, felt extremely uncomfortable. I could *feel* every single twitch and movement, and the idea of somebody *wearing* what was ostensibly a part of me… it was just too much.

But I dealt with it, because it was really the only way to get Leah home without attracting any attention.

The girl in question was dressed in a simple pale pink shirt and a pair of white shorts, simple sneakers on her feet, *not that she needed them*, but walking around barefoot wasn’t exactly inconspicuous.

I turned onto the path leading up to my house and Leah followed behind me as I opened the door, the sound of the TV audible from the hallway. I slipped my shoes off, Leah doing the same, and headed into the family room.

My dad looked over at me. “Hey Taylor…” He blinked when he saw Leah, and stood up to walk towards us, holding his hand out. “Hi, I’m Danny.”

Leah hesitantly reached out and shook his hand. “Leah.”

“She’s… she’s the one I was talking about, Dad,” I said.

My father’s eyes widened slightly. “You mean she’s… you know?”

I momentarily made the nanomaterial on Leah completely transparent, showing the interior structure of the artificial body before returning it to opaqueness.

He blinked. “Okay. *Wow*. I wouldn’t even be able to tell if you hadn’t told me.”

Leah shifted awkwardly and I glanced at her before turning back to him. “Um. She doesn’t have anywhere to go and right now she can’t really remember anything from… before. So I was thinking she could maybe stay with us? She can have my meals if we need to do that.”

My dad gave me a look. “We might be a bit tight on money, but we aren’t *that* tight, Taylor.”

“I was just saying…”

“I understand, but it’s unnecessary,” Dad said, before looking toward Leah. “You’re more than welcome to stay here while you’re… adjusting. We’ve got a guest room you can use.”
“Thank you. Really,” Leah said.

Dad nodded. “I’ll just… let you girls get to it, then.”

I took that as a signal and turned away from him. “C’mon Leah, let’s go upstairs.”

She followed me up to my room, and I sat down in the chair in front of my desk and motioned towards the bed. She sat on the edge, twisting around to see out the window behind her before turning and looking at the model ships on her left. After few moments, she looked over at me.

“So. Um,” I started. “…I’ll admit I don’t really know what to do here. Or what you want?”

She frowned for a second, looking down. “You… you thought my name was ‘Tattletale’. Why?”

Hooooy boy.

How to answer this?

“Um. It’s the name you go by as a cape. Went by?” I struggled out.

“I’m a… cape?” She sounded slightly confused.

“Just, just… here.”

I took a blob of nanomaterial from myself and tossed it at the wall to her right, letting the nanomachines spread out over the surface and then start changing colors, showing a view looking up towards the edge of a building as a collection of panel-van sized monstrosities leaped overhead.

Leah watched the meeting with interest, the way Grue and I spoke, and the things she said herself.

The video paused after Tattletale called me interesting, and Leah reached out towards her smaller past-self.

“Remember?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“I’m a superhero?” she asked, looking at me.

“Uhhhhh… not, quite,” I said with a wince.

“But… I…” She turned back to the image. “Then what?”

“…villain,” I mumbled, and she snapped to look at me.

“What?”

“I said you are, were a villain,” I told her.

She stared at me with wide eyes. “…oh,” she said softly.

I just nodded awkwardly.

“Um. You’re a hero, though, right? You’re ‘Relentless’. Why did you save me if you knew what I was?” she asked.

“Because… because I didn’t think you deserved to die. And especially not like that. Maybe if it was someone like Kaiser, or Hookwolf, or Lung. But you never directly hurt people, and always tried to keep civilian casualties low,” I told her. “A-and I’ll admit I was kind of freaking out and more
worried about the girl who could have been one of my classmates bleeding out right in front of me.”

She nodded, her face slightly pale. “What if I hadn’t reacted well when I woke up? What… oh god. You controlled the ship. The whole ship. That’s how you did that thing with the floor and my skin and—” I just stared, where was she getting this from? “No, you’re all of them? What, I don’t even… what does that mean?”

Oh.

Thinker.

That made so much sense. Her name was Tattletale after all.

Someone who revealed others’ secrets. So some sort of information gathering?

Anyways.

Better just answer her question. I got the sense that trying to hide anything from her was a bad idea, and she’d probably find out in the end anyways. Better to be open than burn any bridges by keeping secrets.

“I converted all of the Ship Graveyard to nanomaterial,” I told her. “And I can control it all remotely.” Leah just nodded. “But… yeah. I wouldn’t have kept you prisoner or anything. I… I don’t really know. If you’d really just wanted to go, I would have let you. You’d already seen my face when I was trying to save you. I probably would have asked you to promise to not to tell anybody it was me, but well,” I shrugged. “The fact I’m a Tinker will likely come out eventually anyways. I’d really prefer to have control of when and how much, but with all of the Ship Graveyard I’d probably be able to handle the fallout.

“Either way, it’s not really a problem, is it?”

Leah shook her head. “I was just wondering.”

“Sooo. Supervillain. …Thoughts?”

“It feels… weird,” she said, looking back at the impromptu screen. “I can see her, me there, but I can’t… understand it? I don’t think it was by choice. When I think ‘what would I do with a superpower?’ my first thought isn’t villain. It’s not hero, either, but I’d like to think I’d rather help people than terrorize them? The world’s already pretty bad off, isn’t it?” she asked, looking at me, and I gave a hesitant nod. “Why would I want to make that worse? …Maybe that’s unrealistically optimistic, though.”

Huh.

“And if you could?” I asked.

She looked at me quizzically. “Could what?”


Leah shrugged. “I mean, sure? I guess? People have needs, right? Um. Ma—. Mas—. Fuck.”

“Maslow’s hierarchy of needs?” I supplied.

“Right! That thing. I think that if I could satisfy all that and help people, I… I guess I would?” she said, sounding unsure. “I don’t know. Maybe. This is so confusing.”
She looked up at me with an expression of mild discomfort. “Can we talk about something else?”

I nodded. “Um. Let’s… let’s figure out the guest room and stuff. And you’ll need supplies and clothes and… yeah.”

So that’s what we did.

Lunch was slightly uncomfortable, compared to the ease of the previous night’s dinner, with Leah there. She seemed especially unsure how to interact with my father, and she was still a bit off-balance from what I could tell.

Understandable, all things considered.

The sandwich she ate appeared to be handled without any trouble, which was good, since I hadn’t had any human food to test her digestive processes on.

We’d done a not insubstantial bit of… window shopping? computer clothing browsing?

With my nanomaterial that could replicate any clothing design instantly, it was literally limited only to imagination and I could manufacture anything once she’d settled on something (which I was doing right then).

Leah seemed to like bright colors, skirts and shorts that showed off her legs.

Two months. Two. Months.

Just had to remind myself that I wouldn’t be a stick figure for too much longer.

I’d made her a laptop out of some of the nanomaterial I’d made her skin from, and she was now in the guest room, browsing the internet, probably trying to find links back to her past or just reacquaint herself with the world.

I couldn’t even imagine being in her situation.

‘hey~’

I smiled slightly.

‘Hey Victoria.’

‘hows it goin?’

‘Pretty good. I got that project done. It seems to be working well. They seem to like it.’

Better than I’d expected, too. Though the amnesia still worried me.

‘oh? good!’

'Yeah. How’re you?"

'doin good! Ames finished all the major stuff in the hospitals so shes home today. '

'homework tho, ugh’

I laughed.
‘I know what that’s like.’

‘oh? whats ur fav subject?’

Hmmm…

‘Mechanical engineering. And chemistry and physics, I guess.’

‘ur one of those smart dual-major people arent you?’

‘I guess, yeah?’

I just knew so much that a dual-major would probably be unnecessarily easy once I got away from gen-eds.

‘hahaha cool’

‘What do you like?’ I returned.

‘psych and stuff? i’m in a dual-enrollment parahu mans studies class.’

‘Is it interesting?’ It sounded interesting, at least.

‘i guess? i like it.’

‘hey, u want to do a patrol tonight?’

I grimaced. It would be nice, but I really had something else I wanted to do instead.

A date involving me, the Ship Graveyard, and one-hundred eighty thousand tons of nanomaterial.

‘Sorry, I’ve already got something planned.’

‘oh’

‘ok. maybe tues then?’

I blinked. I was pretty sure I wasn’t doing anything Tuesday. …You know, considering I didn’t really have much of anything to do outside of school.

‘Sure?’

‘Cool.’

‘Ames wants to do something, ttyl, k?’

I smiled and shook my head.

‘Sure,’ I sent back, leaving me shaking my head and smiling at my ceiling from the whirlwind that was Glory Girl.

It was nice to have friends again.

Fuck.

Leah worried at her lip as she scrolled through the web page in front of her. She’d kept to news sites and Wikipedia, (re)familiarizing herself with everything going on in the world.

That at least was coming back in fits and starts, barely.
It was like learning everything all over again, really.

It was a nightmare.

This world… How the hell were people okay with this?

The Slaughterhouse Nine, the Blasphemies, Ash Beast, Moord Nag, the South American Lords, the various PRT Quarantine Zones, the Case 53s appearing from nowhere.

This was just… not okay.

Now that she knew that that weird source of information that had been feeding to her was a power, things were clicking together. Patterns, plots and plans that she didn’t think she would have seen were she not learning about all of this from a fresh perspective.

And the things she was learning, were not comforting.

Someone was pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Someone was encouraging this, directing it.

The PRT and Protectorate emerging when it did was too much of a coincidence, not even mentioning the various domino incidents that led to it somehow spreading across the US-Canadian border.

It was all too… neat. Too just right.

And Brockton Bay wasn’t exempt from that.

The city had one of the highest cape-to-civilian populations in the world, and compared to others, the Protectorate/PRT were practically useless, progress against the villains occurring at an absolutely glacial pace. And it wasn’t like the Elite or ‘Accord’ were involved either, which might make the lack of progress make sense.

Somebody wanted it like this.

Leah rubbed her temples.

Fuck.

She needed to stop this.

She was back to her ‘natural’ appearance, as she’d labeled it. Beautiful black fiber and metal frame.

Her power had been practically lavishing in its offhand analysis of her body, the intricacies and elegance of it, the way not a single thing went to waste, how much more durable and protected she was.

She didn’t really have any disagreements.

It was also just… cool, in some way, watching herself move around, the way her motions were practically fluid and liquid, thanks to her now-perfect balance and sense of orientation and the economy of motion and precision the artificial muscles gave her.

You’d think that being practically numb everywhere would be seriously inhibiting, except for the fact that she still had internal sensation, just not external. And oddly, she could feel, at least on her
face where she had the small amount of finalized skin layer

Still, she was looking forward to her ‘next’ body, where she’d actually be able to feel things again.

It would probably also be *really weird* after just adjusting to not feeling things.

Oh well.

She was seriously considering offering to help Taylor. To… try helping out the girl who had saved her in her heroic-ish ventures.

(Her power informed her that it was less intentional heroics and more just heroic actions lining up with Taylor’s underlying desires)

And she really did have most of her immediate needs met right now. Water, food, shelter, comfort, interpersonal interaction, (minor) socialization, plus… she had a feeling her power wouldn’t exactly just *go away*. Better to use it than just try and ignore it, right?

Hm.

Maybe she’d have to think about how she’d like to go about it a bit and then when the details were figured out talk to Taylor about it.

For now, though, she had more research to do.

---

The afternoon was lazily passed iterating on my designs for Leah’s next frame.

(I’d decided ‘frame’ was a better name than ‘body’. Less personal and unnerving.)

I was also thinking about that night, having decided it was time to act on my more… immediate wants.

At dinner, Leah was slightly more talkative, asking Dad about what he did and about Brockton in general. She apparently vaguely remembered living somewhere else and didn’t know *why* she’d been in Brockton.

The information he gave her wasn’t anything I didn’t know or hadn’t heard before.

And now… now it was eleven, and I was readying myself for what was next.

The Ship Graveyard.

I left the house quietly, retracing the same steps I made earlier in the day after being suddenly woken by my sub-node.

Nobody bothered me, despite the hour and the few shady people I saw. I took it slowly, content in not needing to rush this. There wasn’t any reason to.

An hour later I was at the beach, looking at the broken, rusted shells that extended out into the bay.

On the way over, I’d had my nanomaterial eating through the last micrometers separating it from the outside, just a bare skin of the original metal maintaining the facade of the original, broken Ship Graveyard.

And now, I let them finish and watched everything collapse.
It was eerie in its silence. Something like this, watching all these once-steel ships—from the smallest fishing boat to the massive freighters in the bay—collapse and dissolve into nothingness, should have had some noise, but there was absolutely none.

Less than thirty seconds later, there was absolutely no sign there had ever been any ships at all, my nanomaterial invisible beneath the waterline.

And that’s that, I thought happily. A week and I’d done something nobody else had for fourteen years: gotten rid of the Graveyard.

The reactions were going to be great.

I collected the nanomaterial beneath the water, my various projects and single subnode safe inside one of the collections.

The nanomaterial began slowly swimming towards the north end of the bay, in the direction of the old shipyards, using the small amount of antimatter and Squealer’s small fusion reactor to help.

Actually.

There was nobody around, and no cameras, so this should be fine. Besides, I wanted to try something different than what I did normally.

I took a small ball of nanomaterial and rolled it out of the bay towards me. In a second it had formed into a simple electric motorcycle with a hydrogen fuel cell to power it, and I swung my leg over it, shifting my weight to get used to it.

With a thought, the cycle started forwards, my nanomaterial swimming beside me.

It was forty-five minutes before I pulled up outside of the rusting chain-link fence topped in barbed wire. I clambered off the motorbike, walking up to the fence, staring before reaching out and grabbing on, one hand going over the other as I climbed up it, and then over, the barbs finding no purchase at all on me.

A hundred feet in, and I could finally see the shipyard.

Or rather, what was left of it.

Five dry docks, two massive and three smaller, all flooded. A long slipway up to land, rails rusted. A giant crane on tracks, off in the distance. Short, squat warehouse buildings, all long-abandoned.

I could almost see what it would have been like back in its heydey, people around in constant motion, the sounds of metalwork and construction, the steel skin and skeletons of ships being brought into being. A place where the work of thousands made multi-thousand-ton dreams reality.

I saw it, as it was. Dead, abandoned, discarded.

And I wanted it to live again.

This would be my home. Neglected and unworthy of notice, where I could be me without fear of being revealed.

I breathed in the salty air and let it out.

Time to work.
My nanomaterial flowed out of the bay like a flood of silver, washing over the ground and the cement of the shipyard.

Where it passed, it scoured the ground, removing every sign of age and wear. Discoloration and dirt disappeared. Rust vanished from bollards and cleats and rails, cracks in the cement sealing as nanomaterial readjusted and fused the pieces together.

The dry-dock gates were fixed, gleaming in the moonlight, their steel cable rebound and various metal pulleys unfrozen, seals repaired. My nanomaterial flowed into the docks, displacing the water and making them look like pools of solid silver.

The flood slowly reached my feet and flowed past towards the warehouses, their progress unhindered. The dilapidated buildings received the same treatment, repaired as nanomachines washed over them until the silver flood reached the chain link fence I’d climbed over.

I took the few hundred pounds or so of steel that had been the skins of the ships I’d consumed and plated the fence, turning it from a simplistic barrier to one that was fifteen feet tall and impossible to see through, ensuring my privacy.

Hrm.

Maybe I should make this all legal?

I’m sure I could buy the prop… er… ty…

I blinked.

I hadn’t even thought about it, but I was now (figuratively) looking at the internals of the city databases and document stores, specifically the entry and deeds for the land once owned by the now-defunct Brockton Bay Shipbuilding Company.

Which I was 100% sure were encrypted and protected.

How did I— Oh.

I could hack things.

I mean, okay, duh that made sense, I was the most powerful computing system in the world, and likely would be for centuries (at least). Breaking current encryption schemes would be trivially easy. I guess I’d just never really tried before.

Okay. Um. Did I want to do this?

…Yes.

And I’d even do it (technically) legally.

Let’s just… create a shell company. The “New Brockton Bay Shipbuilding Company”. Do all the paperwork and registration…

…

That was way too easy.

Alright. Um. Find some money from various illegal organizations like… ([Coprocessor: Accessing network data index]) Gesselschaft, apparently.
Huh. Actual, real, Nazis. …That works.

Alright, take some of that without leaving any traces (which is more just decreasing their account balance and increasing mine minus the transfer history) and buy the deeds and pay the city hall for the processing fee and file it all myself and—

I was the proud owner of three-hundred twenty-seven acres of industrial shipbuilding history.

*Former* history.

Grinning, I watched as nanomaterial continued rushing inland like some sort of flash-flood, now collecting in warehouses and compressing down so that some (but not even a *half* of my total) would fit.

The power station building I gutted, ripping apart the gas generators, HRSG turbines, and steam turbines to be processed into nanomaterial.

Sinking into myself, I focused on the building.

*This* would be where my fusion reactors would go (at least initially).

And I already had the designs for them.

Stellarator reactors with a combination of superconducting magnetic and gravitic fields for plasma containment, and simple static Klein fields that would absorb all excess heat and energy for output.

Nanomaterial fused into complete, perfectly-shaped parts, billions of times more accurate and efficient than what was achievable with human construction. Control systems with simple, easy-to-monitor software. Particle accelerators and neutralized-ion injectors for the ignition system. Deuterium and tritium gas for the fuel, confined inside the reaction chambers.

Jump-start with the antimatter reactor. Heat the fuel with electromagnetic radiation, accelerate ions and neutralize before injecting into fuel mass…

*Ignition.*


*Reaction is self-sustaining.*

All systems green.

*Reactors one and two functioning within expected output.*

My spine straightened from the sudden live-wire of energy my systems had tapped into, my sigils flaring and rolling across my body.

*Ohhhh* that felt good.

Okay. Dark matter generation. Time to rip reality a new one.

Capacitor banks. High-energy non-baryonic particle accelerators. Folded-space capture/containment pocket.
And pulse. Collision.

_Pulse. Pulsepulse. Pulsepulsepulse._

_Pulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulsepulse—_

Alright. Firing faster than once a nanosecond now. Three months until I had enough dark matter to be able to produce an amount of thanatonium that could run a Gato-class sub for a standard 75-day patrol.

_Not good enough._

Not even _close_ to good enough.

I growled and replicated the reactor/collider combo in every single one of my warehouses, leaving me with twenty four active stations over nine buildings.

Better. Now I only had to wait five days until I could create enough thanatonium for a standard cruise.

I brought myself back to my body and looked around. Without my focus, my nanomaterial had continued working and improving the naval yard around me, leaving me with an absolutely pristine shipyard.

The excess nanomaterial that either wasn’t being used or in storage in the warehouses was still in the dry-docks.

I really shouldn’t leave this all unattended. What if some… _curious_ person came by and stuck their nose where it didn’t belong?

“Reporting!!”

My head snapped up to stare at my little sub-node.

I still wasn’t entirely sure what they _were_, whether they were truly sentient or not. They seemed more like echoes of my self, exaggerated and simplified.

Still, I _could_ certainly use the help…

With a thought I created another fifteen from the silver around us, all little mini-mes of nanomaterial, thankfully not easily identifiable as Taylor Hebert _or_ Relentless.

Just in case anybody _did_ see them.

I internally gave them their orders: maintain and keep watch on the shipyard. After a moment, they all dispersed, off to do their tasks.

And now…

Now…

I took a breath.

I’d been putting this off, building up to it. It was why I was here myself, and not just lying in bed at home.

I wanted to _be here_ for this.
I reached out with my will, and *flexed.*

Silver nanomaterial flowed around in the only empty dry dock—one of the smaller ones—filling in a shape I now somehow knew better than almost anything. A three-hundred eleven foot long ‘v’-shaped hull that filled out to large curves near the stern. Flat deck, slightly canting upwards towards the bow. Framing like ribs, running the entire length.

Superconducting power cable and sonar and radar and radio and guns and torpedo tubes and thrusters and rudder and crew space and control room and conning tower and *engines.*

Dead and quiet but I had them, oh I *had them.*

They were only engines in the most liberal sense, more clustered reactors that acted as the power plant for the entire ship, but *that didn’t matter.*

After *three months* I was finally whole.

I was Relentless X-1 and I was *Fog.*

Chapter End Notes

I was surprised that with all the images and comparisons people were throwing around to other series, and especially Gunnm, nobody brought up the topic of amnesia, even with brain damage being practically guaranteed.

But yeah. And now you know why the arc is called *Counterpoint*  

1. (music) the art or technique of setting, writing, or playing a melody or melodies in conjunction with another, according to fixed rules.  
2. an argument, idea, or theme used to create a contrast with the main element.

On one side we have Taylor, the girl who became a machine, losing her physical humanity but keeping her memories and identity (and supposedly continuity of consciousness), who constantly questions if she’s still the same person, or even human.

On the other we have Lisa/Leah, the girl who became a machine, losing her memories and identity but objectively retaining her *physical* continuity and humanity, making her question who she *is* as a person, even as she’s not *quite* entirely human anymore.

Each independent and similar, but foils to one another.

It's a character contrast I think's going to be a lot of fun to explore.
'u did this didn't you?'

I groaned, rolling over in bed to smush my face into the pillow.

Unfortunately, when text messages go *directly to your head*, rolling over doesn’t exactly help with ignoring them.

‘What?’ I sent back to Victoria.

I really should be getting up anyways. I had school, and as much as I hated it, my dad wouldn’t just let me blow it off. No matter how easy it got.

With a sigh, I rolled out of bed and shambled to the bathroom.

‘u said u were goin 2 do smthing last nite’
‘and ur the only one that hangs around in the ship gravyrd’
‘so had to be u’

No, Victoria. That’s not… just because I had something to do and I’m the only one that normally is around the graveyard does not mean that it was me. That’s a causal fallacy. Correlation does not imply causation.

…Even if you’re right.

‘sos was it?’

I sighed.

Ugh. Victoria, why did you have to ask me that?

I didn’t want to lie. But even more than that, I didn’t want to have my full capabilities known. At least not to anybody that didn’t *need* to know. With Dad… well, Dad deserved to know at least the basics, sure, since it was his daughter this had all happened to, but even he was still unaware of what an existential threat I was. With Leah it was probably all going to come out sooner rather than later with her power, but I wasn’t eager to make that go any faster than it had to and I didn’t exactly have any control over it.

But Victoria…

Victoria didn’t *need* to know. Not right now. Not… not when I still didn’t know her enough to trust her with something like that.

Even if we *were* becoming friends.

I just…

*Dammit.*
Friendships were built on trust, but this was just too big for right now. Maybe later, if things went
well and when it wouldn’t jeopardize things as much.

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked, starting the shower as I reabsorbed my ‘clothes’ and then
stepped under the water.

‘the gravyards gone. it was u, rite?’

Deflect. Deflect, avoid, redirect.

‘How would I even do that? I’m an Alexandria package with force fields and no flight, remember?
And I was busy last night.’

…Even if I was busy doing exactly what you’re thinking.

I cleaned off as I waited for her response, before getting out and making my daily fractional avatar
adjustment as I dried off.

‘well yeah, but… idk.’
‘so if it wasn’t u who do you think it could be?’

‘Uber and Leet could have done something like this, right?’ I sent back.

‘yea, i guess. but theyve nevr done anything like this before.’

‘Or maybe a new cape?’ I offered.

‘maybe, yeah. whatever. kinda wish i could thank them tho. the view from the beach is gonna be
sooooo much nicer now.’

I felt myself smile. It was nice to know somebody appreciated it, even if it was for something as
small as that.

‘How did you find out?’

‘its all over tv. probs pho too
‘ppl are flipping the fck out’

I couldn’t help it; I laughed.

A second later, I got another text.

‘whoops, moms yelling, gotta get ready for school. ttyl’

I just grinned. ‘Bye.’

Leah was already at the table when I got downstairs, a bowl of cereal and a cup of orange juice in
front of her.

I have no idea how she managed to appear bleary-eyed, considering the lack of blood vessels to
cause it, but somehow she did.

I went about getting myself a bowl of cereal as well, figuring I might as well follow routine. As soon
as I sat down, Leah opened her mouth to say something, but immediately snapped it shut as my dad
walked into the kitchen with the newspaper under his arm.
Instead Leah just gave me a withering glare.

…What the heck had I done to her?

Her glare softened, and she rolled her eyes.

“Later,” she mouthed at me, and I nodded.

Breakfast was awkwardly quiet, Dad’s eyes darting between Leah and I a couple times, though he never breached the silence that surrounded us.

I almost expected him to bring up the Graveyard thing, considering it had to be in the paper from what Vicky had said, but… he didn’t, and I couldn’t really understand why.

I wasn’t even sure how I would have responded if he had brought it up. I want to say that I would’ve admitted to it, but I really don’t know. I may have told Dad the basics of what my trigger had done to me, but he didn’t know the full details, didn’t know about the Fog or my full capabilities, and I don’t know if I would have told him even like this.

After I ate breakfast I cleared my place, getting up and heading towards the stairs to finish getting ready. There was the sound of rushed movement in the room behind me, and then quiet padding footsteps following me up the stairs.

At the top, I turned around, facing the blonde girl who’d trailed me.

“What?” I asked shortly.

She pursed her lips, eyes darting down the stairs and towards the kitchen. She didn’t want Dad to hear?

With a sigh, I led her into my room so we weren’t just standing in the hall, closing the door behind us. This seemed like it was going to be a conversation.

I directed her towards the bed, Leah taking a seat as I leaned on the side of my desk across from her.

“So. The Graveyard. That was you, right?” she asked slowly.

I nodded.

She let out a small breath of relief. “Good. I thought it was, but I wasn’t one-hundred percent sure.”

“What was your other idea?” I asked curiously.

Leah blinked, refocusing on me from having apparently gotten caught up in her thoughts again. “Oh. Um. Mostly someone trying to make a preemptive strike against you, since you’re the only semi-public cape who bothers with that area.”

I nodded. That made sense.

“So what’d you do with all of it, anyways? Heck, why did you do it?”

“It was in the way and a good source of metal,” I said, shrugging.

She tilted her head. “Is there something you needed it for?”

I opened my mouth, but hesitated.
“Not that you have to tell me if you don’t want to!” she rushed.

I frowned thoughtfully. Honestly, she already knew I was a Tinker, so it wasn’t like the primary reason for hiding this really applied to her. Plus she’d probably find out herself somehow, better to just say it. “I recycled it all into a new ship.”

She stared blankly at me. “Overnight?”

Ah. “Uh. Yes? I turned it all into nanomaterial. Like the stuff I used yesterday to show you that recording. Or the stuff that was in that container when I was… rebuilding your body.”

“A programmable metamaterial?”

“No, er, nanomachines. They can mimic pretty much anything I want.”

“Ohhhh. Can I see?” she asked.

“…The ship?” I assumed that was what she was talking about, since she’d already seen my nanomaterial working first-hand. She nodded.

“I… guess? Sure? Not right now, but later?” I didn’t really mind, and I did kind of want to show it off. I had a lot of pride in my ship-self.

She waved her hand at me. “That’s fine. This afternoon?”

“…Alright,” I agreed.

And that was that.

__________________________

School was unremarkable.

Really, that’s the best compliment I can give a day at Winslow.

Emma was back, but she was silent and withdrawn, staying away from the girls she hung out with and even keeping a little distance between her and Sophia. Neither Sophia nor Madison, nor any of their hanger-ons tried anything.

I ate in the lunchroom, even if it was by myself, but I did it, and did it with my back straight and head high. Compared to the past week, school seemed ridiculous.

I’d fought Lung, Squealer, a dragon the size of a 747, and saved multiple people during a major crisis alongside a well-known hero group. I had a shipyard and over a hundred eighty thousand tons of nanomaterial, as well as my first hull. I had twenty four fusion reactors and eighteen particle colliders for dark-matter synthesis, with enough power to supply the entire eastern half of the continental US without breaking a sweat.

I was Relentless, what could I possibly have to worry about from high school?

So yeah, that was school. Unremarkable.

And afterwards, for the first day in over a week, I went straight home.

Leah looked over at me as soon as I walked in, sitting on the couch with the nanomaterial laptop.
The moment she saw me she closed the laptop, putting it next to her and standing up. “Hey,” she said with a smile. “Can we go see it now?” The smile expanded into a grin. “I’ve kinda been waiting. …Unless you have something to do?”

I shook my head. “Not… really? But it’s like forty minutes away, driving.”

She nodded.

I sighed, glad that I’d brought the bike I’d made the night before home with me, making it a bit less conspicuous, imitating a real-life motorcycle I’d found on the internet minus most of the noise.

I wasn’t Squealer, thank you.

“Come on, then,” I said, heading towards the garage on the side of the house.

“Where are we going?”

I looked over at her. “The old shipyards. Well, not so old now,” I said, changing my clothes to add a jacket and my shoes to boots. I turned to see Leah eyeing the jacket.

“Can I get one?” she asked as we entered the garage, the motion-activated light clicking on.

“There’s not really any point, but if you want, sure,” I said, adding a jacket that matched my own to the clothes she wore formed out of my nanomaterial, but with blue highlights instead of lime green. “I’m really just doing it because I read that drivers tend to respect cyclists in proper protection more and we’re less likely to get flagged by the police. Unfortunately, helmets are required for under twenties, so…” I tossed her the helmet I’d left on the seat from last night.

She looked it over for a moment, before lifting it and putting it on.

“In a contest between you and semi-truck, you’d lose, but only just,” I told her. “Your frame right now is mostly plain steel from the ships that were in the graveyard. The next one is going to be closer to mine.”

“Which is…?” Leah asked, adjusting the helmet on her head.

“Diamond and carbon nanotubes and a material casing that’s stronger than it should be by existing in more than three dimensions. It was the closest I could get to invulnerable without exotic effects. And I’m looking into making it better,” I said. My sword—the claymore—was giving me trouble analyzing it, but the potential benefits of understanding the metal were huge considering how durable it was in my tests.

A helmet of my own formed around my head, and I walked over to the garage door button to open it.

Leah pushed the green-accented motorcycle forward without my prompting, moving it outside before stopping and getting on the rear seat. I closed the garage door and moved over to the bike.

“Besides, the chances of us getting in an accident are astronomically small. Steering something like this isn’t exactly hard for me,” I said, adjusting myself and then sinking in. Not as far as I did with the jet, but enough that I wasn’t really controlling it with my humanoid body.

Kickstand up, and we were off.

Leah paid attention to the surroundings, watching the streets and buildings we passed, asking questions every so often about shops and places that I sometimes had to admit to not knowing the
Driving was... anticlimactic. I’d experienced it last night, when there weren’t so many people out, but even with the increase of people using the roads it was underwhelming. Everybody else reacted at human speeds and I... didn’t.

What I was doing was... technically illegal. I guess? Driving without a license? But do driving licenses even apply to artificial intelligences? To self-driving motorcycles?

How would that even work?

I wasn’t hurting anybody, I was safe, the drivers around me were safe, and I obeyed all traffic laws. Hell, I was better at it than the people around me were.

Isn’t that what mattered?

I pushed my musings aside as we rolled up to the gate of the shipyard, which I was already opening. After it opened far enough we moved inside, weaving through the paths between warehouses until we were at the docks themselves.

The bike halted, kickstand down, my helmet absorbed into my head and jacket disappearing as I stared out at the bay. After a moment I turned around and looked at Leah, who’d hung her helmet on the handlebar and unzipped her own jacket.

“So...?”

“Will you show me?” she asked, looking at the dry dock where my ship-self was submerged.

I blinked. “Sure?”

Without any signal I lightened the gravity ballast and allowed my other self to rise, breaking the surface.

It was beautiful.

I was beautiful.

The only thing that would have given it away as something other than a normal, unremarkable Balao-class submarine was the coloring above the resting waterline: a light grey steel tone contrasting the dark matte-grey color below it.

I looked over at Leah, and saw her staring at my hull, eyes wide. She was completely silent, unmoving, and didn’t even react until I snapped my fingers in front of her to get her attention. “Are you coming?”

She nodded, trailing behind as I walked towards the ramp I formed and then up it onto my deck.

“I just can’t...”

I looked back at her as I opened the port fairwater door. “What?”

“This is part of you, isn’t it? This is you. Just like that stuff on the wall yesterday.”

I stared at her. “…Yeah. All of my nanomaterial is, really.”

I entered the fairwater, immediately turning left and going into the conning tower through the aft
bulkhead as the lights came on silently.

I already knew what it looked like. I was it, after all, but like Leah had said, seeing it was an experience. Where you would expect old electronics, mechanical parts and the bronze/copper that was so characteristic of the Gato and Balao-class subs, where there might have been huge mechanical computers and controls that took up over half the room, there were flat walls and empty space. Everything was sleek metal and white surfaces, which combined with the lack of huge components gave the sense of the space being larger than it actually was.

To be honest, the conning tower was rather superfluous. All of my imaging and targeting was internal, though I still had physical periscopes in the middle of the room for amusement and nostalgia.

Humming to myself, I moved towards the front of the cylindrical room and then down the metal stairs into the control room.

This resembled nothing like the original. No pressure valves or buoyancy wheels, no physical helm or engine controls. I was the most advanced vessel in the world, and it showed.

Instead, it looked more like a curved bridge out of a spaceship from a sci-fi show, lit with soft light that seemed to come from nowhere. All that existed was a captain’s chair in the middle on a platform, more for my satisfaction than any other reason, and I took the opportunity to sit in it, relaxing.

Behind me Leah had descended the stairs, and looked around.

“It’s… a bit empty, isn’t it?”

I swiveled around to look at her, lifting an eyebrow even as I reshaped the room, adding a few control stations and consoles. Each had a screen to the front, left, and right, and a small flat desk/low counter surface surrounding the station’s chair in a horseshoe shape. To my own right on the raised platform I added a chair and screen that would normally be taken by the XO. And in front of the room I added large screens that blinked on, showing a 180° view of our surroundings, which was really only the shipyard.

Leah just blinked, looking around at the stations. “Um. I take it back.”

She trailed towards the XO station on my right, moving around the back to seat herself in front of the screen and poke at it, the overall statistics and current state of myself appearing in front of her as I let it access that information.


“And anti-aircraft guns,” I added. I wasn’t even a destroyer or anything, so my weapons weren’t particularly impressive, but they still weren’t anything to scoff at. My photon cannons could melt through and destroy steel in microseconds.

She navigated around a bit as I relaxed, a calm coming over me as I was finally where I belonged.

After about fifteen minutes she stopped looking around my systems, her curiosity apparently satisfied, and turned to me.

“Taylor?”

I opened my eyes and looked at her. “Yeah?”
“I’m in,” she said.

What?

“In what?”

“This… thing,” Leah said, waving her hands around. “This stuff you’re doing. I’m in. I want to help.”

I stared at her.

She huffed. “Look. You may be good, you may be effectively invincible and able to do nearly anything, but that doesn’t mean you can’t screw up, as I think you probably know.”

I winced.

“You can’t do this on your own. You can’t… you need someone in your corner. Someone to watch over your shoulder and keep you from going too far. People to help you. People you can rely on,” she said. “And I think you know that.”

I did. I really, really did. I needed the grounding that having other people around me provided. The human element that I was losing as I sunk further into my nature as what I was.

“So I want to help you. Now could you please say something I feel like I’ve been talking to a brick wall.”

For a moment I left her hanging.

“…Okay.”

She sat up. “Okay?”

I nodded. “If you really want to help me I’m not going to tell you that you can’t.”

Leah deflated. “Oh. Well. That makes things easier. …I still have five points left in my argument if you want to hear them?”

I shook my head, smiling. “So how do we do this?”

Leah bit her lip. “So um, I was thinking.”

“Thinking or Thinking?” I asked.

“Just plain thinking,” she responded, sticking her tongue out. “Anyways. From what I’ve read everyone seems to think you have this Tinker supplier or backer of some sort, right?”

I nodded, starting to see where she was going with this.

“And well. If you’re trying to keep people from figuring out you’re a Tinker, what better way than to give them one where they expect it?” She grinned widely. “Besides, it would be a good way to hide the fact I’m a Thinker, since I think people would be pretty suspicious if a cape with the same powers as one that reportedly just died showed up.”

I… could work with that. It would be an excellent smokescreen. Plus if Leah actually learned how the things I made worked, it would mean she could potentially maintain her own equipment.
My stuff wasn’t actually tinker-tech, after all. You just had to have a very good understanding of fields like particle physics, chemistry, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering…

Okay, so this might not be so simple.

But Leah had some kind of intuition-based power. If she could somehow get her power to connect the dots with more complex concepts and technology as well as her normal social aspect, she might be able to actually fake being a Tinker for real. Or, enough of one that a rating for it wouldn’t be out of the question.

I nodded slowly.

“Alright. But if we’re going to do that, we’re going to do it right.”

Her brows furrowed. “Right? What does that mean?”

I gave a slow grin.

“So how’s your grasp on particle physics?”

After three hours of explaining stuff, assisted by the ability to simulate everything with three-dimensional holograms, we stopped, Leah looking a bit overwhelmed by everything.

The half-hour after that was spent discussing what would go into her portrayal of a ‘Tinker’ — including a rather makeshift exoskeletal ‘armor’— as well as the abilities she would be showing. All of which needed to match the themes that I’d shown so far that were attributed to my supposed Tinker support, especially the new armor I was making based on Greg’s designs.

Exposed segments, spine-like armor down the back, hard pieces over the shoulders and forearms, flexible impact-resistant undersuit, antigrav discs and thrust outlets, etc.

As for the abilities, I was partial to her using things that were electrical, taser-like capacitor systems that could be powered by her own internal power source, beams of crackling electricity and plasma, maybe even an extendable staff like Dauntless’ arc spear. It lined up well with the technology I had and wouldn’t be too hard to replicate with non-nanomaterial pieces.

All part of the image, the act that she would be a cape like people were expecting.

By the time we finished, it was six o’clock, and we agreed that we should probably go home so that we could start on dinner and have it done by the time my dad got home from work.

I was still working on Leah’s second frame, the differences in the fact that she still had an actual brain and the requirements that necessitated making enough changes that it wasn’t simply “buy lots of charcoal and sheet metal, construct copy of my body”.

Still, I estimated that I’d have it done by the next day, probably after school.

Meanwhile, I was going to leave Leah with enough study materials about what was happening both with her body and the pieces of armor and tech I’d be making for her that she could learn. I wouldn’t lie and say it wasn’t edging into university-level stuff for multiple fields, but that was kind of the nature of what I did. No Tinkertech bullshit that couldn’t be explained, this was all a science and anybody devoted enough could learn how it worked, even if it wasn’t knowledge that humanity had discovered themselves yet.
However, I had manufactured enough synthetic skin that she no longer needed my nanomaterial, which took away the persistent discomfort that had been lingering in the back of my mind.

After dinner, I did homework, and then after that, I finally went on PHO to see what they were saying about everything.

And then I realized I didn’t have an account for my cape identity.

I could have just edited the servers and added it myself, along with all the relevant tags, but doing that felt… wrong?

Which is totally hypocritical considering what I’d done the night before, I know, but it still felt different somehow. Also drawing mod attention if I suddenly showed up and none of them had records of me going through the verification might be kinda counter to what I was trying to appear as.

Either way, I just bit the bullet and made a new account with my name, made a small camera out of nanomaterial, took a picture of myself in costume against the blank wall in the hallway, and sent it off to the mods. Not even five minutes later I had my tag.

Anyways, it was honestly pretty predictable: lots of people freaking out over the fact the Graveyard was suddenly missing, the PRT saying they were “investigating it”, and people slowly calming down as nobody came out and claimed responsibility, (probably) realizing that it didn’t affect their lives all that much and that life still went on.

There were a couple people who talked about the impact to the local shipping and fishing industry, which were then countered by people talking about the fact that there were still the old shipping containers on the shore and facilities that had been largely abandoned other than basic maintenance. All of those would have to be evaluated and cleared, and the facilities brought back up to working condition before anything could happen, though they did acknowledge that it was much more likely for companies to invest in that now that the biggest barrier was gone.

Hopefully that would mean more work for the Dockworkers in the future.

I just… It would definitely help Dad, I hoped, having work and making progress instead of the constant decline that the shipping industry had experienced ever since the Dock’s riots.

I could theoretically fix all our problems in a snap. I could fix the house and his car, take care of our money issues… everything, but it was like how Dad and I had built my shelves by hand instead of taking the easy route and using nanomaterial: nothing worth doing wasn’t worth taking time and putting in the effort for. It was the journey as much as the destination, and I think it would hurt our relationship just as much it would ease our life if I forced Dad to accept all that. Being forced to accept charity from your fifteen-year-old daughter who was going out in costume?

Yeah. Not the best feeling, probably.

So instead I wanted to help indirectly, like with the Graveyard. It wouldn’t fix things overnight, and it wasn’t something that was obviously me intending to improve our situation, but it probably would in the long run anyways, all without Dad losing his drive and sense of purpose.

I went to sleep feeling like even if the day hadn’t been as… eventful as the week before, I’d still made progress in some direction.

That feeling was gone when Leah woke me at three in the morning, her face grim as she stood in the door.
“Taylor, we have a problem.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Welp. This took far too bloody long. And is too short, in my opinion, but that’s how it goes.

As people have noted, ship is finally happening.

In all senses of the word. :P

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